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Rehabilitating Warranted Assertibility: Moral inquiry and the pragmatic basis of objectivity[1]

1   Abstract

This article defends a pragmatic conception of objectivity for the moral domain. I begin by contextualizing pragmatic approaches to objectivity and discuss at some length one of the most interesting proposals in this area, Cheryl Misak's conception of pragmatic objectivity. My general argument is that in order to defend a pragmatic approach to objectivity, the pragmatic stance should be interpreted in more radical terms than most contemporary proposals do. I suggest in particular that we should disentangle objectivity from truth, and I claim that moral inquiry is in most cases responsive to a normative standard that is closer to warranted assertibility than to truth. Using an argument that relies partly on Huw Price's account of forms of normative assertion, I will show that a practice-based account of warranted assertibility does the epistemic work required to defend objectivity while avoiding exposure to the criticisms that are usually addressed against this notion.

Ethics and politics require a working account of objectivity. Recently, the plausibility of a pragmatic strategy to attain this goal has been defended by a plurality of scholars. Among proposed variants of pragmatic objectivity, Cheryl Misak's has drawn significant attention both within and outside pragmatist scholarship. However, while accounts such as Misak's provide many useful ideas, the common tactic of anchoring moral objectivity to truth is unhealthy. Here, I defend an alternative account of objectivity that is "pragmatic" in both recent and broader senses, but which is not

encumbered by traditional attachments to "truth."[2] My argument is first critical, then reconstructive. Firstly, an examination and critique of Misak's conception of pragmatic moral objectivity enables to disentangle moral objectivity from truth. Next, taking advantage of a taxonomy of norms of assertion developed by Huw Price[3], I show why truth should not be understood as the overarching goal of moral inquiry and why, instead, it is better to take a pragmatic approach and deploy "warranted assertibility" as a complementary normative standard. The argument is organized into five sections. The first section sets the general argument within its pragmatic context. The second section outlines Misak's conception of pragmatic objectivity, and highlights the sense in which she makes moral objectivity depend upon truth. The third and the fourth sections provide two critical arguments against Misak's moral inquiry-truth thesis. Finally, with the critical work done, in the fifth and last section I present my constructive account of pragmatic objectivity for the moral domain.

2   *1. Inquiry, objectivity, and truth*

Several attempts have been made recently to set objectivity on pragmatic grounds. Pragmatic approaches require the inquirer to take seriously the epistemic resources that are available to agents situated within real life practices. Among pragmatic approaches, pragmatism provides a promising starting point, its strength relying on its general conception of rationality as inquiry. In a pragmatist perspective, moral agents have a capacity for engaging reflectively in moral disagreements. Through inquiry agents submit contested beliefs to the challenge of reasons and experience, both past and future. On a general basis, the idea of responsiveness to arguments and experience provides the theoretical ground of the pragmatist approach to moral objectivity. It is this responsiveness that explains the fact that morality has a cognitive content. Pragmatism, therefore, is amenable to cognitivist approaches in ethics, and inquiry is central to any

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2 Pragmatism has become, since a couple of decades, an increasingly disputed label in philosophy. "New" varieties of pragmatism have been advanced against well established "neo" variants. In addition, "Kantian" and "analytic" versions have also been proposed as ways of appropriating or enlarging the label "pragmatism" which, after a long eclipse, has a renewed respectability. See Misak 2007 and Calcaterra 2011. For recent approaches to contemporary pragmatist epistemology that are neither "new" nor "neo" see Frega 2011.

3 See Price 2003 and Price 1998.

pragmatist account of moral and political experience.[4]

In a pragmatic perspective, objectivity should not be equated with impersonality, or universality: to be objective in the relevant pragmatic sense, a belief must be supported by the best available evidence (it has to be warrantedly assertible in the sense made clear in the last section of this paper). For reasons that have already been explained by several pragmatic philosophers,[5] these assumptions imply that pragmatic objectivity excludes the conclusion that truth can be reduced to justification. Although this conclusion rules out the neo-pragmatist attempt at introducing overly relativistic elements into epistemic standards in a Rortyan fashion, it does not force us, however, to endorse truth as an overarching norm for moral inquiry. My contention is that a viable conception of pragmatic objectivity should find its way between the Scylla of Rortyan reduction of truth to justification and the Charybdis of a dogmatic commitment to truth.

While there is widespread agreement nowadays about the unhappy consequences which follow from the reduction of truth to justification, the unpleasant consequences that follow from failing to distinguish adequately between objectivity and truth have received much less sustained attention. I believe that in order to work out a consistent pragmatic conception of objectivity we must disentangle objectivity from truth and espouse a thorough fallibilism, acknowledging that in a very wide range of cases moral inquiry has an objective basis (is immune from threats of relativism and skepticism) without necessarily subscribing to the norm of truth. As I wish to show, failing to distinguish adequately between objectivity and truth has the very unpalatable consequence of leading moral and political confrontation onto an agonistic path that is likely to make the moral and political conflicts more confrontational and less dialogical, more likely to block rather than open the road to constructive moral inquiry. To see why we need to disentangle objectivity from truth, one must begin by conceiving of inquiry free from those prejudices that usually glorify truth's epistemic value as a norm of

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4 In this paper, I take the term "pragmatism" to denote something more than a vague appeal to the practices developed by the philosophers that are usually identified by that label and something less than a thoroughgoing commitment to their doctrines. Specifically, I take to be pragmatist any account that relies explicitly on the idea of an epistemological primacy of practices in explaining theoretical entities and that endorses a conception of rationality as inquiry. See Frega 2006a and Frega 2006b for an extensive examination of the thesis of the epistemological priority of practice.

5 See Misak 2000 discussed throughout this article. See also Bernstein 2010 and Wellmer 2004.

assertion. Inquiry, especially within moral settings, can have a plurality of goals that only with great cost can be reduced to the search for truth – the aim of "getting things right". While moral inquiry presupposes – and often relies on – the possibility of clearly establishing the facts of the matter (and here, of course, truth matters as much as in scientific inquiry), its goals are often of a practical sort. Here, warranted assertibility often proves to be the most adequate (if not the only available) norm of assertion.

