

## DO CONTEMPORARY PRAGMATISTS BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES?

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Possibly the best known and most influential work of C.S. Peirce is his 1877 essay "The Fixation of Belief". Since 1877 there have been numerous attempts to carefully spell out a philosophical position which is properly in the Peircean spirit. A recent example of this is to be found in a recent work by Cheryl Misak where she offers an account of truth that borrows heavily from Peirce. Indeed, Misak, in *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth*, sees herself as developing a modern Peircean-like view.<sup>1</sup> She does not claim, however, to be simply laying out the "correct" interpretation of Peirce.<sup>2</sup> Rather, she is developing her own view which draws considerably from Peirce.

One might approach a work such as this in a number of ways. One such approach would be to analyze Misak's work with an eye towards determining if her interpretation of Peirce is correct. My concern here is not, however, to be found in this approach. Indeed, I think that to take this approach would be to ignore the contemporary significance of Misak's work. Rather, I am concerned with her work as an instance of contemporary epistemology and I approach it as such. That is, I am concerned with whether or not Misak has understood knowledge (or at least a component of knowledge) correctly.

The discussion that follows will be divided up into three sections. Section I will lay out what Misak takes to be a necessary condition of a propositional attitude's being a belief at all. Section II will provide an argument which illustrates that Misak's understanding of belief is, at root,

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<sup>1</sup> Misak, C.J. (1991), *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. viix.

paradoxical in that it precludes her from having certain beliefs about herself. Section III will consist of a discussion of the possible responses that might be offered to the problem raised in II. Ultimately, however, it will be shown that Misak's understanding of belief is flawed in a serious way.

## I

Misak is concerned with the notion of fixing beliefs. The ultimate goal of fixing beliefs, of course, is to arrive at true beliefs. As such, a substantial portion of Misak's effort is spent in an attempt to explicate what it is that the truth of a belief might consist in.<sup>3</sup> My concern here, however, is considerably less lofty than expanding on or criticizing Misak's view of the truth of beliefs. My concern is of a more fundamental nature, it is with the truth-bearers themselves: the beliefs. More precisely, I am interested in what it is that makes a belief a belief as opposed to some other kind of propositional attitude. While this might seem unnecessarily exacting, it will be shown that Misak's view rests on a conception of belief which is, at best, suspect, and quite possibly false.

Misak, like Peirce, is interested in specifying how it is that a particular belief might come to be regarded as a true belief. In pursuing this interest she specifies certain of the conditions which must be met if something is to qualify as a belief. Among these conditions is the necessary condition that a propositional attitude be "sensitive to experience" if it is to be a belief.<sup>4</sup> What this exactly means is less than clear. Examining the reason that Misak offers this condition serves as a good first step towards understanding this notion, however, as it will provide us with insight into what role this condition plays in her understanding of belief.

Since the whole process of inquiry is aimed at fixing belief which, in turn, consists entirely in ending inquiry,<sup>5</sup> it is important that Misak specify what qualifies as an appropriate method of ending inquiry. The reason for this is that if we simply claim that those propositions which are

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<sup>3</sup> While Misak does not dedicate a section to this issue, she does offer a considerable analysis of it throughout her discussion of "Inquiry: The Fixation of Belief". *Ibid.*, pp. 46–85.

I will follow Misak in referring to truth-bearers as 'beliefs' rather than the more conventional 'propositions'. While this conflation might seem troubling, it will turn out that it makes no difference to my arguments.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

believed to be true when inquiry, for whatever reason, happens to end, we might end up having to hold that certain beliefs are true in virtue of the fact that a powerful dictator managed to coerce every person into believing that his/her view of the world was correct or, perhaps more perniciously, we might end up sharing a belief on account of some drug which was secretly distributed. Let us call such problems the dictator problem. The dictator problem, if a response is left wanting, is a serious objection to Misak's pragmatism as it permits inquiry to end, and hence the truth of beliefs determined, in obviously defective ways. The dictator problem is not, however, a new criticism of Pragmatism, and Misak is quite aware that qualifications have to be made in order to avoid it.<sup>6</sup>

There are two obvious approaches to the dictator problem. One is to contend that beliefs fixed by means of a dictator are indeed beliefs, but are beliefs which are arrived at in a defective manner. In such a case we might think of the dictator problem as a problem with the methodology of securing beliefs.

