**Title:** Truth, Pragmatism, and Democracy: Another route to the liberal values

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**Abstract:** Cheryl Misak (2000; 2008a; 2008b; Misak and Talisse 2014; Misak and Talisse 2021) has presented an argument for democracy based on her analysis of the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce: If we care about the truth of our beliefs – as everyone does, according to Misak – then we ought to support democratic norms and democratic political institutions. We argue in the present paper that Misak’s argument does not adequately justify a democratic political system. Her argument does, however, justify a rational commitment to the standard liberal-democratic values of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the like. We demonstrate as well that Misak’s argument for the democratic values withstands well-known objections against her argument for a democratic political system. We also show that weaker premises involving every agent’s commitment to pursuing their own subjective ends can get us to Misak’s conclusions regarding liberal values using reasoning otherwise similar to Misak’s in that our alternative premises also get us to the commitment to taking the experiences of others seriously. These weaker premises avoid objections raised against Misak’s Peircean view and are acceptable even to those who reject Misak’s idea, taken from her reading of Peirce, that truth is a constitutive norm of belief.

**Keywords:** Misak; Peirce; Talisse; deliberative democracy; epistemic democracy; truth

We examine some recent efforts by philosophers in the American pragmatic tradition to establish a deep connection between the importance of truth and the importance of democracy. Our focus is primarily on the work of Cheryl Misak and, to a lesser extent, on that of Robert Talisse, who have contributed significantly to the recent surge of interest in Charles Sanders (C. S.) Peirce’s conception of truth and its possible relevance to political theory. According to Misak’s (2000; 2008a; 2008b; Misak and Talisse 2014; Misak and Talisse 2021) Peircean view, to be concerned with truth is to be concerned with reasons and argument, and to be concerned with reasons and argument is to be concerned with the democratic spirit of inquiry: a commitment to truth brings with it a commitment to democracy. Misak argues that it is epistemically irresponsible to fail to respect the liberal-democratic virtues of free speech, free exchange of ideas, and the like. If we care about the truth of our beliefs – as everyone does, according to Misak (2000, pp. 46, 74, 94) – then we ought to support democratic norms and democratic political institutions. Misak’s goal is to give a non-circular defense of democracy as a political system and of the liberal-democratic

values that are commonly thought necessary for its healthy functioning.

Against philosophers from John Rawls to Richard Rorty, Misak (2000) argues that a concern with truth should take a primary place in our political lives at both a practical and a theoretical level. To deny such a place for truth would run greater risks than those, articulated by some theorists, associated with admitting an authority as strong as truth into the political realm. This kind of authority, so the concern goes, opens the door to fascist authoritarianism. For who is the arbiter of truth, after all? If we let politicians hold the truth over our heads, on what grounds will we resist them when we disagree with their dictates? Against this worry, Misak (2000, p. 18; 2008a, p. 101) argues that denying a role for truth in politics leaves us with no rational defense against fascism.[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, a common foil for Misak is the German fascist philosopher Carl Schmitt. She argues against Schmitt’s rejection of truth and objectivity in politics, and his rejection of the liberal-democratic ideal of pluralism in society (Misak 2000, pp. 10-12). Without the notion of objective truth, she says, we have no argument to make against fascists like Schmitt (Misak 2008a, p. 101). Thus, Misak (2000, pp. 12-18) also rejects Rorty’s (1991) view that there is no objective truth or objective justification to be had in the political realm. Across numerous publications, Misak (2000; 2008a; 2008b; Misak and Talisse 2014; Misak and Talisse 2021) argues that a pragmatic conception of truth gleaned from the thought of C. S. Peirce elucidates the role of truth in politics and provides a non-circular defense of democracy and liberal-democratic values.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A recurring critique of the Peircean argument for democracy is that it either conflates epistemic equality with political equality or otherwise provides a question-begging argument that these two types of equality are essentially connected (Erman and Möller 2016; Lever and Chin 2017; Gerber 2021). While this disconnect between the political and the epistemic is well-trodden, less attention has been paid to the fact that Misak’s argument is also intended to imply the liberal-democratic values of freedom of expression, freedom of association, and the like which are essential to the healthy functioning of a democratic society. We contend that Misak’s argument for these values survives the well-known critiques of Peircean arguments for a democratic political system in which everyone has an equal say in political matters. We also provide an alternative argument for the liberal values which is similar in structure to Misak’s, relying on her premise that we should value the input of others, without requiring her premise that truth is a constitutive norm of belief. We conclude by spelling out some advantages of our approach over Misak’s and responding to some salient concerns.

