

Reason-Giving Versus Truth-Seeking: Reconceptualizing Indoctrination in Education

Barbara Peterson

New Hampshire's Academic, Sports, and Arts Academy

INTRODUCTION

In the literature on indoctrination in education, indoctrination is often defined as having occurred when someone holds certain beliefs either non-evidentially or non-rationally.¹ The emphasis in attempts to avoid indoctrination, then, is to teach students to provide reasons for their beliefs, rather than basing their views simply on unquestioned assumptions, or emotional commitments to certain beliefs. I find this notion problematic. To avoid indoctrination, we must not develop reason-givers; rather, I argue that we must develop what I shall call “truth-seekers.”

Often, I find that when I mention indoctrination in education, I am told that we, as educators, cannot help indoctrinating to some degree. We cannot avoid getting our students to believe certain beliefs as true in a non-evidential manner, as we cannot always take the time to provide reasons for all the beliefs we profess. For example, when we tell students not to cheat or not to be late for class, we are telling them to accept that cheating and tardiness are bad without having them accept these views for good reasons; we simply want students to accept them as true, and act in accordance with the behavioral codes that we have set forth. While there may be good reasons for believing that cheating and tardiness is bad, we do not often have the time to get students to accept all of our claims, and thus we must ask that they accept them as true without question, so that we may get on with the business of the day.

In this essay, I cannot take the space that is necessary to adequately address the distinction that I draw between teaching students appropriate classroom behavior and indoctrination. What I can say, however, is that, given the conception put forth in this essay, indoctrination is significantly harmful to students. Fortunately, indoctrination can be avoided. For the purposes of this essay, I define indoctrination as the willful and intentional act of teachers to get students to hold beliefs in such a way that they are unlikely to question the truth of such beliefs in the face of opposing evidence or counterarguments. Put more precisely, I argue that a teacher indoctrinates a belief or set of beliefs when s/he intends to get students to hold the belief(s) in a non-truth-seeking manner.

AN ANALYSIS OF SOME PRIOR CONCEPTIONS OF INDOCTRINATION

My conception of indoctrination is defined in terms of intention. Although it borrows a good deal from Ivan A. Snook's language, the conception that I offer differs in some important ways from that analysis. Snook claims that indoctrination is best defined in the following way: “A person indoctrinates P (a proposition or set of propositions) if he teaches with the intention that the pupil or pupils believe P regardless of the evidence.”² I adopt his general way of wording the definition, but

make some significant alterations. Embedded in my alternative definition are two key concepts. The first concept, a teacher's *intention*, has already been examined in an earlier essay.³ The second concept, the idea of holding a belief in a "non-truth-seeking" manner, which replaces Snook's phrase "regardless of the evidence," also requires explication. In what immediately follows, therefore, I discuss this alternative wording by drawing upon, and defending the use of, Cheryl Misak's pragmatic epistemological framework, which underwrites the notion of truth-seeking that I employ here.

Prior accounts of indoctrination assume that students who hold beliefs in such a way that the beliefs are not open to future inquiry must be holding them "non-rationally." Harvey Siegel and Thomas F. Green, for example, each contend that an indoctrinated belief is one that is held in such a way that it is resistant to change or reconsideration in the face of any future counterevidence.⁴ Green asserts that an indoctrinator aims to get students to hold a belief in such a way that it is "secure against the threat of change by the later introduction of conflicting reasons or conflicting evidence."⁵ He points out that indoctrinators try to lead students to hold a belief *as if* it was held evidentially — that is, indoctrinators provide reasons for the belief, yet they also aim to get students either to disregard any opposing evidence or to be incapable of engaging in any future inquiry regarding the truth of the belief.

Siegel argues that one indoctrinates when she intends to get students to hold a belief in such a way that it is "impervious to negative or contrary evidence" and students have no "regard to...[the] truth or justifiability" of the belief.⁶ A belief held "non-rationally" or "non-evidentially," according to these accounts, is not just one held for *no* reasons or for *irrelevant* reasons; it is also one held for *insufficient* reasons. Indoctrination, then, according to Siegel and Green, aims to get students to foreclose on any future inquiry regarding the truth of professed claims and assertions.

I agree with these accounts of indoctrination — it is best defined as the intention to get students to hold a belief in such a way that they are either incapable of or resistant to engaging in any future inquiry regarding its truth. Yet, I am not satisfied with calling this way of holding beliefs "non-evidential" or "non-rational." I object to these terms when used in regard to indoctrination for two reasons.