The second approach to the dictator problem, and the one Misak favors, is to hold that beliefs fixed in this manner are not beliefs at all, but are, rather, some other kind of propositional attitude. Misak follows this second path by offering necessary conditions for a propositional attitude being a belief which, if successful, will effectively sidestep the dictator problem. In particular, she holds that it is necessary that a propositional attitude be "sensitive to experience" if it is to be a belief.<sup>7</sup> This purportedly solves the dictator problem in that beliefs acquired through one's response to the questionable activities of a dictator are simply not beliefs at all in virtue of the fact that the beliefs are arrived at in a manner which does not attend to the relevant data, i.e., experience. Let us look at this more carefully.

Misak is explicit in holding that an inquirer who claims that she is going to believe a proposition 'P' regardless of what evidence she might have, and regardless of what evidence might come along, is simply mistaken about her propositional attitude; such a person simply does not have a belief at all.<sup>8</sup> The evidence Misak has in mind here is what she calls 'experience'. What this consists in can be grasped when one con-

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55–58.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59. Misak's commitment to this condition manifests itself as an ongoing theme, though the most explicit adoption of it can be found here.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

siders Misak's claim that "[b]eliefs are such that they resign (i) in the face of recalcitrant experience..." and that if a candidate for belief were such that it did not resign under such circumstances, then it is simply not a belief at all.<sup>9</sup> This serves to illuminate the issue because it indicates that beliefs relate to experience in a manner which allows for possible conflict. In particular, Misak understands sensitivity to experience to consist in, at least in part, the idea that propositional attitudes, if they are to be properly understood as beliefs, must be such that they do not encounter recalcitrant experience.<sup>10</sup> This demand, however, can only be taken seriously if it is the case that the propositional attitude in question has the potential to conflict with experience. Otherwise, the demand is vacuous. After all, if a propositional attitude is such that it is impossible for there to be a recalcitrant experience, the claim that the propositional attitude has not met with recalcitrant experience would be of little significance and ought, accordingly, fail to move us one way or another with respect to the truth of the (purported) belief.

We might think of Misak's notion of sensitivity to experience as a parallel to Popper's notion of falsifiability. That is, a necessary condition for a theory's being a scientific theory is that it be falsifiable. Similarly, a necessary condition for a propositional attitude's being a belief is that it be potentially subject to recalcitrant experience.

The concern now is this: how does this sensitivity to experience manifest itself? A possible answer to this might be that individuals need direct experience of everything about which they form beliefs. This would mean that individuals can (and do?) form beliefs about those things, events, etc. with which they have some immediate acquaintance and form these beliefs either rightly or wrongly according to what experiences they have. In the event that the beliefs are corroborated directly by the relevant experiences, the propositional attitudes in question are genuine beliefs, indeed true beliefs; and in the event that the beliefs face some sort of direct recalcitrant experience, the propositional attitudes are genuine beliefs, but are false beliefs. By direct experience here I simply mean that one needs to have the object or event available to the senses in an immediate manner. We might think of our experiences pertinent to propositions such as 'the cat is on the mat' as being just these types of experiences.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

As it happens, however, this demand for such direct experiences will not do as we have beliefs (or propositional attitudes which are such that we are pretty confident we are right in calling them beliefs) about a range of things that we cannot, or at least do not, experience directly. For example, many of us have beliefs about quarks. Quarks are not something that we can experience directly; rather, we can experience their effects.<sup>11</sup> If we had a spark chamber, for instance, we would be able to experience the effects of a quark; namely we could experience its trail. The upshot of this is that we can either expand our understanding of experience to permit indirect experiences, or we rule out, as beliefs, beliefs about quarks and a host of other things.<sup>12</sup> The second option is clearly not tenable if we are to follow Peirce at all. This is the case because our encounter with the above quark is exactly what Peirce had in mind with his notion of abduction.<sup>13</sup> As such, to rule out such encounters would be a mistake. Thus we are left with the expansion of experience to include indirect experiences.

The expansion of experience to include indirect experience does no violence to the necessary condition that there be a possibility of recalcitrant experience. This is the case in that it is possible that we would fail to have the relevant experience of the trail of the quark in the spark chamber. In a sense, with respect to abduction, Misak's notion of sensitivity to experience is again very similar to Popper's notion of falsifiability in that in order for a claim or belief to qualify as a legitimate claim or belief, it must be, in principle, possible for the belief to fail a test, or for a believer to encounter the appropriate recalcitrant experience.