**Misak on Peirce’s Elucidation of Truth**

Misak (2004, p. viii) argues that Peirce was not attempting to define truth, but to give the concept a “pragmatic elucidation…an account of the role the concept plays in practical endeavors.” The elucidation, Misak (2004, p. 9; also see Misak 2000, p. 1) argues, “is that we should think of a true belief as a belief that would forever be assertible; a belief which would never lead to disappointment; a belief which would be ‘indefeasible’ or not defeated, were inquiry pursued as far as it could fruitfully go.” What makes Peirce’s concept of truth particularly *pragmatic* is its connection with the practice of inquiry, which is rooted in experience. Thus, there is nothing metaphysical about truth that might transcend our investigative practices in the long run. As Misak (2000, pp. 65-66) puts it, “Truth is just that property of beliefs which are and which would continue to be warranted, no matter how far our inquiries were pursued.”

On this analysis, the concept of truth is a “constitutive norm” of belief and assertion (Misak and Talisse 2014, p. 367). When we believe or assert, we necessarily aim at the truth, and aiming at the truth means aiming to have beliefs which could withstand any forthcoming argumentation and evidence. Anyone who has beliefs aims at the truth. Thus, there must be room in the political realm for truth, given that people have beliefs and make assertions concerning politics. Misak’s reading of Peirce goes against the trend of avoiding talk of truth in political theory and is a potential prophylactic against those who claim that truth has no place in politics.

Another step is required to get from Misak’s interpretation of Peirce to the conclusion of democratic ideals and institutions. On Misak’s (2000, pp. 73-74) analysis of the Peircean elucidation of truth, the practice of holding and asserting beliefs implies certain social commitments: “I commit myself to defending *p*; to arguing that I am, and others are, warranted in asserting and believing it. […] [T]o assert commits one to engage, if called upon, in the enterprise of justification.” Misak claims that any person who holds beliefs, i.e., everyone, must admit that their beliefs are aimed at the truth. She argues further that, given the Peircean elucidation of a true belief as one that would not succumb to genuine doubt in the face of reason and evidence, believers are committed to ensuring their beliefs are not overturned by future experience: “*If* we want to arrive at true beliefs, we ought to expose our beliefs to the tests of experience.” (Misak 2000, p. 83). According to Misak (2000, p. 6),

A methodological requirement falls out of the idea that a true belief would be the best belief, were inquiry to be pursued as far as it could fruitfully go. That methodological principle is that the experience of others must be taken seriously. In the moral and political realm, this requires that everyone be given the chance to contribute to debate. It requires a democracy in inquiry.

Misak (2008a, pp. 94-95) construes her understanding of Peirce as providing “an epistemic argument for democracy which appeals to the quality of the decisions supplied by democratic procedure…we should value them because the deliberative democratic method is more likely to give us true or right or justified answers to our questions.” The pragmatic argument, moreover, justifies the legitimacy of democratic procedures. “Democratically produced decisions are legitimate because they are produced by a procedure with a tendency to get things right” (Misak 2008a, p. 95).[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is not merely democratic institutions, but a host of liberal-democratic values that follow from the Peircean elucidation of truth. “Freedom of association, freedom of speech, etc. are necessary aspects of a deliberation that is suited to getting us the right answers to our questions” (Misak 2008, p. 95-96).

Misak’s argument for democracy and democratic values can be summarized as follows:

1. Anyone who genuinely believes must care about the truth of their beliefs (or their beliefs are not genuine).
2. Anyone who cares about the truth of their beliefs must be interested to expose those beliefs to the rigors of inquiry. Beliefs must be responsive to reasons and evidence, and reasons and evidence must be sincerely sought.
3. Anyone genuinely interested to expose their beliefs to the rigors of inquiry must value the input of others who might offer countervailing reasons and evidence.
4. Anyone who values the input of others is rationally committed to a society organized not only around the standard liberal-democratic values but also a democratic political system.
5. Therefore, anyone who genuinely believes is rationally committed to a society organized around the standard liberal-democratic values and a democratic political system.

**Misak’s Argument Does Not Deliver Political Democracy**

A number of commentators have argued that a democracy in inquiry does not entail a political democracy (Erman and Möller 2016; Lever and Chin 2017; Gerber 2021). Erman and Möller (2016, p. 463) characterize the difficulty as a failure to establish the inference from epistemic equality to political equality. The concern is that having an equal voice in deliberation does not amount to having an equal say in politics. Consider the following example which has been suggested in outline but not spelled out in detail in the literature. The example neatly captures the main disconnect between a democracy in inquiry and a political democracy. It also illustrates how nevertheless the liberal democratic values are maintained and indeed still flow from Misak’s Peircean requirement that we take the viewpoints of others seriously.