The first reason is that there can be some confusion over what it means to hold a belief non-rationally or non-evidentially. For example, Francis Schrag argues that the hypothetical student "Thomas" believed in God for relevant reasons, and thus his belief is rational.⁷ Similarly, in another example that Schrag discusses, "Jack" decides that he will only apply to MIT and Harvard, although he has been advised to also apply to Boston University, because his grade point average may not be high enough to get him into his first two choices. He does not agree to apply to Boston University, however, and figures that he will pursue paths other than academia if MIT or Harvard does not accept him. If he cannot get into the top, most selective schools, Jack reasons that it is not worth going for his advanced degree. According to Schrag, Jack's decision may be *foolish*, but it is, nevertheless, *rational* because "he has and can give reasons for what he is doing."⁸

Both Thomas's and Jack's beliefs are rational, according to Schrag, because they are supported by reasons that each can provide. Schrag admits that he is not an epistemologist and, thus, perhaps we cannot count on him for the best understanding of Siegel's and Green's notion of non-rationally held beliefs. On the other hand, with all modesty aside, Schrag is an able and distinguished philosopher. Given his view of what it means to hold beliefs rationally, therefore, it is not unreasonable to note that the notion of holding beliefs rationally can be understood to mean holding beliefs based on relevant, but not necessarily sufficient, reasons. Schrag does not *say* that these reasons must be relevant, true, or sufficient, although his examples imply that they must at least be relevant, if not necessarily sufficient. Neither Thomas nor Jack bases his views on a close and thorough analysis of *all* the relevant and available evidence and arguments. For Schrag, few students will spend the time necessary to thoroughly examine all their beliefs, and "failing to do so does not make students irrational."⁹ Nor, we might add, does it make them non-rational.

Schrag's examples do not *in principle* show Siegel's and Green's analyses to be problematic. Yet, they do provide at least one example of how, *in practice*, the notion of holding beliefs non-evidentially or non-rationally can be understood to mean holding beliefs for relevant, but not necessarily *sufficient*, reasons. The issue is not, therefore, that either Siegel or Green provide us with a notion of indoctrination that fails to address an important concern of indoctrination: it gets students to hold beliefs in a manner whereby they are unwilling to engage, or are incapable of engaging, in future inquiry regarding the truth of such beliefs. Rather, my concern with the use of the terms "non-rational" and "non-evidential" is that they do not make our central concern with indoctrination clear, namely, that indoctrination makes it far too unlikely that students will ever be open to inquiring into the truth of their beliefs. Defining indoctrinated beliefs as beliefs that are held non-rationally or non-evidentially may be taken to mean that, to avoid indoctrination, we must get students to provide relevant, but not necessarily sufficient, reasons for their beliefs. This, I argue, promotes the development of reason-givers, rather than truth-seekers.

Although Schrag's notion of rationally held beliefs differs from that of Siegel, he agrees with Siegel's account of indoctrination. Schrag also agrees with other accounts that maintain that rationality is justified because "beliefs formed rationally have the best chance of being true."¹⁰ Green, too, claims that indoctrination aims to get students to hold beliefs without "due regard for truth."¹¹ Similarly, Elmer J. Thiessen argues that the aim of rationality is to arrive at truth, and indoctrination seeks to block this aim.¹² Additionally, Nancy C. Glock contends that indoctrination jeopardizes students' ability to find truth.¹³ Finally, as noted earlier, Siegel asserts that indoctrination involves getting students to hold beliefs in such a way that the students do not have any regard for the truth of those beliefs.¹⁴ Considering that one of the primary uses of rationality, according to these analyses, is to arrive at truth, and remembering that our concern with indoctrination is that students are rendered unwilling, reluctant, or unable to engage in future inquiry regarding the truth of their beliefs, a more straightforward way to characterize indoctrination is as an endeavor that seeks to get students to hold truth-apt beliefs in a *non-truth-seeking* manner. In

short, describing indoctrinated beliefs as those held in a non-truth-seeking fashion makes clearer that such beliefs are held *without regard to their truth*.