We can now see, at least in part, how it is that beliefs relate to experience and the purpose of offering "sensitivity to experience" as a neces-

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<sup>11</sup> One might argue that we do experience quarks directly, but we are simply unaware of this experience. Given the nature of quarks, however, this seems highly suspicious. After all, while it might be true that we are in constant contact with quarks, it is not the case that quarks occupy a place in our ordinary conception of the world that might be occupied by a toaster. Indeed, a toaster is something that we might think that we encounter in a very direct way—our experience of the toaster is such that we have the basis for forming a belief about it. In the case of a quark, this simply does not happen.

<sup>12</sup> Notice that this argument does not illustrate that our beliefs about quarks are untrue if we do not accept indirect experience. Rather, it shows that our beliefs about quarks are simply not beliefs.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91–100. I offer Misak's account of this simply to make explicit that Misak follows Peirce on this point.

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sary condition for a propositional attitude's being a belief. Sensitivity to experience is offered as a necessary condition for belief so as to bypass the problem of questionable methods of ending inquiry determining what is true. This is accomplished, of course, by simply disallowing propositional attitudes arrived at by inappropriate means such as the dictator problem to qualify as beliefs at all. If something is not a belief, it cannot, by definition, be a true belief. Further, sensitivity to experience consists in, at least in part, the possibility of recalcitrant experience.

## II

The account of the nature of belief offered by Misak, however, is problematic. The problem is best illustrated by way of an example. Individual persons (I am taking this for granted) have the following belief: that they, as individuals, exist. I do not mean to suggest by this that the nature of this claim is in some way settled. Rather, I simply mean to point out that, however we might understand the claim that we, as individuals, exist, it is a claim about which we have a belief.<sup>14</sup> The problem I propose is this: given Misak's account of belief, it is *impossible* for each of us to have beliefs about our *own* existence. Strangely contrary to this, however, is that it is possible for each of us to have beliefs about the existence of *other* individuals.

The reason for these strange claims can be seen if we reflect on what might constitute a recalcitrant experience for the belief that we, as individuals, exist. To clarify this, let us look at the belief, had by me, that I exist. The question to be asked is whether there is any possibility of an experience which might count against this belief *for me*. Suppose that I ceased to exist; it would seem that such a turn of events would be sufficient to produce an experience which would run counter to the belief that I exist. While this seems trivially true, let us remember that if I were to cease to exist, there would be no me to have the relevant recalcitrant experience. If there is no me to have these recalcitrant experiences, then it is impossible for me to have these experiences. But, if it is impossible for me to have these recalcitrant experiences, then my belief that I exist is not sensitive to my experience and, hence, it appears, is not a belief at all.

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<sup>14</sup> The argument I advance here can, I think, also be advanced using other candidates for belief. While I suspect that there are a variety of plausible candidates, the most obvious is, I think, the belief, had by me, that I am presently conscious.

The other side of this strange coin is that it is possible for someone else to have a belief that I exist. After all, it is possible for anyone but me to have the relevant recalcitrant experience, whatever that might be, which would come about as a result of my failure to exist. That is, anyone other than me can potentially have experiences which would count against their belief that I exist.

The upshot of this is that we find ourselves in a strange place indeed. Each of us can have beliefs about the existence of any other person, but each of us individually cannot have such beliefs about ourselves. This shows that it is possible to have beliefs about the existence of things, persons, etc., just as long as there is not the self-referential quality present in ascribing these beliefs to oneself.

In dealing with objections to the above arguments a good deal of clarity will be gained. As such, instead of explicating the arguments further, we will turn to certain objections which might be raised in light of the preceding.

### III

One might wish to object at this point that I have characterized experience too narrowly. After all, and as I illustrated earlier, one need not have direct experience of something in order for one to be able to form a belief about it. An argument to this effect might proceed along, roughly, the following lines:

In our dealings with other people we have just the kind of indirect experience which would permit us to form beliefs about our own existence. Indeed, much of our experience with other people seems to rely on the fact that we exist; otherwise, the reactions had by others to "us" would be inexplicable. In short, we have experience of others which can only be explained if we, in fact, exist.