THE WISE AND BENEVOLENT DESPOT: King Philo of Peirceton accepts all of the apparent epistemic dictates of his idol, Charles Sanders Peirce. In particular, he accepts that he is obliged to provide reasons and evidence for his beliefs. He also accepts that he should earnestly engage all of the other sincere inquirers of Peirceton. Moreover, through an ingenious system of exemplary education and effective incentives, King Philo has arranged the political activities of Peirceton to ensure that citizens conform to such norms in their epistemic behaviors. With one exception, King Philo has granted to these citizens (and earnestly acts to secure for them) all of the rights and freedoms associated with liberal democracies, freedom of speech, assembly, religion, etc. The one exception is that Peirceton’s citizens are not allowed to vote or to exert any direct control over communal decisions, although they are encouraged (indeed, rationally required) to deliberate with each other, including with the King, without restriction. Although King Philo ultimately makes every collective decision for the community, in keeping with his deeply-held commitment to the epistemic principles of Peircean pragmatism, he makes no decisions without first sincerely deliberating at length with the citizens of Peirceton.

It should be obvious that Peirceton is not a democracy; indeed, it is an autocracy. In the last analysis, King Philo’s will is the only political will that matters to the collective decisions of Peirceton. In the absence of any further reasons beyond those operative in Misak’s argument for democracy, it is not obvious, for all that Misak has said about the Peircean commitment to taking the experiences of others seriously, that anyone in Peirceton is rationally committed to a political democracy over King Philo’s autocracy.[[4]](#footnote-4) Importantly, Misak’s argument would not work to convince Philo to step down and make way for democracy, because as far as Philo is concerned he already takes the views of all citizens very seriously. Indeed, he does so precisely because he cares about having the best beliefs possible, in the vein of Misak’s Peirce.

Talisse (2014, p. 128) raises the concern that

Seeing others as equal partners in inquiry is consistent with seeing those same others as *political* subordinates. That is, it seems consistent with pragmatist epistemology for one to regard one’s fellow believers as *consultants*, whose arguments and objections have merely *recommendatory* force, rather than as *political equals* who are entitled to *equal* political power and *equal* influence over political decisions. (emphasis in original)

There is also affinity here with Gerber’s (2021, p. 49) character Viktor, who argues for “a system of government in which citizens are political subordinates to a charismatic autocrat.” Gerber’s stated goal (p. 52) “is to show that democratic equality is not a constituent component of Peircean egalitarianism, and that politically inegalitarian institutional mechanisms, if properly justified, may be compatible with a community of epistemic peers.” The King Philo example is intended to tidily illustrate the possibilities raised by Talisse and Gerber, and is tailored specifically to Misak’s arguments. The example also shows that since Misak’s argument for the liberal values proceeds directly from the premise that we ought to take the experiences of others seriously and does not rely on the existence of an actual political democracy, objections to the effect that Misak’s argument fails for being consistent with an autocracy end up throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Valuing the input of others gives us reason to respect the traditional liberal values even if it doesn’t get us all the way to democratic governance.

As lamented by Eva Erman and Niklas Möller (2016, p. 465), Talisse does not adequately address the possibility he raises. He merely suggests instead that “perhaps…in order for inquiry to truly commence, the upshot of inquiry must have political force” (Talisse 2014, p. 128). We agree with Erman and Möller (p. 465) that “this is exactly what needs to be shown” and that no argument is given to show it. In what follows we address some possible objections to the framing of the King Philo case itself.

It might be objected that the political deliberation that occurs in Peirceton is not genuine deliberation inasmuch as the exchange of reasons and evidence may appear to make no difference to actual decision-making.[[5]](#footnote-5) So it is important to bear in mind that the deliberation which occurs here does make a difference—King Philo is responsive to the reasons and evidence of his subjects. Provided with adequate countervailing arguments, Philo would act accordingly, perhaps even changing his mind and overturning a previous decision. He would also never hesitate to justify a decision to his subjects, openly explaining his rationale. Misak cashes out Peirce’s pragmatic requirement that our beliefs be responsive to experience precisely in terms of responsiveness to the kinds of reasons and evidence which the citizens of Peirceton freely exchange with each other and with their King. Hence, the deliberation makes a difference in the ways which are relevant to Misak’s interpretation of Peirce. One thing the King Philo case brings out is the fact that making a practical difference to decision-making in the spirit of pragmatism is not tantamount to having the kind of political force Talisse suggested might be required for genuine inquiry.

