

The Pragmatist Theory of Truth and Deliberative Democracy

Undergraduate Research Thesis

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by

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1. Introduction

In this thesis, I will analyze Cheryl Misak’s essay “Making Disagreement Matter: Pragmatism and Deliberative Democracy”; specifically, I will evaluate the essay’s central argument (what I call the Price-Peirce-Misak, or PPM, argument), which uses Huw Price’s analysis of the norm of truth together with Charles Sanders Peirce’s account of truth as the end of inquiry to show that “there is a direct connection between deliberative democracy and the pragmatist theory of truth” (Misak, 2004: 471). My main takeaway is that although the Price-Peirce-Misak argument is fascinating, it is unclear whether we should endorse it, because (*pace* Price) there does not seem to exist a norm of truth independent of a norm of justification (Section 4), there are other pragmatist theories of truth besides Peirce’s (Section 5), and the synthesis of the two would not entail the political consequences Misak has in mind (Section 6).

2. Preliminary Matters

2.1. What is Pragmatism?

When doing philosophy, it is good to know what one is talking about. And so, since this is a paper about pragmatism—not to mention I will be assuming a pragmatist stance throughout—it would be useful for us to have some agreed upon definition of what pragmatism is.

For this paper, I will be using the straightforward definition of pragmatism given by David Macarthur and Huw Price, plus a couple of my own clarifications. The Macarthur-Price definition of pragmatism is as follows:

“PRAGMATISM = LINGUISTIC PRIORITY without REPRESENTATIONALISM”

(Macarthur and Price, 2007: 97)

What this basically means is that when doing philosophy, pragmatists want to focus on language. Moreover, they do not think of language as the sort of thing meant to accurately latch on to (or, represent) reality. Instead, they think of language as a socially developed set of tools which allow us to cope with the world and/or achieve certain ends.

There are a couple other things it will be helpful to note. Firstly, pragmatists tend place a high emphasis on social practice. Pragmatists want to look at what living people and actual societies do; that is, they want to know how our concepts impact our behavior and attitudes. Secondly, because pragmatists think what we do in practice is so important, many pragmatists subscribe to the belief that for any philosophical distinction to matter, it must make a difference in practice. For example, if the difference between X and $\sim X$ would not affect how we act or how we see the world, then the supposed difference between X and $\sim X$ is practically meaningless.

I stress that this is only a brief sketch of what the pragmatist position amounts to. I understand there is much more that could be said about what it is to be a pragmatist. Indeed, like just about any philosophical movement, one of the most contentious debates within pragmatism is over the question of what pragmatism even is (as we shall see throughout this paper). Nonetheless, I believe the above should give us a suitable basis for knowing what pragmatism is.

2.2. What Kind of a Topic Is This?

The title of this paper is called “The Pragmatist Theory of Truth and Deliberative Democracy,” where the “and” is supposed to imply some sort of relation between the two. Appropriately, this paper will be responding to the argument that “there is a direct connection between deliberative democracy and the pragmatist theory of truth” (Misak, 2004: 471). This may, at face value, strike

some people as odd. Why would a philosophical framework, let alone a theory of truth within that framework, entail any political viewpoint? It would be rather unusual, for instance, if someone were to write a thesis on whether there is a direct connection between libertarian anarchism and the logical positivist theory of verification.

But as it turns out, there is a long history of debate over whether pragmatism has any political implications (Westbrook, 2006: 290). Much of it is focused on whether pragmatism is theoretically tied to democratic views, such as those held by two of the movement's leading figures, William James and John Dewey. Some notable pragmatists have been strongly convinced of the connection between pragmatism and democracy. Ruth Anna Putnam, for example, goes as far as to say that "pragmatists are democrats, only more so" (Putnam, 2006: 278).

Plenty of other pragmatists, on the other hand, see no connection between pragmatism and democracy—or for that matter, between philosophy and politics in general. Richard Rorty is notoriously firm on this point, saying "it is unfortunate, I think, that many people hope for a tighter link between philosophy and politics than there is or can be" (Rorty, 1999: 23).

Whether fortunately or unfortunately, Misak is one of those who thinks there is a link between philosophy and politics. And in fact, her pragmatism is explicitly contrary to Rorty's (which is why Rorty will emerge throughout this paper as the central challenger). Misak thinks that Rorty has steered pragmatism into a wrong path: a path which does not take seriously how serious truth is to us. In a way, this paper will be a microcosm of a much broader split in contemporary pragmatism: the contrast between Rortyan neo-pragmatism and those like Price and Misak who call themselves "new pragmatists" (Misak, 2007: 1).

2.3. Why Analyze The Argument From This Particular Misak Essay?

So perhaps Misak is offering an interesting new take on pragmatism, but why am I writing my thesis specifically on Misak's essay "Making Disagreement Matter: Pragmatism and Deliberative Democracy"? The short answer to this question is that I think the argument Misak makes in this essay is unique, not only in the pragmatist literature, but in philosophy in general. I will explain more about Misak's clever maneuvering in the next section (Section 3), but for now it is worth noting that what makes this essay stand out is that it utilizes the work of Huw Price in making a political argument. Although, as stated above (Section 2.2), there is a long history of pragmatists trying to connect pragmatism to (democratic) politics, this is the only case I know of where Price, a philosopher associated more with the philosophy of language and philosophy of science, has been invoked in this conversation. Misak's argument is therefore all the more impressive in that it utilizes two pragmatists, Price and Charles Sanders Peirce, who have little to do with politics themselves.

3. An Outline of the Price-Peirce-Misak (PPM) Argument

3.1. Setting the Scene: Rorty and Misak on Neutral Grounds and Starting-Points

I think the best way to approach the PPM argument will be to jump right into it—to get to the punchline, so to speak. Yet, before I do so, I would like to indulge in just a bit more set-up, to emphasize a key point of Rortyan pragmatism which Misak sees herself challenging. In doing so, I hope to show the ingenuity of what Misak is up to.