From a pragmatist perspective, inquiry is a behavioral strategy for responding to environmental challenges which utilizes the regulation of those epistemic states we call beliefs. Moral inquiry is no exception to this situational and problem driven conception of inquiry. While "objectivity" names the capacity of these regulations to successfully respond to challenges in ways that remain reasonably stable, "truth" names one of the norms of assertion inquiry must comply with in that process. The question, therefore, is to know whether truth is the only – or at least the overarching[6] – norm of inquiry, or whether other norms might be more appropriate explanations of how inquiry succeeds in resolving morally problematic situations. My point is that in order to be faithful to the phenomenology of the varieties of moral inquiry, we should *not* start with the notion that moral inquiry aims at truth. As I intend to show, challenging truth's privilege in moral inquiry need in fact not imply that objectivity is being replaced with solidarity (à la Rorty), nor that truth is being reduced to justification. To prove the workability of my proposal, I will have first to show the shortcomings of accounts that start from opposed epistemological assumptions. In the next two sections I will offer a critical examination of Cheryl Misak's account of pragmatic objectivity and show that it fails precisely because it makes objectivity depend upon an epistemic conception of truth. This critical examination will clear the ground for outlining the contour of a different conception of pragmatic objectivity for the moral domain.

3   2. Does moral inquiry require truth?

Within the pragmatist tradition, Misak has developed the most complete account of a truth-based conception of moral objectivity and inquiry along Peircean lines. Her

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6 By overarching I mean that any other norm can be introduced only on a "second best" basis. The question I want to ask is therefore whether other normative standards can be appropriate as first rate, not merely second best criteria to which we can submit our epistemic practices.

conception of inquiry is grounded in the Peircean fallibilistic epistemology and in the idea of practical rationality as reasons giving (Misak 2000: 49, Misak 2004: *passim*.). Moreover, she endorses a Peircean epistemic conception of truth as what will resist at the end of inquiry. Consistently with this general epistemic outlook, Misak conceives of moral practice, and especially of the justificatory practice of reasons giving, as being guided by a reference to the idea of truth. She insists notably that without a hope in reaching truth, objectivity is impossible. Truth is defined pragmatically, according to the Peircean idea of inquiry in which "a true belief is a belief that could not be improved upon, a belief that would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument, and evidence" (Misak 2000: 49). So defined, a true belief is a belief that is *indefeasible* (Misak 2000: 58). According to Misak, when we engage in moral inquiry in the face of disagreement with other agents, it is this reference to the norm of truth that should guide our effort at overcoming disagreement. To be good moral inquirers, we should engage our interlocutor with this epistemic assumption, an assumption that, as I will show, will urges us to adopt an epistemic posture of "intolerance" toward disagreement, according to a model that is that of any well conducted form of science-like kind of inquiry.

At the same time, Misak's theory of objectivity is "pragmatic" insofar as it defines the epistemic notion of objectivity with reference to its practical function in orienting inquiry: "truth and objectivity are matters of what is best for the community of inquirers to believe, 'best' here amounting to that best fits with the evidence and argument" (Misak 2000: 1). Misak's account condenses two theses of pragmatist epistemology: (a) the idea that in moral affairs (as well as in any other human concern) inquiry is a reliable guide to conduct because it makes beliefs responsive to experience; (b) the idea that moral inquiry has to emulate the science-like form of a truth-tracking practice. Misak takes from Peirce the idea that the second thesis is a corollary of the first: in order to be effective, inquiry must be truth-tracking. Therefore, pragmatic objectivity should be defined in terms of truth, so that any form of moral inquiry aspiring to be objective should first of all be committed to truth. I want to emphasize this point because two different pragmatist strategies can be developed according to the way we interpret the relationship between these two theses.[7]

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7 There is a great deal of pragmatist literature involved in this passage. In particular, the tension between the two

Misak borrows from the pragmatist tradition an immanent conception of truth. First of all, truth is the attribute of a belief, and beliefs are tools for the coordination of human action. Thus, truth is not defined through correspondence to states of affairs, but rather in terms of the checks provided by human experience. A true belief is one "which would forever fit with experience and argument" (Misak 2000: 82, but see also Misak 2004: 10ff.). Second, truth is identified functionally—its character depends upon the process of inquiry which aims at it: "a true belief is the best that inquiry could do; it is what we would find survives the test of experience at the end of a well-pursued inquiry" (Misak 2000: 54). Misak's understanding of moral objectivity is based upon this strong connection between truth, morality and inquiry: inquiry requires truth "in order to make some rather critical distinctions" (Misak 2000: 56), and morality requires inquiry in order to overcome disagreement and fix common paths of activity.

Her defense of this conception of objectivity relies on the adequacy of an analogy, namely that moral problems, like issues arising in scientific and mathematical fields, can be formulated in terms at least theoretically capable of obtaining an indefeasible solution (i.e. one that all participants will be obliged to accept). I call this epistemic attitude about moral problems "science-like" to emphasize its similarity to those inquiries which aim to know specific properties of the world. According to Misak's model, moral objectivity presupposes an epistemic attitude of *hope* about reaching truth with respect to moral issues. According to this view, the very motivation of moral inquirers derives from the fact that "there is a hope to reach the truth" and, indeed, "without the hope that there is an answer to the question at hand, there would be no point in debate or investigation" (Misak 2000: 101).

A second trait that Misak ascribes to pragmatic objectivity concerns bivalence. Here Misak invokes Peirce's epistemology in order to claim that moral inquiry – but inquiry generally – should be governed, at least prima facie, by the principle of bivalence. Assigning to bivalence the role of the regulative principle of moral inquiry, she implies

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Peirceain conceptualizations of inquiry as science-like and as rational should be kept in mind. See Short 2000 for an analysis of competing accounts of inquiry in Peirce. I discuss this issue and define the 'science-like' and the 'rational' para digms of inquiry at some length in Frega 2012a ch. 1.While Misak's strategy consists in taking (b) as a corollary of (a), another strategy – closer to Dewey than to Peirce – consists in severing the connection between (a) and (b), making rational inquiry independent from the idea of truth-tracking. In this second view, moral inquiry can have an objective basis without being committed to truth-tracking. This is the strategy I favor. I discuss these two possibilities at length in Frega 2012a, ch. 1-2.