It might be further objected that no real democracy in inquiry exists in Peirceton, as it may seem that everyone’s experiences do not matter equally. For example, it is conceivable that in Peirceton the citizens may all disagree with King Philo, and yet he may proceed to decree as he sees fit, though he cannot dispense with the liberal democratic values of free speech, etc. without violating the Peircean norms that come along with having beliefs. So it is important to see that while everyone’s experiences are taken equally seriously, this is not tantamount to giving everyone an equal say as to what the final decision will be. Rather, as pointed out by Erman and Möller, that is exactly what needs to be established in order for Misak’s Peircean argument for democracy to go through. While other versions of Peirce, other Peirceans, and even Misak may be able to establish the connection between a democracy in inquiry and political democracy, at present we urge that the connection has not been made through Misak’s reading of Peirce. And yet, for all that has been said about how Misak’s argument for a democratic political system falls short, we maintain that her argument for the liberal values does not go down with the ship. Indeed, we can get to the liberal values from the premise that we ought to have a democracy in inquiry without assuming that truth is a constitutive norm of belief.

**Getting to the Liberal Values without the Truth Norm**

The King Philo case demonstrates that a commitment to valuing the input and experiences of others does not entail a commitment to democratic political procedures. At the same time, it illustrates that the liberal values associated with deliberative equality are consistent with the absence of a political democracy and indeed that Misak’s argument for a democracy in inquiry survives the objection that a political democracy is not required in order to take the input of others seriously, at least in the abstract. In this section we offer an alternative route to the liberal values which also relies on the idea that we should take the experiences of others seriously but which avoids the premise that belief is necessarily aimed at truth.

Misak argues that truth is a “constitutive norm” of belief; that aiming at truth is inherent to holding beliefs. While others have argued for the inadequacy of this premise for establishing the Peircean democrat’s conclusions with regard to democratic political procedures, in this section we seek to establish how inessential the claim is to arguments for the liberal-democratic values which otherwise keep Misak’s argument intact.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is possible to draw the conclusion that we ought to take the views of others seriously without assuming anything as strong (and potentially controversial) as the constitutive connection of Peircean truth to believing.

In general, when one wants to accomplish something, it is good to seek advice. A common goal is to have true beliefs. For a Peircean, if one does not seek to have beliefs which are true, then one does not sincerely hold genuine beliefs. Here, however, we are not assuming that the Peircean is correct about the proper aim of belief. Let us consider other aims that one might have in holding beliefs and see if these alternative aims might lead us to take the views of others seriously. This consideration is especially important in light of Misak’s goal of convincing anti-democrats of all stripes, including those who are skeptics about the notion of truth in general. For illustrative purposes, we begin with a basic case.

Whether believing also aims at truth, it seems likely that, for most believers, believing at least aims at the believer’s survival. Arguably, humans evolved not to hold beliefs which track the truth, but rather to hold beliefs which are conducive to survival. While this often amounts to just holding true beliefs, inasmuch as there can be contexts in which aiming at truth would not conduce to the believer’s survival, anyone convinced of the evolutionary function of believing might naturally doubt the constitutive nature of truth-targeting to belief. But, we do not mean to deny that truth is a constitutive norm of belief. The pertinent point, rather, is that the much weaker assumption that believing serves a survival function seems no less capable of supporting the conclusion that we ought to take the views of others seriously. All one needs is a few further premises analogous to Misak’s additional assumptions.

Any believer who aims at survival should, no less than a believer who aims at truth, be interested to expose their beliefs to the rigors of inquiry. Such a believer should be especially sensitive to reasons and evidence relevant to ways of life that have – and have not – proven conducive to survival in the past. Of necessity, as the believer’s own relevant experience is limited in this regard, this evidence must come from other believers with more or different experiences with regard to survival. So, the believer who aims at survival should, no less than the believer who aims at truth, sincerely seek out reasons and evidence, and value the input of others who might offer relevant reasons and evidence. If Misak is right that valuing the input of others rationally leads us to the liberal-democratic values, then we can get to that conclusion with weaker and less tendentious premises.