While various analyses agree that the aim of rationality is to arrive at truth, my second objection to defining indoctrinated beliefs as those held “non-rationally” is that none of these accounts provide an adequately clear notion of “truth.” It is not clear that getting students to hold beliefs non-rationally prevents them from formulating true beliefs if we do not first have a good understanding of just what true beliefs are and, therefore, how to arrive at or formulate them. Thiessen, in fact, claims that we cannot know what truth is. He argues that the best we can hope to achieve is “normal rationality,” or holding beliefs based on the best available evidence at the time, and with the openness to reconsider our beliefs in the face of new and opposing reasons and evidence.¹⁵ However, we need some account of why “normal rationality” should be a valued concept. Thiessen has a couple of options. He can argue that rationality is good in and of itself, which seems difficult to do — why, we can continue to ask, should we be rational? Alternatively, Thiessen could argue that rationality is good because it is the best and most efficient method for getting at the truth (which is, of course, precisely what is being argued). But then we need some reason for thinking this, and we *still* need some account of the truth. So, for example, if Thiessen holds a correspondence notion of truth, he must show that rationality is the most promising avenue for achieving truth, rather than, say, meditation, prayer, or intuition. Yet, in his account, we see no such justification.

Misak’s epistemological framework offers such a justification. She defines truth in terms of inquiry, or in terms of the method employed to reach truth. Misak’s notion of truth provides the justification for rationality because, on her account, there is no gap between the method used to arrive at the truth and truth itself. Employing Misak’s theoretical framework thus allows us to develop an analysis of indoctrination that is intimately connected to truth-seeking because she provides a lucid and useful notion of truth.

Additionally, and very much to the point, Misak offers an account of truth-seeking that can provide practical guidance for teachers who aim to get students to hold beliefs in a truth-seeking manner.¹⁶ More specifically, I argue that Misak’s pragmatic analysis of truth provides a reasonable and useful framework that can guide teachers to effectively avoid indoctrination. Misak’s framework also can help educators and others engage in fruitful and generative discussions about when and where indoctrination may be occurring. In the section that follows, I provide an analysis of Misak’s account of truth and truth-seeking inquiry. My aim here is to illustrate that her analysis is promising with respect to the very practical thing we are seeking, namely, helping educators and others identify and eliminate indoctrination in our schools.

MISAK’S NOTION OF TRUTH AND TRUTH-SEEKING INQUIRY

According to Peircian scholar Cheryl Misak, a true belief is one “that could not be improved upon, a belief that would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument, and evidence” (*TPM*, 49). Misak is careful to point out the use of the

subjunctive conditional in her pragmatic notion of truth. She states that truth is a belief that *would* forever fit with all experiences and arguments, rather than one that *will* fit with all experiences and arguments. The use of the word “would” is important here, because it indicates that truth is conditional or contingent upon inquiry. Put another way, if inquiry about a belief were to be pursued as far as it could usefully go, the belief *would* be true in the case that it is both sensitive to experience and supported by all available arguments and evidence. The use of the conditional indicates that truth arrives only at the *hypothetical* end of inquiry. In other words, all “truth-apt” beliefs (that is, those beliefs that are inherently responsive to experience), on this account, are required to be forever subject to questioning, reexamination, and alteration in the face of new evidence and recalcitrant experiences. Defining truth in the subjunctive conditional means that true beliefs are those that, *by their definition*, are ever open to inquiry. Thus, defining indoctrination in terms of this conception of truth prompts teachers to emphasize inquiry so that students can develop beliefs based on critical deliberation over all the available evidence and also learn to be ever open to reconsidering their beliefs in the face of opposing evidence and recalcitrant experiences.

As Misak claims, truth is “internally related to inquiry” such that “when I assert *p*, I undertake commitments regarding inquiry” (*TPM*, 73). This link between truth and inquiry is critical. To claim that the truth of an assertion cannot exist without inquiry is to make very specific demands not only on the manner in which truth can be found, but also on the very nature of truth itself. Students will come to appreciate that, when they make assertions, they are making truth claims, and that they must be committed to supporting these claims with an assessment of all available evidence. Additionally, they will come to see that, when they ask a question, they are assuming that there is an answer, and that this answer will be the best it can be, given the available evidence and arguments. As Misak puts it, our inquiry is “regulated” by truth (*TPM*, 98); that is, the manner and aim of inquiry is to get at beliefs that would be supported by all relevant experience at the end of the day. Truth, Misak says, is a “regulative ideal.”