that even in the moral domain, were inquiry to be carried on far enough (Misak 2000: 98), one (and only one) among the competing beliefs would hold. An important consequence that follows from the acceptance of the principle of bivalence is an *agonistic conception of disagreement*. By agonistic, I mean that moral inquiry is represented as a struggle between competing claims at the end of which all but one claim will hold. Bivalence requires that if a problem is well defined, then no settlement will be reached until one belief is acknowledged to be true (and competing claims are dismissed). Bivalence is a necessary feature of inquiry (as a regulative idea, if not as a necessary constraint) because we engage in inquiry concerning a proposition *p* with the exclusive aim of knowing whether p is true or false. "We must, for any given question, assume that there would be an upshot to our investigations, that it would emerge either that p is true or that it is false. Otherwise, we simply could not explain why we inquire into the issue. Such an assumption is one which we have to make in order to make sense of our practices of deliberation, investigation, and belief. The assumption of bivalence is our practice – it is part of inquiry" (Misak 2000: 68). Even if we admitted that bivalence as a regulative idea is only a hope, its normative force in orienting any form of moral inquiry would, therefore, remain unchanged.

Thus, in Misak's view, by taking true belief as the *goal* of moral inquiry (with bivalence as its regulative idea), it is natural to understand moral *disagreement* as consisting in those situations in which people hold contradictory and logically incompatible beliefs about the norms (rules, values, principles) that should govern our lives;[8] and finally, one can see that truth provides a *methodological norm* for overcoming disagreement (as facilitated by epistemic adjudications of the contested propositions). The regulative hope is that if we disagree because I believe that p ("abortion is morally wrong") and you believe that not-p ("abortion is morally good"), then to resolve our disagreement, it will suffice to determine whether p is true or not (since that will establish who is right and who is wrong).[9] Disagreement disappears, since it was, after all, merely the consequence of a temporary incapacity to attain truth. As Huw Price states things in a

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8 I explain in detail the differences between a propositional and an experiential conception of disagreement in Frega 2012a, ch. 5.

9 I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for having brought my attention to this point.

sentence quoted approvingly by Misak, "in order to really *engage* others in conversation or dialogue, we have to see their disagreement as implying a mistake on someone's part. […] The crucial point is thus that assertoric dialogue requires an intolerance of disagreement. This needs to be present already in the background, a pragmatic presupposition of judgment itself. I am not a maker of assertions, a judger, at all, unless I am already playing the game to win" (Misak 2004: p. 18). Moreover, as Misak puts it, trying to distinguish Peirce's approach from Dewey's, James' and Rorty's (an unfortunate conflation of philosophers with profoundly different epistemologies), "our practices rest upon the assumption that disagreement points to a mistake on somebody's part". I contend that this *intolerance of disagreement* is, beginning from its very wording, precisely that which makes rational disagreement impossible to understand and, as a consequence, impossible to accept and face.

Misak's strategy is two layered: she first lays out a truth-based epistemology of disagreement and then, especially in the third part of *Truth, Morality, and Politics*, she examines cases of moral inquiry where bivalence does not hold. My criticism addresses both these strategies. First, in section two and three I explain why the general epistemological outlook provided by Misak is not suitable for moral inquiry. Second, I explain why her partial renunciation of bivalence for moral inquiry is equally doomed to fail. This task is undertaken in section four, where I discuss Misak's treatment of types of moral inquiry where bivalence and truth do not hold and show why Misak's treatment of them is insufficient to provide a viable pragmatic account of objectivity. My main points of critique will therefore be two. First, I contend that the assertoric conception of moral inquiry fails to account for a much larger portion of moral experience than Misak contends. Second, I claim that Misak's account fails to deliver a viable and complete account of moral inquiry for the reason that her account has nothing to offer in the face of situations of moral rational disagreement: indeed, where bivalence fails and truth-aptness is lacking, Misak's account of objectivity leaves the moral inquirer without adequate epistemic resources for engaging in normative practices. On the contrary, my account of pragmatic objectivity is intended to explain how in cases of moral disagreement where bivalence does not hold and truth-aptness fails, agents still have resources that enable them to engage others with critical bite. The

point a pragmatist account should make concerns precisely the understanding of the type of rational resources that agents have at their disposal once our standard rational strategies fails. This is the reason why the question of rational disagreement is so important.

Given the overall pragmatist framework upon which Misak builds her theory, two main arguments can be raised against her account.[10] The first is that moral inquiry does *not* aim at producing specimens of moral knowledge – general propositions about moral facts – but rather at making decisions in conditions of moral uncertainty. The second is that in a significant range of cases a truth-tracking conception of inquiry blocks rather than facilitate moral inquiry. Thus, the truth-aptness prerequisite makes moral inquiry *practically* impossible. These are pragmatic arguments that a pragmatic account cannot fail to answer. In the next two sections I will explore these arguments in turn.

3. The pragmatic nature of moral inquiry

The first line of criticism aims at disentangling truth and moral inquiry by considering the practical nature of moral goals. We can accept that moral claims are truth-apt, and also that moral inquiry is based upon the search for truth, and yet still insist that the *function* of truth is different from the one highlighted by Misak. I take disagreement to be a central dimension of moral experience and one of the main motivations for moral inquiry. Yet in my view Misak is wrong to believe that what *mostly* concerns us in disagreement is "the fact that there is a truth of the matter and that we try to discover what the truth is" (Misak 2005:131). In moral inquiry, moral agents do not aim *first* at "getting things *right*", but rather at "getting things *done*", albeit done *rightly*. Disagreement in beliefs is troubling because it disparages what is *practical* - personal and collective undertakings - not because we cannot tolerate some theoretical uncertainty about the truth value of our ethical propositions. Certainly in inquiring about how to get things done we are in an important way subjected to a normative standard that we can *prima facie* identify with the norm of truth: we rely on existing knowledge of facts of the matter, we gather empirical evidence, we appeal to scientific knowledge,

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10 A third argument, too internal to the pragmatist tradition to be discussed here, refers to the socio-institutional requirements of inquiry (the existence of a community of inquirers) identified by Peirce and endorsed by Misak. I discuss this third argument at length in Frega 2012a ch. 6.

we draw from a range of empirical surveys. Our moral inquiries are truth apt in the sense that we generally do not (and should not) tolerate taking a decision on the basis of unreliable information.