Indeed, an even weaker assumption would seem to lead to the conclusion that we must value the input of others. Some believers may, for whatever reasons, not aim at survival. However, it would seem that all believers aim at the realization of their subjective ends, whatever these might be, whether or not holding true beliefs is among them, and that believing is a means to these ends. That is, whatever its function with respect to truth, believing serves our instrumental purposes. Again, to the extent that aiming at truth does not always conduce to the realization of another of the believer’s ends, anyone convinced of the instrumental function of believing might reasonably doubt that aiming at truth is inherent to belief. Be this as it may, the important point is that this much weaker assumption seems also to lead to the conclusion that we should seek out and consider the views of others. Again, all one needs to add is a few premises similar to Misak’s additional assumptions.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Any believer who aims to realize their own subjective ends should, no less than a believer who aims at truth, be interested to expose their beliefs to the rigors of inquiry. Such a believer should be especially sensitive to reasons and evidence concerning the historical suitability, or inappropriateness, of particular ends to human life, and of means that have proven adequate – or not – to the realization of these ends. Of necessity, as the believer’s own relevant experience is limited in this regard, this evidence must come from other believers with more, or different, experiences with regard to the pursuit of various ends and the adoption of different means for their attempted realization. So, believers who aim merely to realize their subjective ends, whatever they might be, should, no less than believers who aim at truth, sincerely seek out reasons and evidence, and value the input of others who might offer relevant reasons and evidence.

So, it is by no means necessary to make the stronger assumption that aiming at truth is constitutive of believing in order to draw the conclusion from our epistemic norms that we ought to value the input of others. Whatever the proper function of belief, provided that the character and quality of the functioning of belief depends on input from other believers, as it does in both of the cases discussed in the current section, an argument otherwise quite like Misak’s argument for the relevant conclusion can be devised.

The element of Misak’s argument that licenses the conclusion that we ought to take the views of others seriously has nothing *per se* to do with Peirce, his pragmatic elucidation of truth, or the particular epistemic norm that follows from it, and everything to do with the implication that this norm is most effectively satisfied by believers who seek and value the input of, the reasons and evidence provided by, other believers. But, aiming at truth is merely one among many potential epistemic norms that carry this implication and which, therefore, support the conclusion of democracy in inquiry (but not the conclusion of political democracy). We can infer a democracy in inquiry using reasoning very similar to Misak’s without invoking the Peircean pragmatic elucidation of truth. Provided that they accept one of the weaker and less contentious assumptions described here, anyone inclined to doubt anything as strong as the notion that truth is a constitutive norm of belief is nevertheless led to the relevant liberal-democratic ideals required of a democracy in inquiry. The requirement that we take the experiences of others seriously can be delivered independently of a concern for the truth, Peircean or otherwise. A concern for achieving any ends whatsoever goes a significant way toward the requirement that we value the input of others.

Crucially, we are not presenting an argument that Misak is wrong about truth being a constitutive norm of belief. Rather, we are arguing that her defense of the liberal values can be carried out with assumptions more likely to be acceptable to more believers, including those who reject the notion of objective truth altogether and those who, like Schmitt, confusedly endorse non-tolerance of diverse viewpoints. An advantage of our approach is that it accommodates those who aim at truth as well as those who do not. Misak’s argument is based on the fact that everyone has beliefs. Ours is based on the fact that everyone has subjective ends.

At this point one may be concerned that, in focusing on subjective ends rather than the pursuit of truth, we have undermined Misak’s justification for the promotion of an environment where information can be freely exchanged. Specifically, there is a worry that favorable socio-epistemic conditions need not be promoted in cases where our ends and means are non-epistemic, i.e., where there is no concern for achieving true beliefs.[[8]](#footnote-8)

An important clarification should be made at this point. If ‘epistemic’ here is taken to be that which essentially involves knowledge of the truth, then our argument in fact does not require that ideal socio-epistemic conditions be maintained. This is because we are not concerned with the pursuit of truth *per se*. We are concerned with whatever one might pursue. Misak’s argument relies upon the premise that a commitment to Peircean truth enjoins a commitment to be open to the evidence provided by future experience, including testimony about the experiences of others. This commitment to valuing the input of others specifically has to do with achieving true beliefs. Our claim is that one can arrive at a commitment to valuing the input of others with a much broader set of aims: The achievement of any ends whatsoever. The having of subjective aims itself, if one wishes in general that one’s aims be achieved, carries a requirement that one be open to the input of others. This is because it is the pursuit of ends generally speaking which requires the advice of others, not just the pursuit of truth. The subjective end of achieving true beliefs is just one end that rationally commits us to taking the input of others seriously.

