

REPLY TO CHERYL MISAK

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I now turn to Cheryl Misak. We see eye to eye concerning pragmatic naturalism without foundations, but I resist her idea that we need, or can intelligibly construct, a robust or substantive conception of truth and the related belief that truth is a useful justificatory or explanatory concept. We as pragmatic naturalists should be deflationists concerning truth and, where workable (as it typically is), disquotationalists about truth. Truth cannot be, or so I say, conventional wisdom to the contrary notwithstanding, the aim of inquiry. We should not aim at what we cannot get—at what we do not, and arguably cannot, understand. We should aim at getting right whatever we are investigating, which is to say getting as fully justified (in the various ways we justify things) a belief or beliefs as we can concerning whatever is under consideration at a given time. To ask *in addition* “Shouldn’t it also be true?” is to ask for the color of heat. If we take not just strongly—as strongly as we can get at a given time—warrantedly assertible beliefs as the aim of inquiry (assuming there is one aim of inquiry) but over and above that truth as well, we will never know or reasonably believe or even understand whether we have attained what inquiry aims at. Justification—the fullest justification we can get at a given time—is what we should aim at. Whether it adds up as well to truth is something we will never know or even be able reliably to surmise. Way back in 1932 Rudolf Carnap said that truth was time independent while confirmation was time dependent. That wasn’t a bit of Platonism coming from strange places, but I take it as being what Wittgenstein would call a grammatical remark, and an important one too. The role that the concept of truth—the uses of truth—plays in our practices is very different from a justificatory one.

The latter is time and place dependent and dependent on our having certain purposes concerned with certain ends. There is little sense in talking about just justification, period. It is always justification given certain purposes or aims.

Misak would try to convince me that a good pragmatist antifoundationalist should have a robust account of truth. I shall try to convince her that such a person—fallibilist that such a person should be—should be a deflationist disquotationalist. I should add that I very much admire Misak's work and broadly agree with most of it. I discussed her *C. S. Peirce: Truth and the End of Inquiry* when I gave a seminar on the classical pragmatists, and her *Verificationism* makes an important philosophical and historical corrective.¹ For a while it was thought—indeed it was fashionable to think—that verificationism was dead. Only hopelessly outmoded philosophers, it was widely thought, would be in any way verificationists. Metaphysical realism and its scientific twin, scientific realism, flourished as if the linguistic turn had never occurred. Particularly in the philosophy of religion, but in other metaphysical areas, this seemed a disastrous throwback to me. Such people chattered on as if they knew what they were talking about. Misak's *Verificationism* provided a powerful counter to that—not by critiquing these baroque claims directly, but by perspicuously characterizing and distinguishing various forms of verificationism and articulating an adequate form. My beef with her is about a certain treatment of truth.

I should add that I am neither a truth denier nor a truth detractor. I also agree with Misak that the "pragmatist thinks that in order to fully understand the concept of truth, we need to explore truth's relationship with . . . the practices of belief, assertion, and inquiry. . . . [W]e ought to get leverage on the concept, or a fix on it, by exploring its connections with practice." There is no getting a foothold outside our practices. We think and conceptualize within them. There is no alternative to that. But practices change and we may sometimes, working within our practices, gain useful idealizations of our practices and with them help make those practices more coherent. But, to use an overworked metaphor, we always repair and rebuild the ship at sea. It is not this practice-oriented conception of how we should go about things that I resist but her understanding of the role of truth in those practices.