However, we should acknowledge that this does not exhaust moral inquiry, but it defines at best its antechamber. In many moral deliberations, in fact, the central question is not whether the propositional object of our decision is true or false, but whether the decision is appropriate or inappropriate. This distinction does not eliminate truth from moral inquiry. However, it circumscribes its function. Once we understand that function, it becomes obviously misleading to say that moral inquiry "aspires to truth". Here a pragmatist would say that moral inquiry aspires to being based upon the maximum amount of non controversial evidence (truth about facts of the matter), knowing that any possible amount of non controversial evidence about facts will in most cases not suffice to bring moral inquiry to its conclusion: even agreeing about all the relevant factual knowledge, we might still disagree – rationally – about how to act.

Pragmatic objectivity requires that moral inquiry conform to certain standards: that one weigh the existing evidence, make existing values and commitments explicit, and strike a balance between competing claims. This holds for moral as well as for political inquiry. How do we make our decisions? We articulate our values, rank them, plot out the implications of possible plans of action and try to estimate their meaning for the context of the situation at hand. Our interlocutors will likely do the same, often reaching diverging conclusions. Moral inquiry consists in a double movement. Prospectively, it figures out consequences and deploys meaning. Retrospectively, it articulates tacit assumptions and personal commitments in terms of their deliberative implications. With the exception of the forecast of consequences, none of these dimensions of moral inquiry is driven by the norm of truth in the sense assumed by Misak. These are just some counter-examples to Misak's claim that moral inquiry is a truth-tracking enterprise. There is a broader variety of forms of moral inquiry that can make a claim to objectivity (that are responsive to arguments and experience) but that cannot properly be said to "aim at truth", and certainly not in the sense advocated by Misak. With reference to these and similar cases, to say that truth is the goal of moral inquiry is simply misleading.

The upshot is that Misak's position fails as a general theory of how moral and political inquiry should be conducted. Moral inquiry, in fact, has aims that are broader than establishing facts of the matter. This is true not only because in moral inquiry we aim at "getting things done" and not merely at "getting things right". Truth-talk can stand in the way of moral inquiry also for a second reason. Moral inquiry has a temporal structure that differs greatly from that of science-like inquiry. This difference is so important as to undermine Misak's Peircean model of moral inquiry (as based on truth/agreement in the long run). For moral and political inquiry, unlike scientific research, must adapt to changing needs in varying situations while remaining sensitive to the processes of self-transformation affecting inquiring agents themselves. The beliefs inherent to this kind of dynamic inquiry simply cannot be required to measure up to Misak's ideal (i.e., of indefeasibility, attained by inquirers with an agonistic attitude towards disagreement after engaging in long-lasting inquiry amidst stable experimental conditions). Rather, inquiry based in the actual world should take, as its regulative idea, a model of contextual responsiveness: not the best solution in an indefinite time but a solution good enough, for the time being. To be responsive to context, we should devise a model of inquiry that is adequate to the conditions in which inquiry is called upon to operate.

The point of my argument is that differences between scientific and moral inquiry cannot be eliminated simply by stating that truth is an ideal notion to which both types of inquiry tend in the "long run", although each in its own ways. Misak's ideal can claim to universality because it idealizes scientific practice. Yet this ideal - shaped for the purposes of science-like forms of inquiry - misdirects moral inquiry and diverts efforts from best solutions. After all, my moral beliefs not only express present knowledge about facts, they also express moral identity, cultural conditions and values. While factual knowledge can be improved (and stabilized) through truth-aiming inquiry, most of the beliefs that orient moral agency do not stabilize in that way. Misak acknowledges this in an incidental way, but fails to draw from it any significant consequences. This failure cannot but strengthen a pragmatist's perplexity: what is the use of Misak insisting on the truth-aptness of moral claims if, in the majority of actual moral inquiries we are faced with moral claims that do not display this property?

To this extent Misak has a reply that only serves to increase the reader's puzzlement: right in the middle of her treatment of moral disagreement, in fact, she claims that in the end "the pragmatist is not as attached to the principle of bivalence [...] as many others are" (Misak 2000: 137). This sentence comes in a chapter that introduces a distinction between what Misak aptly terms "truth-seekers" and "reasons-givers". The question therefore seems to be what the best model is for describing the normative attitudes of moral inquirers, how moral inquiry should be conducted in the two cases. Misak implies that we should consider moral inquirers to be *prima facie* "truth-seekers" and therefore committed to bivalence and truth and engaged in assertoric intolerance of disagreement. When these first order epistemic requirements fail, and only then, moral inquirers should be seen as being merely "reasons-givers", no longer committed to bivalence and truth and, probably, no longer committed to the normative intolerance of disagreement. Even granting to Misak that this *proviso* answer some of the objections I have raised, the problem remains that Misak's theory cannot address the central and most important question of how moral inquiry should be conducted when *prima facie* truth-seeking strategies fail and agents need resort to reason giving. Indeed, if truth-seeking has to give way to reasons-giving, Misak's truth-based epistemology – shaped according with a truth-seeking model – lacks the resources needed to explain on which sort of epistemic resources they will rely to bring their exchange of reasons to a close. In the next section I provide my arguments for this second claim through an examination of the three kinds of moral situations where, according to Misak, reasons-giving should replace truth-seeking.

4. Can moral objectivity rely on the ideal of the intolerance of disagreement?

My second line of criticism goes more directly to the heart of Misak's conception of pragmatic objectivity, and concerns its workability in resolving moral disagreements. In this section, I argue that her approach is not consistent with the goals she sets for moral inquiry, and that this inconsistency creates a pragmatic tension (if not a pragmatic contradiction) within her theory. In particular, I claim that engaging in moral deliberation with the notion of moral truth as a guide actually reduces rather than increases our chances for agreement. Moreover, I claim that Misak's attempt to account

for moral situations where bivalence and truth do not hold does not live up to the pragmatic requirements she endorses.