We do not merely import Misak’s inference from the fact that beliefs ought to be aimed at the truth to the conclusion that we ought to value the input of others. Rather, we are arguing independently that if one has subjective ends, then one ought to take the views of others seriously with regard to achieving those ends. Furthermore, as the choice of which ends to pursue itself benefits from the advice of others, in general one ought not limit one’s range of input.

In more recent work, Misak (2016) has developed her Peircean ideas through a fascinating interpretation of Frank Ramsey and an account of the influence of Peirce on Ramsey. To the extent that Misak’s Ramseyan account of the relationship between belief, action, and instrumental ends may provide the wherewithal to construct an argument which is consonant with the one we adumbrate here, Misak might be in agreement with us. We would hesitate, however, to draw too many parallels. Crucially, we maintain that an argument for taking the experiences of others seriously need not rely on even a Peircean (or Ramseyan) conception of truth where the pragmatic import of the truth concept is understood as a kind of instrumental ideal. For an agent focused solely on the instrumental ends of belief has reason to take the experiences of others seriously even if the agent has no interest in whether a belief would hold up in the long run, or would even be acceptable tomorrow, as long as it helps to accomplish his ends today. We only wish to emphasize that this very weak assumption can get us to the conclusion that we ought to take the experiences of others seriously without involving the Peircean elucidation of truth, indeed, without even involving a minimalist conception of truth.[[9]](#footnote-9)

One might also worry that assessing beliefs according to whether they help us achieve our ends could require one to countenance certain paradoxes of assertion. Specifically, there would appear to be a kind of epistemic failure encapsulated in an assertion such as ‘I believe that p, but p is false’ for which our theory centered on instrumental ends cannot account.[[10]](#footnote-10) We do not mean to argue that there is no problem with asserting that one believes p while also asserting that p is false. That may indeed be an epistemic failure on the basis that one is failing to disbelieve p even though one believes that p is false. Importantly, we are not arguing that the correct way to evaluate a belief is how it serves to meet one’s instrumental ends. It may very well be that beliefs can and should be evaluated according to whether they correspond with the objective truth. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that there are those who reject entirely the notion of truth, as well as those who might accept the notion but do not think that it is a necessary aim of belief. Our argument is that the instrumental function of belief gives one reason to seek the input of others. Someone could possess this reason based on instrumental function without thinking it coherent to believe both that p and that p is false.

Earlier we quoted Misak (2008a, p. 95-96) as saying that “freedom of association, freedom of speech, etc. are necessary aspects of a deliberation that is suited to getting us the right answers to our questions.” One way of putting our point would be to say that the right answers to our questions need not be identified with that which would stand up to indefinite scrutiny in the long run, i.e., need not be identified with truth on Misak’s Peircean conception, in order for us to have reason to value the input of others. The interest in successfully pursuing our ends, whatever they may be, translates into an interest in drawing upon the experiences of others.

**The Problem of Deep Epistemic Disagreements**

Peircean arguments for democratic ideals face a problem associated with what Karin Jønch-Clausen and Klemens Kappel (2015) have called “deep epistemic disagreements.” The overarching concern is that any two people may agree that genuine belief requires an interest in truth, in having the best beliefs possible as well as an interest in exchanging evidence and reasons with others, as on Misak’s reading of Peirce. And yet they may disagree as to what counts as good evidence, on what means are appropriate for achieving the truth. Similar considerations are raised by Michael Bacon (2010, p. 1083), who argues that some people clearly endorse epistemic norms which do not require, and in fact do not permit, deliberation with those who subscribe to rival perspectives. Bacon gives the example of religious fundamentalists for whom deliberation with non-believers is dangerous because it may lead away from the truth (or away from the “truth” as conceived by their religious leaders). Talisse himself (2014, p. 128) says, “even if we grant the pragmatist epistemic deliberativist’s claims, we still may disagree in specific cases about whether some statement counts as evidence. So, although we may all agree on the norms governing belief, we may yet be in conflict regarding the precise content of these norms.”

In a similar vein, Eva Erman and Niklas Möller (2016) offer some criticisms of the argument from Peircean truth as a constitutive norm of belief to the socio-epistemic commitment to take the views of others seriously. They present the case of “Professor Winifred, a brilliant chemist,” an undeniably reasonable and coherent believer who “spends almost all of her time in the laboratory” and who “*always* attempts to revise her beliefs in light of what she takes to be the best reasons available,” but who nonetheless “is very sensitive to what she takes to be nonsense and simply cannot stand the antifeminists, refusing to stop or even listen when they address her on the way to the lab” (2016, pp. 458-459). It would appear that Winifred is justified in refusing to take seriously the viewpoint of the antifeminists, and yet she counts as a coherent believer. Erman and Möller argue that in order to get to the conclusion that we must be sensitive to the viewpoints of others, Misak and Talisse require a commitment to the pursuit of truth which is untenable and unreasonable (Erman and Möller 2016, p. 459).