For Misak, a regulative ideal is quite distinct from, say, a blueprint. She notes that a blueprint is realizable, whereas a regulative ideal is not. The purpose of a regulative ideal, then, is *not* to realize fully that which is outlined in the ideal. Rather, the purpose of a regulative ideal is to “set direction and provide a focus of criticism for actual arrangements” (*TPM*, 98). Thus, according to this account, we must teach students to be sensitive to experience, such that when a belief is supported by available evidence and reasons given by a community of inquirers, that belief should prevail. When a belief meets with recalcitrant experiences, however, the belief should be questioned, dropped, or exchanged for an alternative belief that is better supported by *all* the evidence.

This notion of truth, then, encourages students to go beyond reason-giving. Providing reasons for one’s assertions is not enough. In keeping with Misak’s Peircian framework, students are prompted to search not just for relevant reasons for their beliefs, but also for the truth — that is, for an understanding of the available

arguments, reasons, and evidence in favor of, and in opposition to, their beliefs, so that they may formulate beliefs based on the best assessment of the evidence available. The notion of experience, therefore, is critical in a pragmatic conception of truth. I address experience here because doing so helps to direct our attention to the sorts of evidence to which students need to be attuned as they formulate and test their beliefs. According to Misak, truth derives from the continual testing and refinement of beliefs through experiences. Experiences can be “compelling, surprising, brute, unchosen, or impinging” (*TPM*, 80). She contends that an experience is anything that makes an impression on our senses, our thoughts, and our feelings. Many experiences, she explains, are not rational, or even cognitive. When my body touches a hot stove, I experience burning heat without having to think about, or even understand, the concept of heat. I need some level of understanding to know that the sensation I experienced is *called* heat, and to know what effect that heat can have on my body, but to actually perceive or experience the heat, thought is not required.

For Misak, experiences move us to either affirm or question our beliefs; it is the nature of experiences that we are moved by them. To develop true beliefs, we must allow our beliefs to be affected by experience. Charles Sanders Peirce claims that we have a myriad of ideas in our minds. Experience can have the effect of casting out false ideas and “letting the truth flow on.”¹⁷ Yet, not all persons are equally sensitive to experience. Some persons are more likely than others to pay attention to, reflect on, and cognitively engage with a wide range of experiences. Such persons are, in a sense, *open* to being “surprised” by experiences that do not fit with their beliefs and are, therefore, quite likely to be moved by them, enough to question, or perhaps even alter, their beliefs. Others, however, are not as receptive. They are more apt to shut out, ignore, or immediately discount experiences that do not support or fit with their beliefs. Many of us are familiar with young children, for example, who refuse to admit, even to themselves, that the water they are swimming in is so cold that it is making them shiver, and is turning their lips blue. They convince themselves that they are fine, and they beg to be allowed to continue their swim. Experience also can come in the form of information one hears or reads about, and some persons are more open to this sort of experience than others. For example, I once had a student who insisted that all poems rhyme. When he read a collection of poems that I assigned, many of which did *not* rhyme, he stubbornly and repeatedly discounted the non-rhyming poems, and said that they were some other form of writing, because poems, he claimed, rhyme.

Being sensitive to experience, then, is not a given; persons are not *necessarily* going to be moved by their experiences to reflect on or question their beliefs. To be truth-seekers, we must teach students to be, on Misak’s account, open and receptive to experiences; we must teach students to ponder their experiences, and allow them to question, or even change, their beliefs. For persons to be sensitive to experiences, they must be open to allowing their experiences *and the experiences of others* to influence their reflections on, and thinking about, their beliefs.

While it is true that the end of inquiry is unrealizable, Misak claims that our task is to develop beliefs that are both well grounded by available evidence and sensitive

to all of our experiences to date. According to Misak, the “fact that [on this account] there can be no proof that any belief is absolutely true is something to be taken for granted and should not cause anxiety.”¹⁸ Though we may not be absolutely certain about a belief, practically speaking, there are some beliefs about which we can be “substantially certain.”¹⁹ Thus, although students cannot be certain that the beliefs they hold are true, according to this pragmatic account, we can teach students that if a belief is supported by available evidence, experiences, and reasons, and if they can reasonably assume that the belief will continue to be so supported, then they can be “substantially certain” that the belief is true. In other words, our practical goal is to get students to arrive at “the settlement of belief” through the process of open-minded, critical inquiry.²⁰