The main justification for my first claim is that disagreement has neither the same meaning nor the same function within science-like inquiry as it has within moral inquiry. As we saw, Misak reposes hope of reaching truth in moral inquiry upon a supposed continuity between science-like and moral forms of inquiry: to be a moral inquirer just means being committed to the search for truth, and truth-aptness is *prima facie* attributed to any moral proposition deserving of inquiry. This commitment to truth introduces within moral inquiry the same "intolerance of disagreement" that characterizes all forms of assertoric discourse. To see why "intolerance of disagreement" should not be taken to be a normative standard of moral inquiry, let me distinguish first two main sources of disagreement: insufficient or distorted information and value pluralism[11]. Each of these sources require to be handled by different type of inquiry. In the case of insufficient or distorted information, in the majority of cases a truth-tracking evidence based inquiry can prove to be the appropriate way to carry on deliberation. With reference to this type of situation, moral inquiry is oriented at establishing facts of the matter, verifying hypothesis, and check the available information in order to avoid errors. We can here imagine an agent in the process of fixing his beliefs about his moral duties of solidarity by examining figures about poverty, discussing the effectiveness of benevolence, assessing the moral impact of philanthropy. Here inquirers are expected to be intolerant of disagreement in the sense made clear by Misak and Price: if I say that in my opinion philanthropy weakens the sense of autonomy of agents and you say that it does not affect it, we cannot merely be content with this disagreement. Here disagreement bites in the sense that each of us can legitimately expect that a well conducted social inquiry will be able to provide some kind of evidence in support of one or the other incompatible claims. Evidence-based inquiry here can really help moral inquirers in getting out of disagreement. I would suggest that this happens every time we are able to frame our disagreement in terms of

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11 By this distinction I do not mean to introduce any sharp dichotomy between facts and values. My aim is only to highlight the two prevalent types of disagreement that are empirically encountered in moral inquiry. Although facts and values are inextricably entangled in any real life inquiry, it is always possible, within a given line of inquiry, to distinguish factual from axiological elements for the sake of inquiry itself.

the consequences that would be produced by acting upon the beliefs we are testing.[12] The second source of disagreement is value pluralism. With respect to this second source, in order to search for agreement agents adopting different normative standpoints need first to seek a shared perspective on how to act. And to do this, they *must not* act under the assumption of the epistemic intolerance of disagreement; rather, disagreement should be taken as a fact that might not be overcome. They need, in other words, to learn to *tolerate* disagreement in order to further moral inquiry. In brief, Misak's truth-tracking conception of inquiry exposes moral deliberation to the risk of failure while making relativism and non-cognitivism more (not less) likely threats. Intolerance of disagreement, in other words, cannot be the epistemic ideal to be followed while engaging in moral inquiry.

Troubles with intolerance do not concern only moral experience but also our capacity to actively engage in political controversies. As deliberative theorist John Dryzek has remarked, "implicit in a situation where moral truth is sought is an incipient danger of the eventual silencing of the differing opinions that are the very grist of politics" (Dryzek 2004: 74). This is precisely what happens when the "intolerance of disagreement" is taken as *the* regulative idea of inquiry and then brought into the public arena. When we force truth to regulate moral discourse in Misak's way, the only remaining strategy for addressing disagreement is to admit that "disagreement, again, implies a mistake on someone's part" (Misak 2004: 16). In the face of pluralism, truth-talk exacerbates rather than mitigates disagreement. This is not merely an unfortunate practical consequence. Rather, it is an alarming signal of an epistemological inadequacy: after all, Misak's account was supposed to explain (and support) successful human practices of moral inquiry, not imperil them. And no pragmatic account can hope to survive the consequences of such a pragmatic contradiction.

The acknowledgment of the role played by rational disagreement within moral practice, and the acknowledgment of the inescapability of pluralism should not be taken as implying that moral practices are intrinsically irrational or that moral propositions are devoid of cognitive scope. But it should make us aware that the epistemic properties of

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12 This has of course an explicitly pragmatist sound. I have argued elsewhere that to understand moral and political inquiry according to a pragmatist model we must test our competing beliefs by examining the consequences that would be brought about by acting upon them. See Frega 2012b.

moral inquiry are not those identified by Misak. Therefore, while I agree with Misak that "the very essence of the norm of truth" is that it "gives disagreement its immediate normative character" (Price 2003: 168), in light of this definition I contend that truth does not play within moral inquiry the role Misak wants it to play. For even if we admit that *prima facie* many moral claims aim at a validity expressible by the true/false dichotomy, we should also admit that this approach nevertheless fails to account for the kinds of normative strategies often used to deal with cases of rational disagreement. With respect to these cases, the appropriate description is not that we are confronted with discursive moral practices that fail at their goal of reaching truth, but rather that we are confronted with discursive moral practices which comply with a *different* normative standard.

Misak is, however, open to the possibility that bivalence and truth can fail in moral inquiry. She is willing to acknowledge the overwhelming importance of radical disagreement in moral inquiry, and, as I have anticipated at the start of this section, she thinks her theory can easily deal with it, by a simple shift from truth-seeking to reasons-giving. I contend that this solution is flawed. There are two ways to deal with the challenge of rational disagreement that is at the heart of the failure of truth and bivalence. The first would be to neutralize it, saying that because it concerns only a very limited portion of moral experience its impact on the theory is irrelevant. This solution would save Misak's theory by limiting the cases where it was doomed to fail. However, as even Misak acknowledges, moral experience is such that failure of truth-based inquiry is too widespread to be circumscribed to a limited number of irrelevant cases. Granted this, the path followed by Misak is to say that in these cases moral inquiry can be pursued even in the absence of the stronger epistemic condition of bivalence, but still submitting inquiry to the norm of truth.

My objection against Misak is twofold. First her theory fails to tell us the most important thing, which is how inquiry should be conducted in cases of deep moral disagreement. On the one hand, this is because the shift from truth-seeking to reasons-giving is not complete. On the other hand, it is because the ensuing account of reasons-giving does not explain what the normative requirements are to which this practice must conform. My second objection is that Misak's account of underdetermination, regret,

and tragic choice[13] fails to grasp what is essential in situations of moral disagreement. Moral disagreement, in fact, becomes philosophically intriguing and morally troubling when normative standards fail. Cases of normative failure are precisely those that are excluded in Misak's analysis.

The question I want to press on Misak is, therefore, the following: once we admit that in certain moral situations truth-talk fails, how are we to further inquiry? To what specific normative standards will inquiry be submitted? If the norm of truth fails, how are we to settle our disagreements? My general idea, which I will develop in this and the next section, is that unless we drop truth (in the epistemic sense) as the norm of inquiry, we will not be able to account for a great number of normative practices that characterize the moral and political domain. To show this, I proceed to discuss briefly the three situations examined by Misak. I will show that her epistemological outlook is inadequate in all these cases.