Erman’s and Möller’s (2016, p. 463) objection to the Peirceans is that, generally speaking, a commitment to epistemic equality, epistemic participation, and epistemic inclusion does not deliver a commitment to political equality, political participation, and political inclusion. We have already agreed about the relation between epistemic and political equality: Everyone having an equal opportunity to express their point of view does not amount to everyone having an equal say in political decision-making (see again the King Philo example).

What we consistently see is reason to doubt that a full-fledged theory of democratic politics can be derived from pragmatic epistemic considerations of the Peircean variety. However, a rational commitment to the standard liberal-democratic values need not be bound up with the search for a rational commitment to a democratic political system. The democratic ideals tend to get lost in the mix of the argument. For all that Erman and Möller and others referenced above say about how the Peircean’s pragmatic premises do not deliver a commitment to a political democracy, we are not given a reason why the route might be closed from a commitment to valuing the input of others to a commitment to the free exchange of ideas, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of religion.

We submit that the connection between valuing the input of others and the liberal-democratic ideals is rather intuitive and compelling, especially on our version of the pragmatist argument focused on the achievement of instrumental ends. Anyone interested in determining which ends to pursue and how best to pursue them should be willing to consider the viewpoints of others with regard to the answers to such questions. Thus, anyone interested in pursuing their own ends has reason to allow others to pursue their respective ends and exchange ideas freely on the matter of ends and means.

Our approach focused on instrumental ends, rather than baseline epistemic commitments, takes some of the punch out of the objection from deep epistemic disagreements. In fact, it helps us to see that the concern about epistemic disagreements is a bit overblown. As Erman and Möller point out, it is very difficult to maintain that we are always and everywhere required to seek further reasons and evidence for all possible claims. But to say that we are not required to always be on the front lines of deliberation in that way is a far cry from saying that we do not take the experiences of others seriously, that we do not value the input of others, or that we think others should be silenced. I can be resolute in my disagreement with the white supremacists and still be justified in declining to attend their regular meetings to drum up debate. Indeed, I can decline to engage in arguments with them (perhaps because I have grown weary of the discussion), stand firm in my disagreement, and still insist that they have a right to air their views. Likewise, there is room to say that the religious fundamentalist need not engage with the non-believer, but this does not mean that the fundamentalist has no rational interest in the free exchange of ideas, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion.

The possibility of deep epistemic disagreements, in addition to the possibility that we need not always engage on every point as though our primary function in life were to seek out all possible evidence for and against every thesis, at first appears to undermine the Peircean argument because it undermines the idea that we are always rationally committed to continued deliberation with others. But Misak does not need the claim that we must always continue to engage and in fact urges that we can be justified in refusing to engage further.[[11]](#footnote-11) As she states (2000, p. 148), “the pragmatist is not committed to a ‘we must talk with everyone all the time’ attitude. The Schmittian who refuses to take seriously the experience of the other introduces one kind of situation in which we need not talk and we need not deliberate.” All that is needed is the claim that we must value the input of others inasmuch as we believe that they should be able to put their reasons and evidence up for consideration. We may consider and finally reject such reasons and evidence, but this does not imply that we think others should be silenced or their arguments erased from the record. Thus the liberal values stand even amidst deep and widespread disagreements.

In formulating the ends we wish to pursue and determining the best way to achieve these ends, it would be most rational to have at our disposal the experiences, reasons, and evidence of all who have anything to say on the matter. We are therefore rationally committed, inasmuch as we seek to achieve our own ends, which everyone does, to respecting the liberal values which encourage the free exchange of ideas. We may disagree on epistemic matters, but we are likely also to disagree simply on what ends we think worth pursuing, etc. A rational commitment to taking the viewpoints of others into consideration nevertheless follows from the very weak premise that we seek to satisfy our own subjective ends. That we may at some point decline to continue to consume the ideas of others and defend our own ideas does not undermine the justification for the liberal-democratic ideals.

