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C. J. Misak

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For my parents

Preface to the Paperback Edition

I have tried not to succumb to the inevitable temptations which attend the revisiting of one's doctoral thesis. I have not tried to restate the arguments in the way I now think best. Nor have I tried to add all that I have learnt about the subject matter in the intervening years. Rather, in an effort to preserve the integrity of the book, I have made only two additions—additions which I think deepen our understanding of Peirce's account of truth.

One of these additions is an improvement on the programmatic comments about ethics I made in the first edition (see p. 29). I suggested there that Peirce's view of truth might be especially friendly to moral judgements. But at the time I thought that Peirce himself had placed obstacles in the way of such an extension of his account of truth and later (in *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*, Routledge, 2000) I attempted to articulate a pragmatist account of how moral judgements might be seen as candidates for truth, while continuing to maintain that this extension of Peirce's theory of truth had to be made in the face of his objections. I have come to see, however, that Peirce was not only amenable to such a project, but had some rather sophisticated contributions to make to it. Chapter 5 tries to make amends.

The other addition is really an amplification of something I argued in Chapter 1 of *Truth and the End of Inquiry* and can be made more briefly here in the preface. Much has been written about Peirce's view of truth in the last decade and a half. The most significant contributions, in my view, are Chris Hookway's *Truth, Rationality and Pragmatism: Themes from Peirce* (OUP: 2000) and David Wiggins's 'Reflections on Inquiry and Truth Arising From Peirce's Method for the Fixation of Belief' (*The Cambridge Companion to Peirce*, CUP: 2004).

Amongst many other things, both stress a point I was at pains to emphasize in Chapter 1: it is a mistake to take Peirce to be offering a definition of truth. He is engaged, rather, in

a distinctively pragmatic enterprise—that of exploring truth's role in assertion, belief, and inquiry.

The idea that we should turn our backs on the attempt to define truth has become popular amongst those who write about truth today. But unlike some of those contemporary philosophers who are wary of definition, Peirce does not hold that truth is indefinable or primitive. He tries to get us to see the difference between two respectable tasks. The first is the provision of an analytic definition of a concept, which might be useful to someone who has never encountered the concept before. The second is the provision of a pragmatic elucidation of a concept—an account of the role the concept plays in practical endeavours. His interest lies in the second of these tasks.

It continues to be important to hammer away at this point. For it is still commonplace for philosophers to mischaracterize Peirce's account of truth as a definition and then scoff at what a poor definition it is. Even those who end up adopting something very close to Peirce's account of truth (for instance, Crispin Wright (1992) and Huw Price (2003)) make this mistake.

Wiggins makes the corrective point very nicely: when a concept is 'already fundamental to human thought and long since possessed of an autonomous interest', it is pointless to try to define it (2002: 316). Rather, we ought to attempt to get leverage on the concept, or a fix on it, by exploring its connections with practice. As Peirce put it: 'We must not begin by talking of pure ideas,—vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation,—but must begin with men and their conversation' (*CP* 8. 112). In order to really grasp a concept, we must connect it to that with which we have everyday 'dealings' (*CP* 5. 416).

It is easy to see that the concept of truth is one of those concepts, already fundamental to human thought, in which we have a long-standing autonomous interest. We take ourselves to be aiming at truth. We want to know what methods are likely to get us true belief and whether it is worth our time and energy to inquire into certain kinds of questions—whether a discourse such as moral discourse aims at truth or whether it is a radically subjective matter, not at all suited for truth-value.

The concept of truth, that is, is central to the human practices of belief, assertion, and inquiry. Peirce argues that we must look to these practices in order to come to a full understanding of the concept of truth (*CP* 5. 416). Once we see that the concepts of belief, assertion, inquiry, and truth live in the same conceptual neighbourhood, we can learn something about the concept of truth by exploring the connections between it and its neighbours. As Donald Davidson puts it, we can illuminate truth by making clear the connections between it and the ‘human attitudes and acts that give it body’—no ‘definition of the concept of truth, nor any quasidefinitional clause, axiom schema, or other brief substitute for a definition’ will do (Davidson 1996: 276).

The upshot of Peirce's exploration of these connections 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 (*CP* 5. 569, 6. 485). It should be clear that this is not to say that truth has now been *identified* as that which satisfies our aims in assertion and inquiry. For, again, Peirce is not in the business of telling us what the essence of truth is; he is not in the business of giving us an analytical equivalence between truth and something else. As Wiggins says: ‘To elucidate truth in its relations with the notion of inquiry, for instance, as the pragmatist does, need not . . . represent any concession at all to the idea that truth is *itself* an “epistemic notion”’.¹

Hookway also admonishes us to focus on what Peirce himself thought he was up to. Peirce's account of truth is a direct product of the pragmatic maxim, which requires us to ask what we would expect to be the case if *H* were true. We are to ask ourselves, that is, what we are committed to when we assert that something is true. What we expect, what we commit ourselves to, roughly, is that experience would fall in line with the belief; that the belief would survive the rigours of inquiry and deliberation. This, of course, is another way

¹ Wiggins 2002: 318. Sellars saw the point as well. He noted that the pragmatist will not want to claim that truth is defined by or ‘means’ something like successful prediction in the long run (1962: 29).

of saying that our understanding of truth can be improved upon by looking at the role of truth in inquiry and deliberation.