Rorty takes it that there is no neutral standpoint on which we can discuss or debate any issue, including politics. Misak takes this stance to be a dangerous one. In particular, she often worries that comments Rorty makes in his more radical, cavalier moments—like claiming that

truth is nothing more than “what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying” (Rorty, 1979: 176)—are eerily similar to the views held by Carl Schmitt, a political philosopher who was heavily involved in the Nazi Party (Misak, 2000: 16) (Misak, 2010: 35) (Misak, 2013: 230). Misak thinks the absurd upshot of Rortyan pragmatism is that it “gives us no standpoint from which to criticise [sic.]” people who seem worthy of criticism, such as “flat-earthers or neo-Nazis” (Misak, 2000: 6).

Rorty does, however, give us some “standpoint” from which to criticize, just not a universal or objective one. Consider the following, (in)famous passage from Rorty’s autobiographical essay “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids”:

It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us [we decent, liberal humanitarian types] and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which an experienced Nazi philosopher and I can repair in order to argue out our differences. The Nazi and I will always strike one another as begging all the crucial questions, arguing in circles. (Rorty, 1999: 15)

In response to this passage, one might wonder what exactly the difference between the “false” and “correct” view is supposed to be. That is, what does it mean to say that we have something to choose between liberal humanitarian and the Nazis, but not from any “neutral, common ground?” The answer is that *we*, given our culturally conditioned preferences, have reasons to prefer one over the other. For example, those who were raised to treat everybody with respect and were socialized within a community that values reason over violence, will no doubt prefer liberal humanitarianism; however, their reasons are ultimately a product of their upbringing¹.

¹ We should interpret “upbringing” rather loosely. Of course, there are people who grow-up to reject the values taught to them within their household (e.g., someone brought up in a conservative household ends

Thus, those who were somehow socialized differently, may not consider those reasons valid, no matter how much “argument” or “rationality” you throw at them. Just some people (due to their cultural environment) like spicy foods and some do not, some people (due to their cultural environment) value democracy and some do not.

We can now see what really troubles Misak about Rorty’s perspective: what she wants is a “neutral, common ground” from which to criticize flat-earthers and neo-Nazis. But how can we have a neutral ground if different communities care about different things? Misak’s solution is to find a value which *all* communities agree upon—a norm, in fact, which it would be impossible for any community to go without. This shared starting-point, she argues, is that we all want to have true beliefs (Misak, 2004: 472).

Another passage from Rorty will, I think, further elucidate how Misak’s strategy contrasts with his version of pragmatism. Rorty is here writing in praise of Dewey, of what he thinks Deweyan pragmatism² did right:

[Dewey] abandoned the question “Why should one prefer democracy to feudalism, and self-creation to obedience to authority?” in favor of the question “Given the preferences we Americans share, given the adventure on which we are embarked, what should we say about truth, knowledge, reason, virtue, human nature, and all the other traditional philosophical topics?” (Rorty, 1998: 27-28)

up becoming more liberal, or vice versa). Rorty would say that in such cases, people are just adopting these different values from other cultural influences (e.g., people they have talked to, books they have read, or any other sort of exposure to an alternative community).

² The question of whether Rorty’s description of Dewey’s views is accurate is beyond the scope of this paper. Fortunately, it is not relevant anyway, since what matters here is not what Dewey thought, but what Rorty endorses.

What is fascinating about Misak's approach is that she attempts to take on both questions, though not precisely in the way Rorty outlines them.

The first question Misak takes on directly. Unlike Rorty, Misak does want to ask, "Why should one prefer democracy to feudalism?" She explicitly does not want to assume a political standpoint, in the way Rorty thinks we can. As she puts it, "we must not beg the question in favor of the liberal democratic values we may hold dear" (Misak, 2004: 472).

Her approach to the second question, however, is a little more nuanced. Misak does take herself to be asking about what we should do "given the preferences we share, given the adventure on which we are embarked," but with two important qualifications. Firstly, Misak's uses of the term 'we' is entirely general³. Unlike Rorty, who focuses on the projects of a particular, contingent community (*e.g.*, the United States), Misak addresses a project which, she thinks, *all* communities share: the aim to get things right, to have true beliefs. Secondly, while Rorty wants our political beliefs to shape our philosophical framework, Misak wants our philosophical framework to shape our political beliefs. For Rorty, the "preferences we share" are moral and political ones—*e.g.*, a preference for democracy—which will then tell us what we should say about metaphysical topics such as truth. Misak, on the other hand, posits that a preference we share *is aiming at the truth*, and *given the sort of thing truth is*, we should endorse deliberative democracy.

3.2. The Price-Peirce-Misak (PPM) Argument

³ Such as when she writes, "we take ourselves in morals and politics to aim at the right answer—i.e., at the truth, rather than at what my own standards point to (what is justified by my lights) or at what my community standards point to (what is justified by our lights)" (Misak, 2004: 472).

And so, we have finally come to the central question: how is a pragmatist theory of truth supposed to show us why we should endorse deliberative democracy? I will now present a few basic outlines of the argument and then give a summary of Misak's argument.

The Price-Peirce-Misak⁴ (PPM) Argument for Deliberative Democracy

P1: We want to get at truth (shown by Price).

P2: Truth is the outcome of unlimited democratic deliberation (shown by Peirce).

C: Since we want to get at truth, and democratic deliberation is how we get at truth, we should want deliberative democracy (Misak's synthesis).

An even simpler breakdown of the argument's structure goes as follows:

P1: We want T.

P2: $D \rightarrow T$

C: We should promote D.

By using this logical form, we may better conceptualize the PPM argument using a comparison such as this:

P1: We want to be physically fit.

P2: Physical fitness is the outcome of healthy eating and regular exercise.

C: We should eat healthy and exercise regularly.