Let us examine these three cases in turn. According to Misak, underdetermination denotes situations where more than one (although not an infinite) number of equally acceptable conflicting options are available. Misak's solution to preserve truth in cases of underdetermination is that disagreement about alternative ways of life can be disposed of by adopting a permissible/non-permissible logic (Misak 2000: 137-138).[14] Misak concedes that in these cases bivalence does not hold. However, she contends that truth-aptness can be saved by adopting a *disjunctive* logic: when more than one option holds as valid, we can preserve the connection between objectivity and truth by admitting that the solution A is best *for me*, while the solution B is *best for you*, and both are permissible. Moral objectivity is therefore pluralized but still made dependent upon truth. It is certainly true that *some* cases of underdetermination can be accounted for in that way. However, this strategy cannot be applied in all cases of underdetermination, particularly when disagreement concerns decisions to be taken. In these cases, in fact, underdetermination stands in the way of action and plurality has to be brought to unity, not merely applauded. The situation that is underdetermined should

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13 These are the types of moral situations where, according to Misak, moral beliefs do not satisfy the conditions of truth-aptness, i.e., bivalence and constancy of truth values among people. See Misak 2000: 136-147.

14 This move exemplifies her general strategy of shifting from a truth-seeking to a reasons-giving account of inquiry.

therefore be brought to determination. And we expect inquiry to support moral agents in taking their decisions in ways that are rational and not based upon political procedures (vote) or emotional motives. Misak's strategy of reconciling incompatible approaches through a disjunctive affirmation of their truth has no utility with reference to this normative goal. The question thus becomes how agents are to behave in order to manage their disagreements if they cannot count on truth-aptness. It can certainly not be by engaging in the kind of assertoric dialogue Misak places at the heart of moral inquiry.

A similar destiny affects Misak's treatment of regret. Misak sees regret as characterizing a position where agents have a clear grasp of truth concerning the right thing to do, but the contingent situation forces them to act differently. Regret is a moral feeling arising out of the awareness of not being able to get what we take to be right. As in the previous case, truth-aptness is not really called into question: the tension concerns rather the impossibility to act in accordance with it. We *know* what is right – "the 'ought' that is not acted upon" – but some external constraint stands in the way. In these cases, according to Misak, moral inquiry ought to help agents find a viable compromise among competing requirements. This is an extremely oversimplified understanding of moral disagreement, and the price for saving truth appears to me too high. Unless, in fact, one is ready to accept that the goal of moral inquiry is to identify the best trade off in cases of moral disagreement, one cannot be content with this solution. In situations of disagreement that are most compelling from a moral point of view, what is at stake is not that I cannot get what *I* take to be right; but rather that I find valid grounds in *my opponent's* claim. That is, I see that I cannot defeat my opponent's reasons, but at the same time I am not ready to drop my own. To account for the normative structure of this moral situation we cannot rely either on truth-aptness or on disjunctive validity. The real issue for moral inquiry seems to be, rather, how inquiry should be conducted once "the competing tug of values" (Misak 2000: 140) renders truth-seeking hopeless. In those cases, saying that what agents should do is to 'compromise' on a "trade off, where all parties get something, but not everything" (Misak 2000: 140) is simply not an adequate answer.

The third case examined by Misak is that of tragic choices, where an agent is obliged to

choose between two equally unsatisfying options. This case is so difficult for her theory to handle that she has to admit that "we ought to be prepared for a range of responsiveness to experience and reasons – a range of objectivity, if you like" (Misak 2000: 142). This idea of a "range of objectivity" contrasts sharply with the norm of truth, and introduces the idea that in fixing our beliefs through moral inquiry we are confronted with a wide variety of situations, where different normative standards can apply.[15] This solution sounds to me like a Trojan horse in her theory: to be consistent with this last claim about objectivity, one should admit that moral inquiry aspires to warranted assertibility rather than truth, and that only in some cases does warranted assertibility comply with the norm of truth. This is the position I will defend in the next section.

4   5. Pragmatic warranted assertibility

It should be clear by now that in criticizing the idea of truth as the overarching normative standard of moral inquiry, I am in no way contesting the idea that when we engage in moral and political inquiry we aim at something objective; nor am I contesting the epistemic function or the moral significance of disagreement.[16] My objection is rather that in order to account for objectivity within moral and political inquiry, reference to truth-aptness of moral propositions does not provide a satisfying explanation of how inquiry can point to objective results in the whole range of forms of inquiry that is found in the moral and political domain.[17] What is contested is not that moral and political claims cannot be truth-apt (many are, indeed, truth-apt), but rather

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15 Elizabeth Anderson defends a similar idea of moral objectivity as a scalar entity. She remarks that "objectivity can vary by degrees, with respect to both the justifying community and how well this community lives up to the norms of objectivity" (Anderson 1993: 94). Yet she considers that objectivity should be made autonomous from truth, as "the space of reasons is wide enough to accommodate diverse ideals" (Anderson 1993: 94). A normative belief is objective when it withstands the reasons addressed against it, *provided* such reasons are advanced **in respect of** the normative position (the evaluative perspective) from which it stems.

16 Freedman 2006 shows that from the point of view of disquotationalist conceptions of truth this marriage of truth and inquiry is equally unhappy. Yet without a theory of objectivity her critique of Misak has no bite. Criteria such as mutual accountability, importance of and interest for the issue at stake ("how much a community has invested in that discourse, and how easy it is for the claims therein to be verified," p. 385) are not sufficient criteria to explain the diversity of normative standards to be found across the spectrum of the various kinds of practices of inquiry.

17 There are of course other ways of defending the idea of moral truth, that I do not discuss because they are not compatible with the pragmatic standpoint here discussed. One could, following David Copp, define truth as the attribute of moral sentences that apply a given moral standard correctly. In this way, however, the perspectival dimension of moral inquiry is lost. See Copp 1995.

the claim that truth-aptness is a necessary presupposition of moral inquiry; or, to put it another way, that any moral inquiry must assume truth as a normative ideal.