Hookway goes on to note something that other Peirce scholars (myself included) have missed. Peirce argued that what we commit ourselves to is experience falling in line with the belief *or with some successor of it*; and what we expect is that the proposition *in some form* will survive future inquiry.

This amendment solves a pressing problem for Peirce: it explains how meaning can be preserved over time. When we assert that a belief is true, the content of what we commit ourselves to can be indeterminate (Hookway 2000: 57). We hope that the belief will prove to be indefeasible, that there will be a convergence upon the belief. But that convergence will be on a refined version of the current belief. What would prove to be indefeasible in the long run is some approximation of our current belief. So the connection between truth and assertion is not that to assert something is to assert it as absolutely true. An inquirer can successfully assert a proposition that she thinks is almost certainly not strictly true.

The concept of mass, for instance, has undergone radical revision, but we can still think that both Newton and contemporary physicists are referring to the same thing. Newton was committed to having not his precise beliefs about mass survive the rigours of inquiry, but some successors of his beliefs. The same holds for the beliefs of contemporary physicists. In this way we can refer to individuals and to kinds even if we do not fully understand their character. Changes in our view of x can be seen as moves within a general or vague picture. Earlier views present a partial grasp of a complex reality. Indexical reference anchors our beliefs to the world; it explains how we can have beliefs and theories about x , despite the fact that we get much wrong.

Hookway also appeals to the distinctive nature of the pragmatic project in an effort to solve for Peirce the problems revolving around bivalence. Peirce's account of truth is an account for those beliefs *which we assert*. That is, the goals of the pragmatist account of truth only reach to saying what we expect of a sentence we are prepared to assert. The

question of truth does not arise in those situations in which we ought to not believe or assert.

I flirted with this thought in Chapter 4, but Hookway both properly embraces it and makes good on it by drawing our attention to those texts in which Peirce argues that sometimes there need not be a fact of the matter about what judgement we would reach, even if there is a fact of the matter about the underlying reality. Truth and falsity are properties of representations, thoughts, or utterances and thus the issue of truth may be indeterminate and the underlying reality determinate.

In one kind of case, the very content of utterances is indeterminate. There may be no fact of the matter whether 'Icabod is bald' is true, although there is a fact of the matter concerning the precise number of hairs on his head. Vagueness, Peirce saw, can produce indeterminacy of truth-value. He argued that when we are dealing with a skeleton which is on the borderline between being a human anthropoid or ape, there will be no determinate truth-value attaching to either 'This is a human skeleton' or 'This is not a human skeleton' (MS 596).

In another kind of case, there may be controversy about how to best judge whether an utterance is true. When trying to answer the question 'How many leaves are on the tree in my front garden?' I might find myself needing first to ask whether the new growth just escaping from the bud counts as a leaf or whether gnarled and half-dead leaves count. There is a determinate reality with respect to the tree, but if these controversies are not easily resolved, there may not be a determinate truth-value to statements about the tree. I ought not to assert that there are x number of leaves on the tree.

In a third kind of case, if I am confident that no evidence or argument will turn up for a statement about the remote past, then I will not assert or deny the statement. Hence, 'there is nothing that asserting it commits me to. I could only turn out to be wrong if the fact turned out not to be lost after all. (Hookway 2000: 61.)

Hookway's general point is this: if I think that a sentence is vague, or irredeemably controversial because we have

difficulty formulating the question, or such that there could be no evidence for or against it, then I do not assert it. And if I do not assert it, I do not commit myself to its being such that it will stand up to experience and inquiry.² Only if I assert something am I committed to the hope that opinion will converge upon it.

This is another way of making a point I made in Chapter 4: Peirce argued that bivalence is a regulative assumption of inquiries in which we are actually engaged. The fact that we can trace a second Peircean argument—that which rides on the fact that reality can be determinate and truth indeterminate—makes the case much stronger. The pragmatist can think that the principle of bivalence holds of those statements for which it seems that it must hold³—statements into which we are inquiring and statements which we are prepared to assert or deny. But it must not be supposed to be a principle which governs every statement.