The PPM argument can be summarized as follows. Misak thinks that in his article "Truth as Convenient Friction", Price has shown that we do not only care about justifying ourselves to

⁴ Note that because the ordering of P1 and P2 is irrelevant, the argument could be called either "the Price-Peirce-Misak argument" or "the Peirce-Price-Misak argument." Likewise, it could either be abbreviated as "the PPM argument" or "the PPM argument" depending on one's preference.

other people, we also care about getting things right. As Misak would put it, “we takes ourselves [...] to aim at the right answer—i.e., at the truth, rather than at what my own standards point (what is justified by my lights) or at what community standards point to (what is justified by our lights)” (Misak, 2004: 472).

But even if we do care about the truth, it does not follow that we should practice deliberative democracy, unless seeking truth somehow requires deliberative democracy. Misak thinks it does. Inspired Peirce’s elucidation of a true belief as “a belief that would forever stand up to deliberation or inquiry” (Misak, 2004: 471), she argues that the more conversation we have, the closer to knowing the truth we will be. And to maximize debate, we have to allow everyone to have their say. Therefore, if we want to get at the truth, Misak thinks we should promote *deliberation*, by valuing discussion, and ensure *democracy*, by letting as many people as possible participate. In her words, “deliberative democracy in political philosophy is the right view, because deliberative democracy in epistemology is the right view” (Misak, 2004: 477).

Whatever we may say in response to it, it is certainly a clever argument. But is the PPM argument legitimate? The next three sections (Section 4, 5, and 6) will look at each of the three parts of the PPM argument in order. So, Section 4 will be on the Price proposition, Section 5 will be on the Peirce proposition, and Section 6 will be on the Misak conclusion. (It is worth noting that Section 4 will be significantly longer than Sections 5 and 6, because I take that piece to be what is unique about the PPM, compared to other formulations of Misak’s pragmatic justification for liberal democracy.)

4. Rorty vs. Price on the Norm of Truth

4.1. Terminology

Before explaining what Rorty and Price think about the norm of truth, it would likely be helpful to know what the (potential) norms of assertoric discourse even are. In his essay, “Truth as Convenient Friction,” Price identifies a total of three norms that he thinks are necessary for communication to function. For each of the norms, I will give Price’s “characterizations⁵” and then put it in my own words; afterwards, I will provide an example case and show how the norms would apply.

Here is the first norm, the *norm of sincerity*:

“(Subjective assertability) A speaker is incorrect to assert that p if she does not believe that p; to assert that p in these circumstances provides prima facie grounds for censure, or disapprobation” (Price, 2003: 455).

Now here it is in my own words:

The Norm of Sincerity - You must believe what you say; if you do not believe your own assertion, you are liable to scrutiny, blame, criticism, etc.

This norm, I think, is pretty simple. It basically says, don’t lie. While one could come up with some exceptions, it would seem to be a generally agreed upon rule to follow⁶.

⁵ As an aside, pragmatists can sometimes be touchy about calling an account of something a “definition,” perhaps because it has Platonic implications of, say, telling what justice is not just *in practice*, but *in essence*. Price thinks, for instance, that we should avoid asking “What is X?” type questions entirely (Price, 2003: 463). Following suit, Price carefully refers to his descriptions of the norms only as giving a “characterization” (Price, 2003: 455), even though, when looking at them, we may be inclined to think of them as definitions. Personally, I do not believe it would be blasphemy to call them “definitions,” so long as one understands that these would be “pragmatic definitions,” not “Platonic definitions.” Granted, what this actually means would probably take a whole other thesis paper—if not an entire book—to explain, so I will not pursue the point here. I will instead defer to euphemistic language which pragmatists on the whole seem more comfortable with, like “characterization,” “description,” “account,” “portrayal,” etc.

⁶ That is not to say the exceptional cases don’t matter. As a matter of fact, the idea that we have many “little norms” as opposed to one “big norm” is important to Rorty’s response (Price and Rorty, 2010: 255). However, I will not pursue that point in this paper.

The second norm, the *norm of justification*, is where things get trickier. Perhaps it's best to begin by showing what Price says about it:

“(Personal warranted assertability) A speaker is incorrect to assert that p if she does not have adequate (personal) grounds for believing that p; to assert that p in these circumstances provides prima facie grounds for censure” (Price, 2003: 455).

What I want to emphasize about this characterization of the norm of justification is the “personal” in parenthesis. By Price’s own admission, personal warranted assertability is not how pragmatists like Rorty would think of the norm of justification; they would think of it as *communal* warranted assertability. As Price writes, “few people who advocate reducing truth to (or replacing truth by) a notion of warranted assertability have personal warranted assertability in mind. Rather, they imagine some more objective, community-based variant, according to which a belief is justified if it coheres appropriately with the other beliefs of one’s community⁷” (Price, 2003: 455-456). Curiously, Price does not give an explicit characterization of communal warranted assertability the way he does for personal warranted assertability (or subjective assertability and truth). Price’s underplaying of communal warranted assertability is a point of contention I have with Price’s argument for the existence of a norm to truth, but I will get more into that later (Section 4.3.).

Here is how I would put the norm of (private/public) justification in my own words:

The (Private/Public) Norm of Justification - You must have (personally/communally recognized) evidence (i.e. justification) for what you say; if you do not have evidence to

⁷ Price’s use of the term “objective” in describing this position is an odd choice, given that Rorty—who Price obviously has in mind, given that “Truth as Convenient Friction” is a direct response to (and refutation of) Rorty’s views—would never describe his own position as trying to seek objectivity (Rorty, 1991: 22-23). Perhaps Price is using this term ironically?

back up your assertion, you are liable to censure (Price 2003, 455).