For Misak, the “settlement of belief” means arriving at beliefs, about which we have no doubt. Our certainty derives from the fact that a community of inquiry has critically reflected on all available evidence, experiences, and arguments. It is important to distinguish “settled” beliefs, which are based on deliberation over all of the available evidence, from beliefs that one does not doubt, due to brainwashing, indoctrination, or a stubborn and closed-minded adherence to a belief. Misak illustrates her point with an example of a totalitarian regime that successfully fixes a set of beliefs in their citizens. Such beliefs, she argues, would not be pragmatically settled because they are not “sensitive to evidence or experience, broadly construed.”²¹ Thus, if a student maintains a stubborn commitment to a belief, or if a student holds a belief that is formed from a restricted pool of reasons and evidence, because the student is not sensitive to experience, such a student cannot be said to hold a settled belief (and, therefore, this belief cannot be true), in the pragmatic sense. To avoid indoctrination, then, students must be encouraged to inquire into all available evidence, in pursuit of beliefs that are supported both by their experiences and by the experiences of others.

Inquiry into the truth of beliefs requires that students openly consider opposing views and counterarguments. Even if persons continue to dispute a belief — that is, even if no agreement has been reached regarding the truth of a belief — it does not mean that some person cannot, or should not, consider it settled. For example, I do not harbor any doubts that women are of equal worth to men, even though there are many persons who doubt the truth of such a view. My belief is settled, however, because I have considered the opposing arguments, and I have found them to be unconvincing. Settled beliefs, then, are not the same as beliefs that are universally accepted. Neither are settled beliefs true in the Misakian, pragmatic sense. Yet, we aim for settled beliefs, because that is the way toward truth, and that is the best we can hope to achieve in our lifetimes.

Just because I have beliefs that I do not doubt, however, does not mean that I *could* not doubt them, or *would* not doubt them, if new and opposing evidence should arise. The important point to take from Misak’s notion of truth is that, when we make a truth-apt assertion, we are recognizing our responsibility to support the claim with evidence and reasons. Misak offers us one particular epistemology among many. I adopt her analysis of truth and her epistemological framework because it addresses

one of the central concerns we have about indoctrination: it is an endeavor which seeks to get students to stubbornly hold beliefs based on insufficient evidence, even if they can give relevant reasons for such beliefs. Further, Misak's framework puts truth-seeking at the center of our focus when we consider how to help teachers (who accept the importance of a democratic exchange of ideas in pursuit of true beliefs) to reflect upon and understand what their aims are, and what the likely outcomes of their efforts will be. By making truth-seeking, rather than reason-giving, the aim of inquiry, and by defining truth in terms of the method employed to achieve this aim, we teach students that their goal is to work toward beliefs that would forever meet challenges posed by evidence, reasons, arguments, and experience at the hypothetical end of the day.

1. Ivan A. Snook, "Indoctrination and Moral Responsibility," in *Concepts of Indoctrination*, ed. Ivan A. Snook (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 152–61.

2. *Ibid.*, 154.

3. Barbara Peterson, "Holding Teachers Accountable for Indoctrination: A Reexamination of I.A. Snook's Notion of 'Intent,'" in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2007*, ed. Barbara S. Stengel (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007), 298.

4. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988); and Thomas F. Green, "Indoctrination and Beliefs," in *Concepts of Indoctrination*, ed. Snook.

5. Green, "Indoctrination and Beliefs," 35.

6. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 80.

7. Francis Schrag, "Challenges to Rationality," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 181.

8. *Ibid.*, 180.

9. *Ibid.*, 181.

10. *Ibid.*, 180.

11. Green, "Indoctrination and Beliefs," 34.

12. Elmer J. Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993).

13. Nancy C. Glock, "*Indoctrination*": *Some Pejorative Senses and Practical Proscriptions* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Dissertation Services, 1975), 156.

14. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 80.

15. Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment*, 106.

16. Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* (London: Routledge, 2000); Cheryl Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004). *Truth, Politics, Morality* will be cited as *TPM* in the text for subsequent references.

17. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking*, ed. Patricia Ann Turrissi (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1997), 144.

18. Misak, *Truth and the End of Inquiry*, 51.

19. *Ibid.*, 54.

20. *Ibid.*, 57.

21. *Ibid.*, 59.