There are two comments to be made about this argument. First, if it is the case that we can only develop the belief that we exist in virtue of interacting with other persons, or, more generally, other sentient beings, it would seem to be the case that a person who is deprived of such interaction would not be capable of having the belief that they exist. We might, however, be willing to admit this possibility if only because persons do not live in such a manner. Second, and more importantly, legitimate indirect experience, say that of quarks, is significantly different from the indirect experience we have of our own existence.

Our experience with quarks that was sufficient to permit us to have beliefs about quarks was clearly indirect. We did not experience the quark as such, rather we experienced the effect of the quark. The effect that we experienced, however, was produced in virtue of the nature of the quark and the nature of the equipment used to produce the effect. These are all things which we as individuals have, at least in principle, access to. We might study physics so as to understand the relationship between non-quark subatomic particles and appropriately charged metal plates in gas filled chambers. We might be lucky enough to be present when experiments were taking place so as to witness the effect of a quark. In short, we have access to the effect, which is an indirect source of information about the quark, but also to the knowledge which is sufficient to justify the inference to the quark itself. Nothing in the entire process is, in principle, off limits to any one of us. In the case of my developing a belief about my existence by observing the reactions of others two important differences need to be considered.

The first difference is that my experiences of other people's reaction to me is something to which I, in principle, lack access. That is, unlike my interaction with the quark, I cannot simply understand the nature of the various objects in question, the various persons to whom I am reacting, and form a reasonable basis for an inference. The reason that I cannot do this is that the various persons are, unlike quarks, volitional. That is, they do not simply obey the various laws which govern them.<sup>15</sup> Rather, they form judgments. These judgments, however, are judgments to which I simply lack access. As such, I need to rely on the honesty and integrity of other persons in order to have this indirect experience of my own existence. This, however, is highly problematic.

The problem with relying on the integrity of other persons in order to justify forming a belief can be seen if we recall why Misak, following Peirce, raised the issue of a necessary condition for something's being a belief in the first place. Misak wishes to maintain that truth will be attained at the "end" of inquiry. Given this, Misak understandably wants to avoid the charge that any method whatever which would serve to end inquiry is sufficient to secure the truth of beliefs. By outlining the necessary conditions for something's being a belief at all, Misak purports to be

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<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting, of course, that if one were fond of hard determinism this response would vanish because persons would be just like quarks in that their actions were determined by external forces. In this instance, however, this response is irrelevant as Misak, following Peirce, seems less than ready to adopt hard determinism.



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able to avoid this problem. To this end Misak offers the following restrictions which are intended to be consequences of the necessary condition that beliefs be sensitive to experience: “[t]he methods of tenacity, *authority* ... are not methods of inquiry...”<sup>16</sup> This is to say that, for the present purposes, appeals to authority are simply not acceptable, and understandably so. The problem, however, is that unless we appeal to the authority of other persons, we are unable to rely on their integrity which is, in turn, required for us to use their actions as a basis for our experience of our existence.

The second difference between my experience of the effects of my existence and the effects of the quark’s existence is that I still lack the ability to have the relevant recalcitrant experience. That this is the case can be understood in virtue of the fact that in order for me to have the experience of my non-existence, even with the help of the reactions to me offered by another person, I would still have to fail to exist. So, even if we somehow grant that we can have the positively relevant experience of ourselves through the reactions of other beings, it is still impossible for us to have the appropriate recalcitrant experience. Thus, the problem remains: I simply cannot have the belief that I exist, though others can have the belief that I exist.

We are left, then, with a paradox. Given Misak’s account of belief, as I understand it here, each of us, as individuals, cannot have the belief that we, as individuals, exist, though any of us can have the belief that any other individual exists. If I am right about this, there are two options. The first option is to accept the paradoxical conclusion. While this is an option in the technical sense, it is not, as James might say, a live option. That is, it is unlikely that anyone, Misak included, would want to accept it. The second option is that we modify our understanding of belief so as to avoid the paradox. This pursuit, however, has foreseeable problems. The notion of belief which has given rise to the present problem was proposed by Misak to avoid what I above called ‘the dictator problem.’ Modifying our understanding of belief, then, requires a new approach to the dictator problem. Whether this can be accomplished, of course, remains to be seen. It does, however, appear to be the most reasonable course of inquiry.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.