These two norms are (relatively) uncontroversial. Rorty and Price would broadly accept that these norms are necessary for meaningful communication. The second norm in particular—what Rorty calls “justification” and what Price calls “warranted assertability”—is the norm the Rortyan pragmatist thinks is the strongest norm we would need within our account of how discourse functions. The third norm is the one in question:

“(Truth) If not-*p*, then it is *incorrect* to assert that *p*; if not-*p*, there are prima facie grounds for censure of an assertion that *p*” (Price, 2003: 457).

And here it is in my own words:

The Norm of Truth - You must be correct in what you say, if you say something incorrect, you are liable to censure.

Allow me to now illustrate these norms by means of an example. To take a trivial case, say someone asked me “Is there any milk in the fridge?” This is how each of the three norms would operate in this instance (notice the use of “should” in all of these conditions):

1. Subjective Assertability - I should answer “Yes” in case I believe there to be milk in the fridge (i.e. I am not lying in my assertion; I am being honest).
2. (Personal/Communal) Warranted Assertability - I should answer “Yes” in case I have some (personally/communally satisfactory) evidence that there is milk in the fridge (e.g. I recently went to the store to buy milk, I remember seeing milk the last time I opened the fridge, etc.).
3. Truth - I should answer “Yes” in case there is *in fact* milk in the fridge (i.e. what matters most is not whether I believe there is milk in the fridge, or whether I have evidence to

support my claim that there is milk in the fridge—what matters most is whether there is *actually* milk in the fridge).

Although this is a low-stakes example, even here we may feel the pull of Price’s argument. Even if I am justified in my belief that there is milk in the fridge, neither my belief nor my justification will do much to satisfy my colleague’s desire for milk. They do not merely care if I believe p or am justified in asserting p . They also care if p is accurate—in other words, if p is true.

4.2. What Are We Arguing About?

Let me once more begin by laying Rorty’s views of truth out on the table, and then show how his opponent (in this case, Price) responds. Rorty’s position can be summarized by the following quotation:

Pragmatists think that if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy. This conviction makes them suspicious of the distinction between justification and truth, for that distinction makes no difference to my decisions about what to do (Rorty, 1998: 19).

As mentioned earlier (Section 2.1), some, though not all, pragmatists, hold the view that “if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy.” This pragmatist notion is held by Rorty and Price. (Price, 2003: 451). Despite their differences, they both see themselves as committed to the belief that a difference should make a difference; that is, philosophical distinctions do not matter unless they entail differences in how we interact with and within the world. And so we will treat it as a background assumption of the debate.

With that understood, Rorty’s argument can be represented as follows:

P1. Philosophical distinctions do not matter unless there is a difference in practice.

P2. The distinction between truth and justification does not make a difference in practice.

C. The distinction between truth and justification does not matter (i.e. it is empty, insignificant, unhelpful, etc.)

From the conclusion, Rorty takes it that since the distinction between truth and justification does not matter, truth is not a worthwhile concept to keep around. In an Occam's Razor style move, Rorty suggests that if we are able to tell a story about the way things are without relying on a notion of truth, then that's what we should do.

For Price, P1 and C are not under scrutiny; it is P2 that worries him. If P2 is correct, Price would agree with Rorty that truth does not matter. However, Price thinks P2 is incorrect: there *would* be a difference in the behavior of a society that followed the norms of truth and justification and a society that only followed the norm of justification. If Price is right that there is a difference in practice between seeking justification and seeking truth, then by Rorty's own logic (P1), the distinction between justification and truth would matter, and thus the philosophical concept of truth is worth keeping in the pragmatist's inventory.

But how can we tell whether the distinction between justification and truth makes a difference in practice? In other words, if a difference has to make a difference, what difference would make a difference? I think this passage from Rorty, talking about why the norm of justification matters, may offer us an answer. He writes, "the need to justify our beliefs and desires to ourselves and to our fellow agents subjects us to norms, and obedience to these norms produces a behavioral pattern that we must detect in others before confidently attributing beliefs to them" (Rorty 26). Norms, in this context, matter because we use them to determine who we are able to legitimately converse with. Following a norm creates "a behavioral pattern" which

shows that you subscribe to said norm and can therefore be held accountable to it. And we need to be able to hold people accountable to the norm of justification (and possibly the norm of truth), because without it (or them) conversation would collapse.

But again the question is, What constitutes “a behavioral pattern?” What does the behavioral pattern for the norm of justification or the norm of truth look like? It may be hard to recognize what I will call “norm-obeying behavior” because we are so entrenched in it. This is why Price thinks it is difficult to see what difference the distinction between the norm of justification and the norm of truth makes. As Price says about the norm of truth, “ordinarily we look through it, rather than at it” (Price, 2003: 452). And so in order to, as it were, “look at” the norm of truth, Price proposes a thought experiment where we imagine a society that only followed the norm of justification.

But before we get to the Mo’an thought experiment (and my evaluation of it) I will offer one more point of clarification. It may be helpful to think of there being two distinct, though easily conflated, questions at hand:

1. *Do* we practice the norm of truth?
2. *Should* we practice the norm of truth?

Price would answer “Yes” to both of these questions. As to the first question, Price thinks that empirically (or, theoretically empirically, so to speak) we can see that human beings do act in accordance with the norm of truth. As to the second question, Price thinks that the norm of truth plays such a vital role to discourse that human interaction is hardly conceivable without it. This is because without the norm of truth disagreements would not matter. Rorty, conversely, would answer “No” to both of these questions. As to the first question, Rorty thinks that although we can tell that human beings follow various “little” norms, there is no reason to jump to the

conclusion that we follow one big, wholesale norm of capital-T Truth (Price and Rorty, 2010: 255). As to the second question, Rorty thinks that the norm of truth is not really necessary to the functioning of social discourse. He thinks that what plays the crucial role instead is social cooperation; in other words, for Rorty, *getting at the truth* is not what matters, *getting to agreement* is what matters.