Against this claim I have advanced a pragmatic argument and an epistemological one. The pragmatic argument states that conceiving of moral inquiry as a search for truth will not bring us any closer to understanding how moral inquiry can be objective. The epistemological argument says that the Peircean theoretical framework Misak is using was not designed to deal with moral and political forms of inquiry, and this explains why it is significantly inadequate for that task.[18] Moreover, I have claimed that in adopting a theoretical model of inquiry as a knowledge-getting enterprise, Misak is being unfair to her pragmatist standpoint, according to which "a theory of x must take seriously the practice of x" (Misak 2000: 71). If for "the practice of x" we mean the way in which agents engage in moral and political inquiry in order to fix their beliefs, evidence shows that their actual aim is not truth but agreement, and that to be successful the search for agreement should not necessarily be driven by the epistemic intolerance of disagreement that Misak places at the heart of every kind of inquiry. What drives agents, rather, is a willingness to act together despite a radical pluralism that makes the quest for truth ineffective and conflict-raising. In light of this, though, the question emerges: if we do not take truth to be the overwhelming mark of objectivity, how are we going to preserve the epistemic properties of moral inquiry? How are we to avoid relativism and skepticism about morality?

My claim is that in order to develop a conception of objectivity consistent with these conditions, we need to rehabilitate the notion of 'warranted assertibility'. I do not propose to introduce warranted assertibility with the aim of reducing truth to justification: as Dewey clearly showed, in fact, the notion of warranted assertibility should not be part of a theory of truth. In order to define 'warranted assertibility' (WA), I will refer to a taxonomy of normative standards proposed by Huw Price, although the use I will make of this taxonomy will be partly different from Price's. In his treatment of WA, Price distinguishes two possible meanings, *personal* WA and *communal* WA. Personal WA is defined as follows: "'p' is warrantedly assertible by a speaker who not

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18 I examine this point in details in Frega 2012a, ch. 1.

only believes that p, but is justified in doing so" (Price 2005: 173). A belief is justified in this sense if it is "supported by a speaker's other current beliefs" (ibid.). Communal WA provides a stronger degree of validity. It offers a "more objective, community-based variant, according to which a belief is justified if it coheres appropriately with the other beliefs of one's community" (Price 2005: 174). Price says that pragmatists tend to refuse *personal* WA but to accept *communal* WA. I think that Price's analysis of WA is incomplete, and that there is at least one other conception of WA that can do the epistemic work pragmatists say it does.

This third version of WA, which I will call pragmatic, provides the argumentative friction that, as Misak and Price correctly point out, is an indispensable ingredient of any account of objectivity. What in fact, provides friction to intersubjective intercourse? We can give two answers to this question, according to the approach we take to truth. I will call the first answer 'semantic', and the second 'epistemic', following the analogous distinction between theories of truth.[19] Semantic conceptions of truth aim at defining the meaning of the word 'truth'. They convey the common sense understanding of the words 'truth' or 'true' and of their uses. Accordingly, they express the idea of truth-tracking as a commitment to "having things right", to searching for agreement, to being reactive against mistakes, contradictions, inconsistencies, as opposed to a discursive practice merely based upon assertion and counter assertion (Price 1998: 246-247). At the semantic level, truth-aptness is correctly stated as a general trait of discourses that aims at not being defeated. As such, it characterizes also discursive practices in the moral domain. Epistemic conceptions of truth have different goals and content. They aim at specifying the conditions that preside over the acceptability of propositions, as in the case of the Peircean theory of truth as the end of inquiry endorsed by Misak. When we speak about normative standards, we should therefore first of all specify whether our concerns are semantic or epistemic.

Price's theory of truth is semantic; it conveys the idea that unless we presuppose an independent standard of validity, we cannot account for the normative practice through which agents engage in disagreement. He calls this normative standard "the norm of

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19 The confusion between semantic and epistemic levels of discussion is a problematic aspect of Misak's account of truth, as was clearly noticed by Freedman 2006.

truth", to contrast it with the weaker normative standard of opinion. However, no epistemic properties concerning the requirements for a proposition to be valid are introduced. On the contrary, the pragmatic norm of WA is introduced at the epistemic level, not at the semantic one. I am not concerned here with whether Huw Price intends to accomplish this move. I do not think he does. He is not concerned with the epistemic dimension of the notion of truth, while on the contrary Misak certainly is. My point is rather that to understand the functioning of inquiry, we necessarily have to move from the semantic to the epistemic level. If our goal is to offer a theory of inquiry – and of objectivity as being one of its components – then warranted assertibility, not truth, provides the relevant normative standard, what Price calls "the third norm". I am aware that in my discussion I am stretching Price's argument beyond the point to which its author intended to bring it. To avoid misunderstanding, I agree with Price about the semantic aspect: we all aim at truth if this means that we are not left untouched by divergence in opinions, that we are not merely Mo'ans (see Price 1998). But I disagree with this claim if this is intended in the sense that truth is the epistemic standard that should guide agents engaging in disagreement. This is false. Semantically, inquiry is driven by the norm of truth in the sense made clear by Price. Epistemically, it is driven by the norm of warranted assertibility in the sense I explain in this article.[20]

My claim *contra* Misak is therefore that at the epistemic level in order to engage in criticism we do not need to endorse "the norm of truth": the "norm of pragmatic warranted assertibility" is a sufficient normative standard. If disagreement impinges upon our practical undertakings, then friction will likely come from the impossibility of "having things done" rather than from "having things right". In addition, agents can aim at "having things right" without having the hope of reaching truth: after the fact of pluralism we can hold irreconcilable beliefs, accept it that the norm of truth does not hold and yet be willing to engage in reasons-giving in order to solve problems relating to agency.