"A true belief, Peirce said [and Misak agrees], is one that is "unassailable by doubt"; it is a belief that would meet every demand we were to place on it." But a belief might meet every demand we were to place on it and still be false. Truth is said to be indefeasible. That is, "it would stand up to whatever could be thrown at it by any community of inquirers." But all we could at best know is that for all communities of inquirers at a given time and place that a candidate for a true belief had stood up to what they had thrown at it. We could never be in the position to know or reasonably believe that "it would stand up to whatever could be thrown at it by any community of inquirers." Truth becomes, on such a conception, utterly unknowable and thus unconceptualizable. This is a terrible predicament for a pragmatist to be in. This hardly seems like respecting practice. Misak asserts plausibly, and perhaps rightly, that

if we understand “[w]hat it is to assert, to make a claim, to believe, to judge” we will understand that doing any of these things will be “to be engaged in a process of justification aimed at getting things right.” If we have beliefs that are not just dogmatic opinions and instead have what Charles S. Peirce would regard as genuine beliefs, these must at least in principle be responsive to evidence and argument. I would agree with all of this, properly interpreted. But to aim at getting things right may not be to get things right. When we get things that we take, on as full a consideration as we can at a time muster, to be right, we get things that are as justified as we at that time can get. Are they really right? Well, we will never know. The most human beings can ever get is what are taken to be right by what they take to be their own best lights when their lights coincide with what would be agreed on by the most extensive and diverse group that can be carefully conversed with and reasoned with. It is always by someone’s lights. We never transcend that.

Misak has another partly different take on arguing for a robust conception of truth built into our social practices. In examining our practices she says, “you find that truth is not just solidarity or what this or that community happens to find best to believe. When you examine practice, you find the goal of inquiry is truth as we have always thought of it—something stable and independent of what this or that person or community might think.” We have already seen reasons why truth cannot be the goal or aim of inquiry. However, in justifying our beliefs—fixing them, if you will—we are not just concerned (if in some contexts concerned at all) to attain solidarity or just concerned with what our community happens to find best to do or think. We want something which is stable and in many contexts not so particular culture-centric. We want, where we can get it, justification to the widest community possible, taking into account beliefs and interests of a great number of varied people and peoples with varied lives. We want not only to know what we believe and think—what people on our side of the mountain believe and think—but what people on the other side, whom we seldom have contact with, believe and think as well. Perhaps when we do, we will find their beliefs and practices strange. We may be puzzled about what they believe and think and why. We want to learn the rationale for their beliefs; we want, if we are reasonable, to converse with them and get to know them and understand them. We want, again, if we have integrity about our own beliefs, to have such wider communities so interacting. But it is the beliefs and convictions that come out of that interaction that, specialized contexts apart, we appeal to in justifying beliefs. This isn’t just any community but where there is (as there always is) no overleaping history there is no escaping, if we would fix our beliefs adequately, some such a determinate community. In so acting we give our beliefs the fullest justification we can give them. But we still must recognize even with this justification—or indeed any justification—that they still might not be true. The open question keeps coming back just as it did with G. E. Moore about “good.” Still, in claiming anything to be true, taking it for true, believing something to be true, this sort

of justification is all we can ever go on. If we think hard enough, apply wide reflective equilibrium carefully enough, perhaps even *feel* reflectively enough, we might come up with better norms of justification. Still, that we can get time- and place-independent norms seems, to put it mildly, rather problematic. There is no permanent end to this justification business where we finally have found truth, where we have finally found something where the open question doesn't apply: "as well corroborated as we can get but still perhaps false?" There is no place for norms of truth as distinct from norms of justification. There are, that is, no norms of truth as distinct from norms of justification. We don't even know what it would be like to have such distinctive norms of truth. All we can ever get, and all we need, is very carefully discussed, well confirmed, or otherwise validated, cross-cultural agreement about some mutually taken-to-be-central things that are taken to be the case or taken to be what to do or what to be, though in many places we will not need to agree on what to do and what to be. There are many situations in which reflective and sensitive people will agree to let everyone do their own thing when by doing it they do not do harm to others. Still, we seek in many crucial places, if we are not in some horrible sense pejoratively ethnocentric, wide community understanding, sympathy, and agreement.² Where we get that rooted in the fullest possible understanding of what is going on, including knowledge of the causes of one's beliefs and the consequences of them, we gain the best justification we can get. But such a justified belief or set of beliefs, like any belief or set of beliefs, still might turn out to be false. The open question comes back like the return of the repressed. But such justificatory norms are all we can have to go on; "norms of truth" that are thought to be distinct justificatory norms are something that are thoroughly unintelligible. We have norms that some people call "norms of truth," but they are not justificatory. They note, attending to our practices, distinctive uses of "truth" such as the cautionary one just deployed and the ones specified by Misak when she was discussing disquotationalists. It is considerations like this that make John Dewey's account of truth as warranted assertability mistaken. But it is a good account of justification. Dewey thought in his last book (with Arthur Bentley), *Knowing and Known*,³ that we should just jettison the concept of truth and stick with warranted assertability. But we need the various nonjustificatory uses of "true" like the cautionary use to remind ourselves of our fallibility and the thorough contingency of things. It, among other things, should cut down our hubris.