4.3.The (Im)possibility of Personal Warranted Assertability

The most troubling aspect of Price's "Truth as a Convenient Friction" is that he portrays the norm of justification as *personal* warranted assertability, rather than *communal* warranted assertability. In other words, the Mo'ans in Price's thought experiment are only trying to justify by their own lights rather than by the lights of their community. This is evident, for instance, when Price writes in explaining his argument that "the crucial point is that if the only norms in play are subjective assertability and personal warranted assertability, introducing disquisitional truth leaves everything as it is. It does not import a third norm" (Price, 2003: 458). Price then goes on to conclude that because the Mo'ans cannot communicate, societies must need a third norm, the norm of truth. And when explaining what the norm of truth is, he says that it "provides a norm of assertion which we take it that a speaker may fail to meet, even if she does meet the norms of subjective assertability and (personal) warranted assertability" (Price, 2003: 457).

I think the way that Price consistently emphasizes personal warranted assertability in his analysis of the norm of truth is misguided because this paper is supposed to be a response to Rorty's views, but Rorty would not characterize the norm of justification as personal warranted assertability. Rather, Rorty portrays the norm of justification as aiming to justify oneself to one's community (Rorty, 1998: 41). Therefore, if Price is trying to show why the norm of justification

is insufficient in explaining social practice, he should be using the same definition of the norm of justification as Rorty is. Otherwise, they are just talking past one another.

The more serious reason I think Price is wrong to characterize the norm of justification as personal warranted assertability is because I do not think there is such a thing as personal warranted assertability, in the same way that the late Ludwig Wittgenstein (via Saul Kripke) thinks there is no such thing as a private language (Kripke, 1982: 60-62). There can be no private language because language is socially constructed. Even when someone is “talking to themselves,” so to speak, they are doing so according to the rules and meanings of the language-games they have been socialized to play (Kripke, 1982: 89). Similarly, justification should be understood as a social phenomenon, because like language, the rules of justification evolve out of social practice. That is, in a world without human beings, neither language nor justification (which is dependent on language) would exist. Humans have made language in order to communicate with other humans and have made justification in order to persuade other humans. So even when someone is “justifying an assertion to themselves,” they are doing so through what are considered the valid moves and maneuvers of a community’s own justification-game, the game of giving and asking for reasons. Indeed, if pragmatists are to take away any lesson from the late Wittgenstein, it is nothing grants legitimacy except social practice. If I am correct that pragmatists should view justification the way that the late Wittgenstein views language, then we should deny the concept of personal warranted assertability.⁸

⁸ There is a lot I have just said in this paragraph in summarizing the late Wittgenstein’s views as interpreted by Saul Kripke. The idea that a private language is impossible is a controversial one. Simon Blackburn has written an article arguing against it (Blackburn, 1984: 281-301). If Blackburn is correct that a private language is possible, then the comparison I have just made between language and justification to show that there is no private justification would fall apart. But I do not think Blackburn is correct. To explain very briefly, Blackburn’s approach in his article is misguided because he is trying to answer the sceptic, even though the point of “the sceptical solution” is that we do not need to say anything to the sceptic. As Kripke writes, “the main problem is *not*, ‘How can we show private language [...] to be

4.4. How To Make Discourse Function

To be fair to Price, he does at one point acknowledge communal warranted assertability later in the paper. He writes that, “Without a norm stronger than that of warranted assertability *for me*, or *for us*, the idea of improving *my*, or *our*, current commitments would be incoherent [...] we need a norm stronger than that of warranted assertability for any *actual* community” (Price, 2003: 460). So perhaps the reason Price focuses on personal warranted assertability is because he does not think communal warranted assertability would make a significant difference, specifically for getting us to improve on our own beliefs. I would argue, however, that the norm of justification, when properly understood, does allow us to improve our beliefs.

To get across the point of how important justification is to disagreement—to the point where the norm of justification is all that one needs to make discourse function—I would like to offer my own hypothetical. Here is a disagreement between two people:

Seasoned Debater 1: It is the case that X is in fact objectively capital-t True.

Seasoned Debater 2: It is not the case that X is in fact objectively capital-t True.

Seasoned Debater 1: Yes, it is.

Seasoned Debater 2: No, it isn't.

Seasoned Debater 1: Yes, it is.

Seasoned Debater 2: No, it isn't.

(And so on...)⁹

impossible?”; rather it is, “How can we show *any language* at all [...] to be *possible?*” (Kripke, 1982: 62). The answer to the latter question is social practice. Again, there is much, *much* more that could be said here (enough for a whole other thesis), but this footnote has grown long enough already.

⁹ Although I admit this hypothetical is played up for absurdity, it is, in some cases, not too far off from how some debates really go. Anyone who has listened to or participated in enough philosophical

When arguments such as this occur, where we seem to have reached an impasse, where do we go from there? To state the obvious, the problem with the above disagreement is that neither side is giving justification for their views. Adding in more truthiness (like saying, “It is *a priori*, apodictically, analytically the case that...”) will not make the discussion more productive. What we need is justification—things like reasons, arguments, data, etc.—to show why each side has the view that they have, e.g. I think that X because Y. It’s the Y matters here. What makes discussion flow is the question, “why do you believe what you believe?” regardless of whether a belief is or is not (in fact, objectively, capital-T, etc.) true. To be fair, I recognize that Price does not think the norm of truth can function independent the norm of justification. But my point is that once justification is added to this hypothetical argument, there is nothing more which needs to be added for it operate properly¹⁰.

Of course, as Price and Misak are keenly aware, we often think that assertions people make are worthy of criticism. However, Price thinks that there is a norm “which speakers immediately assume to be breached by someone with whom they disagree, *independently of any diagnosis of the source of the disagreement*“ (Price, 2003: 452). But I would argue that the only way in which people censure someone for a view is because of the justification for that view. In other words, the “source” of the censure-worthiness is not in *what* people disagree on, but *why* they disagree on it.