I will call this version *pragmatic warranted assertibility*, as it is based upon the notion of practice. According to this conception, a belief is warranted if it is justified according

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20 I have to thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me to better see the importance of distinguishing between these two senses of the idea of normative standards, or of truth as the norm of inquiry.

to the epistemic standards of the practice which provides the context in which a belief is proffered. We should notice that the reference to practice plays a role that is very different from that played by the reference to community. A community denotes a human aggregate, identified according to social and historical criteria. It has no epistemic properties. On the contrary, practice is an epistemically qualified notion. A practice can be a well structured enterprise such as physical science, or a much less defined one such as moral inquiry. Each practice is spatio-temporally determined, in order to limit its reference to the conditions that define the possibilities of inquiry in a given place and time. If according to personal WA a person is entitled to a belief if *she* has grounds to hold it, and if according to communal WA a person is entitled to a belief if her *community* has grounds to hold it, then pragmatic WA claims that a person is entitled to hold a belief if she has grounds to hold it *according to the epistemic norms of the practice* which govern the context in which she proffers her claim. A practice is oriented by fallibilistic values and open to revision. It is a self-reflective, critical undertaking. As such, it sustains the possibility of objective criticisms. Pragmatic WA incorporates the agonistic element thinkers like Misak and Price consider distinctive of truth - it grants normative friction - without presupposing the intolerance of disagreement that both argue is inseparable from truth. In particular, it is not exposed to the failure of personal and communal WA to explain why "true by my lights" or "true by our lights" solutions fail. Pragmatic WA, being fallibilistic and open to the revision of its normative criteria, is not content to leave disagreement unchallenged.

With this definition in mind, we can distinguish two ways of rehabilitating WA. The first way, which consists in reducing truth to WA, gives rise to well known paradoxes and cannot be defended.[21] The second way – the one that I support – consists in claiming that no matter how we define truth, pragmatic WA defines a legitimate and independent goal of inquiry, so that we can claim that moral inquiry, at least in a significant number of cases, does not aim at truth but rather at WA.

My thesis is therefore twofold. First, WA has a broader scope than truth as a normative standard. This thesis does not imply any reduction of truth to justification, but rather

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21 Besides Misak, Putnam, Wellmer and Habermas are among some of the most persuasive critics of this attempt.

identifies different degrees of stability in our beliefs. Second, WA constitutes a goal of inquiry. This is the level most relevant for a pragmatic theory of objectivity, as the goal of such a theory is not to define truth (the semantic approach), but rather to define the normative standards for assessing the epistemic quality of a given inquiry and its outcomes. Compared to truth, WA has a broader scope, that is, it is a more inclusive notion for describing the goal of inquiry, as it does not apply only to science-like forms of inquiry. According to the pragmatist, inquiry aims first at giving beliefs a maximum amount of stability; a belief that is warranted is a belief that is stable, and truth is simply one of the possible marks of stability, a mark that can be assigned only in the context of certain types of moral inquiries. In other words, while all kinds of moral inquiry aim at pragmatic WA, in specific circumstances *where specific epistemic conditions hold* this goal can legitimately be expressed as "a hope to reach the truth". In these cases, inquirers can be said to engage in that form of assertoric dialogue that Misak and Price rightly consider to be guided by an "intolerance of disagreement." In those cases where inquiry is directed towards truth-apt propositions, pragmatic objectivity sustains the kind of inquiry that Misak and Peirce place at the heart of the pragmatist epistemology. When moral inquiry aims at establishing a fact of the matter, then we should not be afraid of resorting to the language of truth-aptness – to the assumption of bivalence and to the idea of rightness and wrongness. With reference to this circumscribed sub-field of moral inquiry, to say that a belief is warranted means that it satisfies "all of our local aims in inquiry" (Misak 2000: 61). With reference to this context, warranted assertibility accomplishes the regulative function of truth. Yet, as I hope to have shown, the notion of warranted assertibility is broader and more inclusive than that of truth; it provides a guide for inquiry even in those cases in which the conditions of the moral situation force it off the track of epistemic truth-aptness.

5   *Conclusions*

In a wide range of forms of moral and political inquiry, when what is at stake is not the establishment of a fact of the matter but rather the articulation of a valuational perspective or normative standpoint, a non-exclusionary and pluralistic search for

pragmatic warranted assertibility should replace the assertoric intolerance of disagreement as the normative standard to which moral inquiry should be submitted. This move, as I have shown, does not expose inquiry to subjective or communal relativism. Agents inquiring into how to shape a policy or whether to act in one way or another should confront the fact that their respective preferred options might derive from assumptions which are incompatible and nevertheless all legitimate. In these cases, pursuit of truth-talk becomes an idle exercise in self-defense. Yet having renounced the pursuit of truth does not leave inquirers at the mercy of an anything goes relativism: they can engage in moral reasoning with the hope of finding an agreement, temporary though it might be. They deliberate in order to find a solution which is viable, consistent, acceptable, fair, reasonable, but not necessarily true. In doing this, they are engaged in the exchange of reasons and in the examination of experience that pragmatists place at the heart of their epistemology. Yet, in carrying out inquiry, they are not driven by the normative standard of truth, but rather by the somewhat weaker normative standard of what I have called pragmatic warranted assertibility. They ask that claims be warranted by reference to the best existing epistemic standards but admit that the fact of pluralism can make any hope to reach truth vain and misguided. In these and other possible occasions when facts are in dispute, they try to overcome disagreement. Yet truth is not their guide.

In conclusion, it is false to assume that moral inquiry confronts a dilemma: either there is hope of reaching truth or there is no issue at stake. This inaccurately portrays the nature of the goals of moral inquiry and the ways in which agents engage in it. To understand moral inquiry we must refrain from endorsing a conception of objectivity designed with particular forms of scientific inquiry in mind, those forms which aim at establishing facts of the matter. We need, moreover, to reject the idea that in dealing with disagreement "we subscribe to a practice according to which disagreement is an indication of culpable error, on one side or other" (Price 2003: 186). Pragmatic objectivity requires, instead, that we disentangle objectivity from truth. This is precisely what pragmatic objectivity can offer: it explains why moral inquiry can result in a plurality of valid and legitimate solutions, all justified, all backed by experience and argument and all, therefore, objective.

Pragmatic warranted assertibility, therefore, is not, as Price fears, a conversation stopper: it does not deprive disagreement of its characteristic bite, nor does it leave agents each enclosed within his own position. It shows that disagreement matters even – and perhaps mostly – when it cannot be resolved. One would wish to say that in such cases we are confronted with a plurality of truths rather than with the absence of truth. Yet I suppose that this solution would be taken to be even worse than the one I am proposing. In any case, its practical consequences are similar to those of the position of objectivity without truth: they amount to dropping the "intolerance of disagreement" talk.

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