People self-consciously sticking with justificatory norms and not kidding themselves into believing they have something—we know not what—called "norms of truth" still seek out evidence and engage in discussion and argument and the like. With justificatory norms the wheels of argument still engage. A says, "Same-sex marriage should not be allowed." B asks "Why?" A says such relationships are destabilizing for the people involved. B says plenty of same-sex couples have cohabitated for years in stable relationships. All we need and all we can get are justificatory norms to carry out such arguments. B

either has evidence for his claim or he does not. That is surely relevant to B's argument for same-sex marriage: relevant but not decisive. But all this can—and should—be carried out within the limits of justificatory norms alone. To say we have to have "norms of truth" to get objectivity just uncritically invokes a reified conception of objectivity. But "objectivity" can be taken to be wide and carefully investigated intersubjectivity: again, something we would gain from wide reflective equilibrium. Surely we aim at getting things right—or as nearly so as we can. But if that means getting an answer that is not justified by me or by my community but justified *tout court*, we do not understand what we are talking about unless we give *tout court* a *persuasive* definition, making "justified *tout court*" come to "being justified to the largest community that can be had." We have to be trying to make a contrast between speaking of something being justified merely in my community and something being justified by the widest, most diversified community possibly obtainable in which the people were with sincerity and care conversing and reasoning with each other. The former is not objectively justified (i.e., fully intersubjectively justified); the latter is. But in both cases we do not break out of the circle of justificatory norms or attain certainty or a norm of truth. It isn't that aiming at truth is optional—something we should seek instead—for that very idea is incoherent.

Moreover, talking about "giving up on truth" is emotive trickery. Pragmatic naturalists such as myself are not giving up on gaining a justification as objective as we can get or on getting things as nearly right as we can. But saying we are seeking warranted assertability does not have the emotive wallop of saying we are seeking truth and the same goes for caring for the truth. To keep the emotive wallop we keep talking of seeking for truth or caring for truth. But we can explain what we mean in sober justificatory terms.

What's at issue is a lot more than this matter of the use of emotive terms. We need to recognize, as deflationists such as Richard Rorty, Paul Horwich, and Michael Williams have, that it is useful to keep truth as a term with a generalizing function, a cautionary function, and for expressing propositions whose assertability conditions we cannot identify, for example, "Everything the pope says is true." There are these uses of "true" that are important, so we do not want to try to conceive of truth as anything like warranted assertability or, like Dewey finally did, jettison the notion altogether and stick with just warranted assertability. So we continue to speak of truth, and reasonably so, while continuing to recognize that it is justifiability that is crucially important. And this is what Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, in their somewhat different ways, in effect do. And that is why Misak considers them in their own distinctive ways deflationists about truth. But I then think that she should side with Rorty, Horwich, and Williams and stop thinking of truth as being so essential and stop thinking of it as an epistemological notion.

NOTES

1. Cheryl Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991); Cheryl Misak, *Verificationism: Its History and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 1993).

2. I use “ethnocentric” in the standard anthropological sense and not in Rorty’s wide, and sometimes useful, anthropological sense.

3. John Dewey and Arthur Bentley, *Knowing and the Known* (Boston: Beacon, 1949).