21st-century Americans asserting the earth is flat, for example, seems obviously deserving of scrutiny. Why? More specifically, what is the source of the censure-worthiness? Is

dialectics will have encountered one which pretty much boils down to one person saying “Yes, it is” and another person saying “No, it isn’t” (or some variation of these phrases), with nowhere to go from there.
¹⁰ There is another way in which we could think of disagreements “mattering” which is concerned not with functioning, but with caring about disagreements. That reading of “matters” will be addressed in the next section (Section 5).

it because what they believe is untrue? Although we might articulate our condemnation of flat-earththers this way, when we look at how such articulations function, it is clear that what we mean when we say that “flat-earththers are wrong” is that “flat-earththers hold views which lack justification.” In other words, we take it that there is no experiment which demonstrates that the earth is flat, but there are several experiments which demonstrate that the earth is round (or an oblate spheroid, to be more precise.) Therefore, an assertion that the earth is flat is censure-worthy *because* the assertion has no argument to support it and has many arguments against it¹¹. It is the justification behind the view, not the view itself, which is troubles us; or, to put another way, a view troubles us only because of the justification (or lack thereof) behind it.

But what if even after both sides give justification for their views, the debate still goes nowhere? There are at least two pragmatic responses to this.

The first is the approach William James takes in the case where his friends are debating “*does the man go round the squirrel or not?*”¹² We can look at how both sides are defining the key term of the argument: in this case, “go round”. If we define “go round” in one way (e.g., going north, south, east, and west of the squirrel), then one side is right; if we define “go round” another way (e.g. being in front, behind, to the right, and to the left of the squirrel), then the other

¹¹ As for what to do in cases where there do not seem to be arguments for or against a claim (e.g., the assertion that God exists or the assertion that God does not exist), see William James’ “The Will to Believe.” It may be that although we lack justification for a view, we may have justification *to believe* the view, if the matter is “forced, living, and momentous” (James, 1896: 93).

¹² For context, here is the full anecdote: “The *corpus* of the dispute was a squirrel—a live squirrel supposed to be clinging to one side of a tree-trunk; while over against the tree’s opposite side a human being was imagined to stand. This human witness tries to get sight of the squirrel by moving rapidly round the tree, but no matter how fast he goes, the squirrel moves as fast in the opposite direction, and always keeps the tree between himself and the man, so that never a glimpse of him is caught” (James, 1907a: 93).

side is right (James, 1907a: 93). So, what may at first appear to be a metaphysical argument, may only be a confusion over what we mean when we use a word.

The second strategy would be to make the distinction between an internal question and external question, as Rudolf Carnap does in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”. The idea behind this tactic is that questions about the existence of things (which often hit a dead end)—e.g., “Do numbers exist?”, “Do universals exist?”, “Do possible worlds exist?”—can be understood in one of two ways. One way could be as an internal question, which is asking if something is included in our linguistic framework. For example, if one is internally asking “Do things exist?”, we should interpret this question as asking “Do we use thing-talk?” (as opposed to, say, atom-bundle-talk or time-slices-talk). Since we do use thing-talk, the answer would be Yes. The second way, the external question, is asking if we should adopt a new linguistic framework which would include something not already in our own. For example, if one is externally asking “Do possible worlds exist?”, we should interpret this question as asking, “Should we start using possible-worlds-talk?” If we think that possible-worlds-talk would be useful, then we would answer Yes (Carnap, 1951: 250). The upshot of this approach is that we take questions about what there is to be questions about what we should say there is (Carnap, 1951: 262).

If a philosophical disagreement seems to be going nowhere, I think either of these strategies would be useful for the pragmatist to try to make the conversation more productive. But neither of these tactics are in the business of adding some weightier sort of concept of truth into the discussion. If anything, they are drawing attention to the words we say and the vocabularies we use. Given that language is the stuff of justification (e.g., I am justified in calling something a ‘table’ based on how my linguistic community uses the word ‘table’), we

have no reason to think that a norm of truth is necessary in order for communication to function.

That is not to say

But then there are times when justification doesn't work simply because our opponents are unwilling to listen. This is a problem as old as philosophy itself¹³. And even now there seems to be no solution to it. Misak herself writes that her intention is not to create an argument that will convince neo-Nazis that they are wrong, but to create an argument which will explain *to us* why they are wrong (Misak, 2000: 16).

5. Truth as the End of Inquiry, or Something Else?

In this section, I will now turn to the second crucial element of the PPM argument, which is the Peircean conception of truth as the end of inquiry. Unlike the previous section, where I directly challenged Price's analysis of the norm of truth, I will attempt a more indirect challenge to here.

I want to focus less on showing that Peirce's account of truth is *wrong* and more on showing how it is *optional*.

The PPM argument centers on what Misak calls "the pragmatist theory of truth" (Misak, 2004: 471). This phrase would surprise pragmatists for two reasons. The first reason is that they might not believe there even is a pragmatist theory of truth, or at least not much of one. As Rorty puts it "[a pragmatist theory about truth] says that truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about¹⁴" (Rorty, 1982: xiii). The second, more basic

¹³ The opening of Plato's *Republic* makes this very point: that persuasion only works on those who are willing to listen to reason (Bloom, 1968: 3-4).

¹⁴ Like many things Rorty says, the assertion that there is nothing "interesting" to say about truth is a rather cavalier remark. Certainly, there are many philosophers who think truth is an interesting topic. What then would make a philosophical concept in itself "interesting" or "uninteresting?" My interpretation of the "Introduction" to *Consequences of Pragmatism* is that Rorty thinks theories of truth are "uninteresting" in the sense that they *lack explanatory efficacy*, like how saying that opium makes

reason is with the article “the” in “the pragmatist theory of truth,” implying that there is only one theory of truth pragmatists have. But nothing could be further from the truth.