**Conclusion**

We have seen that Misak’s starting point, that truth is a constitutive norm of belief and assertion, as well as her ending point, that we are rationally committed to a democratic political system, can both be challenged. Consistent with the rejection of those endpoints is the acceptance of a thread running through the middle of Misak’s line of reasoning: We are rationally committed to valuing the input of others, and this commitment leads us to the liberal-democratic values. Misak’s goal from the beginning has been to offer a substantive, non-circular argument for democracy which any rational thinker must accept. Her starting point has been Peirce’s idea that truth is a constitutive norm of belief. An attraction of this approach is that everyone has beliefs, so no one can avoid the argument. However, one may doubt that truth is a constitutive norm of belief. We have shown that much weaker assumptions lead to similar reasoning resulting in the liberal-democratic values. Everyone has instrumental ends, even those who do not accept that truth is a constitutive norm of belief, indeed even those who do not care for the truth at all. Furthermore, the focus on instrumental ends helps to avoid some of the objections to the Peircean argument as detailed above. And still, for the reasons elucidated through the case of King Philo, a democracy in inquiry does not necessarily lead to a democracy in politics. If one believes that a justification for political democracy is needed, such justification must be sought elsewhere.

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1. Michael Lynch (2008) defends a similar point. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are many pragmatisms, and many Peirces. In the present paper, we are concerned only with Misak’s Peirce (except when we specifically refer to the ideas of Talisse). It is conceivable that another interpretation of Peirce might not be susceptible to the objections we discuss here, and we make no claim either way as to how other interpretations might fare. The reader is advised to keep this point in mind throughout, as Misak’s interpretation of Peirce is somewhat idiosyncratic. For readability, we will sometimes refer to “Peirce,” “Peirce’s conception of truth,” etc., without explicitly qualifying them as Misak’s. The narrow scope of our target should be borne in mind nonetheless. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In an essay co-authored with fellow Peircean democrat Robert Talisse, Misak has more recently asserted that what follows from the Peircean conception of truth is not an epistemic argument for democratic legitimacy, but only an epistemic argument for democracy as a political institution (Misak and Talisse 2014, p. 372). Thus, according to Misak and Talisse (2014, p. 372), the “moral right of democratic states to enforce laws…minority voters’ obligation to comply with the outcome they oppose…the bindingness of democratic outcomes” does not flow simply from the epistemic norms which we take on when we have beliefs and make assertions. All that follows from these epistemic norms is a particular defense of democracy itself, not its legitimacy when it comes to coercing citizens who do not agree with certain democratic results. In a footnote, it is explained that “Misak might have used ‘legitimacy’ in a broad and non-technical sense (to mean roughly ‘proper’)” in prior work, “but the distinction…is always at least implicit in her work” (Misak and Talisse 2014, p. 372n). While that may be true, Misak (2008a, p. 104) certainly asserts in earlier work that the epistemic norms which come along with genuine belief give rise to the binding nature of democratic decisions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Scheall (2020, p. 153) argues that democratic means, especially voting, are often conflated with democratic ends, especially the principle of popular sovereignty. Voting may not be a particularly effective method for constituents to convey their policy priorities to policymakers. To the extent it is not, inasmuch as policymakers do not know very well what constituents want them to do, it is hard for them to act on constituents’ priorities, and the principle of popular sovereignty may be respected in appearance only. The King Philo example shows a similar (logical, if perhaps not practical) possibility of the principle being “more honour'd in the breach than the observance.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pushing us to clarify this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Erman and Möller (2016) for an exceptionally clear critique, well-situated with respect to the relevant literature, of the idea that assuming truth as a constitutive norm of belief is sufficient to achieve the Peircean democrat’s conclusions. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. It is worth noting at this point that while on some pragmatic accounts of truth, truth may be identified with whatever satisfies our instrumental purposes, Misak makes no such identification. Not only does she see Peirce as offering a pragmatic elucidation, rather than a definition, of the concept of truth, she also perceives the results of that elucidation as essentially tied to our epistemic practices inasmuch as genuine belief must be sensitive to reasons and evidence. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Our view might also be seen as similar to the Deweyan alternative advanced by philosophers such as Michael Fuerstein, who says that (2021, p. 96), “for Dewey, the measure of successful decision-making is not some fixed independent standard of truth or correctness but, instead, our own reflective satisfaction with the practical results.” We are not concerned to advance the attainment of one’s subjective ends as the proper way to assess a decision or a belief. We are only concerned to argue that belief can serve an instrumental function and to the extent that it does, those who hold beliefs in order to achieve their subjective ends have reason to take the input of others seriously. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this concern. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Thanks are due to an anonymous referee for pushing us to clarify this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)