The most obvious example of an alternative pragmatist account of truth is the Jamesian one, which says that “‘The true,’ to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving” (James, 1907b: 86). If this were “the pragmatist theory of truth”, then there would not seem to be much of a connection between it and deliberative democracy.

But perhaps we might feel that one is too basic; like it is leaving something important out, something which Peirce was more attentive to. Another alternative pragmatist account of truth, one which tries to combine the insights of Peirce, James, and disquotationalism¹⁵, is the one Rorty gives in “Pragmatism, Davidson, and truth”. According to Rorty, there are three uses of truth:

1. An endorsing use; that is, truth as what is good for us to believe. In other words, “whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief” (James, 1907a: 109).
2. A cautionary use; that is, the fallibilist attitude that although we may think having a belief will bring about good results, it may not turn out that way. Basically, the idea that while we think a belief is justified now, we may no longer think it is justified later.
3. A disquotational use (Rorty, 1991: 128).

people sleepy because it has “dormitive power” explains nothing we did not already know (Rorty, 1982: xxiv). In any case, I would not consider it Rorty’s best choice of words.

¹⁵ Disquotationalism is simply the view that the sentence “snow is white” is true if snow is white (*i.e.*, adding “is true” to the end of the proposition “snow is white” would be redundant). Indeed, if this were “the pragmatist theory of truth,” there would really be nothing to say about its political entailments.

The cautionary use of truth has echoes of the Peircean account of truth, but with the key difference that it does not commit to any idea about how we are approaching an ideal “limit” of inquiry with truth as its terminus.

Misak is aware of Rorty’s endorsing and cautionary uses of truth. While she prefers this account of truth over Rorty’s other, more dismissive comments on truth, she still does not think it is fully adequate. Her main issue with it is that she sees the endorsing use and cautionary use as in tension with one another. As she writes, “the endorsing use and the cautionary use pull against each other. They require us to think, in one thought, that *p* is true, but it might be shown to be false” (Misak, 2013: 236).

I think Rorty’s best response to this challenge would be to say that even if this tension does exist, the tension lies within social practice and not with him. If we agree with Rorty that “grasping a concept is knowing how to use a word” (Rorty, 2010: 44)—a view which, as pragmatists, we have good reason to assent to—then it is easily understandable why the endorsing use and cautionary use pull against each other: people use the same word in different ways, depending on context. If want to look at how the concept of truth functions in practice, we will find that sometimes people use the expression ‘true’ to endorse a belief and sometimes they use it to caution that we might change our beliefs in the future. In which case, our account should include both uses, regardless of how they fit together. If we pragmatists want to focus on language, and specifically on language as use, then we must expect and be willing to accept a certain degree of messiness. It is likely most people do not base their choice of words on how convenient it would be for the philosopher’s analysis. Pragmatists must sacrifice purity for the primacy of practice.

So, if there are no other objections to Rorty's three-fold account of truth, it seems we have another contender for "the pragmatist theory of truth" besides Peirce's; in which case, it is unclear why we would choose Peirce's specifically.

There are two possible attempts one could make to explain why we should choose Peirce's account of truth over Rorty's, both of which I think are misguided. The first would be that Peirce's account of truth has salient political entailments (assuming the PPM argument is correct) while Rorty's does not. If Peirce could get us to a justification of deliberative democracy while Rorty could not, there would be a clear benefit to choosing Peirce. The problem with this approach is that it would defeat the whole point of the PPM argument. The PPM argument is strictly not supposed to assume any political stance, until it reaches its conclusion. Misak explicitly does not want to "beg the question in favor of the liberal democratic values we may hold dear" (Misak, 2004: 472). Indeed, if we were to take liberal democratic values as a given, we would not even need the PPM argument to get us there (because we would just "be there").

The second reason one might choose Peirce's account of truth over Rorty's—the argument Misak is in favor of—is that Peirce's account of truth explains why disagreements "matter" to us. There are two possible interpretations of the word "matter" in this context: making disagreements matter, in the sense of explaining how to make them function well, and making disagreements matter, in the sense of explaining why we care so much about them. I have already gone over why we do not need to invoke truth in order to make disagreement properly function (Section 4), so I will now focus on why people care about disagreements.

People care about disagreements when, basically, they care about the topic of disagreement. For example, people who are indifferent to pragmatism will be indifferent towards disagreements over what pragmatism amounts to. And people who care about pragmatism will

care about disagreements over what pragmatism amounts to. Now, why some people care about some topics and some people care about others will vary, being mostly a product of personal and cultural taste. This will be based, of course, on a number of psychological and sociological factors.

However, there are some cases where we care about a topic because we care about the outcome of a disagreement over that topic. That is where I do agree with Misak's Peirce. Where I disagree is that I do not think we care about the outcome because we care about getting things right in abstract. Ultimately, a disagreement will matter to someone in proportion to how much they think the outcome of a disagreement will affect their life. Some outcomes of disagreement will be relatively mundane to us (*e.g.*, arguments over what is the greatest movie of all time), in which case we would care about the outcome only because we care about the topic. Other outcomes of disagreement will be relatively important to us (*e.g.*, arguments over whether to use nuclear weapons), in which case we care about the outcome because we care about the practical consequences of the outcome. Disagreements over whether democracy is better than fascism matter to liberal humanitarians because they do not want to live (or do not want others to live) under a totalitarian regime. We do not need a Peircean conception of truth as the outcome of unlimited inquiry in order to understand this.

6. Consequences of the PPM Argument (or Lack Thereof)

For this section let us now say for the sake of argument that the Price proposition (*i.e.*, the norm of truth) and the Peirce proposition (*i.e.*, truth as the end of inquiry) are correct. In other

words, let us say that all communities care about getting at the truth, and truth is the outcome of unlimited inquiry. What then? How far does the PPM argument take us?

There are two subsections to this section. In the first subsection, I claim that the PPM argument leads to absurd conclusions about which assertions are worthy of scrutiny. In the second subsections, I present what I take to be the limitations of the PPM argument in giving us cause to adopt political beliefs.

6.1.Price and Peirce Don't Mix

My first challenge to the PPM argument as a whole is that Price's analysis of the norm of truth and Peirce's account of truth as the end of inquiry do not get along well together. Considering that the Price-Peirce-Misak argument is, as its name implies, a combination of Price and Peirce's views, this is a serious issue.

The problem with combining Price's norm of truth with Peirce's truth as the end of inquiry is that the norm states that "if not- p , there are prima facie grounds for censure of an assertion that p " (Price, 2003: 457), but if we think of truth as the end of inquiry, it would be absurd to think that there are "grounds for censure of an assertion" of an untrue claim. To explain this point, consider the science from a historical perspective. I do not think we would deem it legitimate to criticize someone in the 18th-century for holding the belief that Newtonian physics is true—even though certain aspects of Newtonian physics have since been disproved by later theories—because they were holding the most plausible view, given the available justification at the time. Similarly, we may imagine that accepted theories within our current scientific paradigm (*e.g.*, Darwinian evolution, Einsteinian relativity, quantum mechanics, etc.) could also turn out to

be seen as false by later generations. But even if, say, Darwin's theory of evolution turned out to be false at the supposed ideal end of inquiry, this would not mean that our assertion that evolution is true would be worthy of censure within our own time. Likewise, say that I currently assert climate change is real, because the available evidence strongly suggests that it is; but, for the sake of argument, assume that at some point in the future, at time T , some new piece of evidence will be discovered which will show that my assertion is false. Are there "grounds for censure of an assertion" that climate change is real if the assertion is made before time T ? Surely, I cannot be blamed for making the assertion. If one has made the best possible conclusion given the best possible evidence available, one has done all they can—there is no more room to criticize.

The upshot of this is that adding Peirce's account of truth as the end of inquiry to Price's analysis of the norm of truth leads to absurd conclusions. This may, in part, explain why Price himself in "Truth as Convenient Friction" is adamant about how we should not give into the temptation to provide an account of truth, let alone a Peircean one (Price, 2003: 463).

6.2. Everything in Moderation

Misak describes her philosophy as a "moderate version of pragmatism" (Misak, 2004a: 33). Thus, we may expect that although she thinks there is more of a link between philosophy and politics than Rorty does, she does not think the link is limitless. And indeed, we find her write that "philosophy...has something to say about how we should arrive at answers to our moral and political questions, but it does not have everything to say" (Misak, 2000: 6-7).

It is no surprise, then, that the PPM argument, even if it is correct, does not in itself give us enough to form a fully fleshed out political worldview. To take just one example, the one which Misak often returns to: what exactly is wrong with the Nazis? Is the reason we find Nazism so abhorrent that they do not deliberate enough? Or that they do not allow non-Aryans to participate in deliberation? The very notion of “deliberation” feels like a rather unsatisfying criteria for describing our outrage towards mass genocide. As to any other political question—e.g., Should we pursue globalization? Should we fund the police? Should we legalize marijuana?—the PPM argument will probably not have much to say, at least not directly.

At its core, the PPM argument cannot really give us answers to political questions, it can only tell us what method to use to get them: deliberative democracy. But even then, this is uncertain. Recall that the basic logical form of the PPM argument (Section 3.2) is as follows:

P1: We want T.

P2: $D \rightarrow T$

C: We should promote D.

This would be true only if T was all that we care about; that is, if truth is the one and only goal we have. However, even if we do aim at truth, it is possible that we may aim at other things as well, and that the methods for attaining these other goals may conflict with deliberative democracy. Although getting at the truth may be the one thing which all communities value, why should we assume that the value which all communities share is *superior* to the values of particular communities? In fact, whether we value inter-communal over intra-communal values, or vice versa, is a historically contingent taste which is the product of our upbringing.

7. Concluding Reflections

In this paper, I have tried to show that although the PPM argument is compelling, there are several reasons to think it does not hold. Here is a list of the main reasons:

1. Price's argument for the existence of a norm of truth is tenuous, because the Mo'an thought experiment which is meant to demonstrate why a norm of justification would not be enough is built upon a false understanding of justification (Section 4).
2. There are other pragmatic accounts of truth besides Peirce's and it is unclear why we would choose Peirce's over the others (Section 5).
3. The norm of truth dictates that untrue views are censure-worthy, but if truth is what would be the outcome of unlimited inquiry, there are cases where assertions of untrue views would not be censure-worthy (Section 6.1).
4. Even if all communities value aiming at the truth, communities have other values besides aiming at the truth (Section 6.2).

I would like to now like to take the conclusions of this paper out of the parochial pragmatist realm, and into the broader philosophical sphere.

One of the "big questions" out there now is whether metaphysics has any relevance for morality. Do we, like Derek Parfit, think that the metaphysical theory of personal identity has serious consequences for our moral theories, or do we, like Mark Johnston, think that "metaphysical pictures of the underpinnings of our practices do not represent what crucially has to be in place if those practices are to be justified" (Johnston, 1997: 175). If my conclusions in this paper are accurate, and the PPM argument does not hold, this would seem to favor the Johnston side of the debate, at least as far as it concerns pragmatism.

That is not to say the question has been resolved. I will not be so arrogant as to think my undergraduate thesis paper has provided an answer to this “big question.” For one thing, everything I have written could be wrong (pragmatists should be fallibilists, after all). But even if everything I have written was correct, it could always turn out that while the Parfit side has lost the battle, they will eventually win the war.

But this paper is not the war; it is, at most, a skirmish. However, for the sake of this skirmish, our takeaway should be that those like Misak who want pragmatism to grant stronger political entailments than Rortyan pragmatism allows—specifically, those who want pragmatism to justify liberal democracy—will have to either revise the PPM argument, create a new argument, or simply learn to live with contingency¹⁶.

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