I am not only indebted to Wiggins and Hookway for their published contributions to Peirce scholarship. Both helped me get right the arguments in the first edition of *Truth and the End of Inquiry* and also those of the second. David Dyzenhaus, Huw Price, and Tom Short also gave me helpful comments on a draft of what eventually became Chapter 5, as did audiences at the universities of Auckland, British Columbia, Cambridge, Canterbury, McMaster, Otago, Oxford, São Paulo, Sydney, Sheffield, St Andrews, SUNY

² Brian Ellis (1992), in a critical notice of *Truth and the End of Inquiry* makes a similar point. If we think of bivalence as merely a semantically escalated version of the law of excluded middle, the pragmatist can think that it holds when it ought to hold. 'It is either true or false that *H*' amounts to 'It is true that either *H* or not *H*'. *If we agree that *H* and not-*H* exhaust all possibilities* in a given case, we should agree that bivalence holds for *H*. But bivalence need not hold unrestrictedly—we might not always think that all possibilities are exhausted by *H* and not-*H*.

³ Reynolds (2000: 308) is right that I made a slip when I first made this point (see pp. 126, 155–6). I suggested that we must assume that if a hypothesis is true, then inquiry would eventually settle upon it. But that invokes a prior conception of truth—a way of picking out the true hypotheses which have not been settled upon. It assumes that there must be more to an account of truth than what the Peircean account provides. I should have remained content with the thought that the principle of bivalence can be assumed to hold for those statements for which it seems that it must hold.

Buffalo, and York (Toronto). Danielle Bromwich helped with the bibliography and compiled the index for the second edition. Finally, I am happy to thank Peter Momtchiloff, the philosophy editor at OUP, for encouraging the thought that I might return to *Truth and the End of Inquiry* and for patiently waiting for the results.

Preface to the Original Edition

This book is about truth and inquiry. It explains how, following C. S. Peirce, we might think it correct to say that a true hypothesis is one which would be believed at the end of inquiry.

Peirce, however, conceived of himself as an ‘architectonic’ philosopher and so in order to get a grip on what he thought about truth, one must make serious excursions into his pragmatism, theory of signs, fallibilism, critical commonsensism, logic, categories, and scholastic realism. Matters are further complicated by the fact that Peirce's thought was constantly evolving; not much in his system lies static, isolated, or unconnected. Thus the account of truth that I shall put forward as Peirce's is one that has to be both excavated and reconstructed from the architectonic maze of forty years of diffuse papers. The resulting account, however, is not the product of purely historical scholarship. Although my argument is one firmly based at all points on Peirce's work, it is an argument about what the best account of truth is; it is an argument about what account of truth we *should* extract from Peirce's work.

The core of my interpretation is the view of truth and inquiry which Peirce first developed in the 1870s. The culmination of this work was published in a series of papers in the *Popular Science Monthly*, called ‘Illustrations of the Logic of Science’. They include the famous papers ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’ and ‘The Fixation of Belief’. The central philosophical ideas which I retain from this period were never abandoned by Peirce. There are numerous passages in the 1900s where he refers to and ratifies them. Thus references in my work to the earlier period represent what I take to be constant in Peirce's position—the theses he maintained into the 1900s.

In the late 1880s and early 1900s Peirce amended many of his doctrines. Where these are significant improvements, I take on the amendments. And so it is to this later period that my interpretation best attaches. But in order to keep the enterprise on the rails, I have to suppress certain doctrines of

Peirce's—those which I think do not hold up to scrutiny. The two most significant doctrines from which I want to distance myself are his distinction between science and practice and his very late claims about the need to find an ultimate aim for humankind. I shall give notice in the footnotes when these theses are especially relevant, but, for the most part, I simply ignore them because in both cases, Peirce could have reasonably and consistently exercised the option to go in another direction.

Thus the position I attribute to Peirce will not coincide with any résumé or consolidation of it that Peirce himself offered at a particular point in his intellectual career. But it is a position constructed solely out of doctrines that Peirce did indeed hold, whether or not he put them together in just this way himself. To any objection that I end up picking out one strand in Peirce's rambling system and thereby misrepresent the whole, I reply that what I offer represents a stable, coherent, and plausible Peircean position.

Because many of Peirce's doctrines will be discussed in what follows, the reader unfamiliar with Peirce will find here an extensive, if selective, introduction to his thought. My aim is to give just enough background to provide everything required to grasp Peirce's account of truth without imparting so much that the reader is bogged down in scholarship. Much of the scholarly load is borne by the footnotes. Since all of the background material referred to will be more or less explicitly related to Peirce's conception of truth, many relationships (such as that between the categories and the theory of signs) will remain untouched. To draw these out would only distract attention from the issue in question. The overriding aim is not to explicate the entire body of Peircean doctrine, but to develop a sensible Peircean position about truth.

Wherever my interpretation of Peirce is novel, more complete textual evidence is given. For instance, I claim in Chapter 1 that Peirce formulates pragmatism in at least three different ways, none of them providing a coherent doctrine that will meet all of his requirements. I then suggest a way of achieving the result which Peirce, on my view, desires. The reader may wonder why I bother with Peirce's misguided

efforts in this way. The answer is that, first, if I am going to improve on what Peirce said, then to be fair, I must look carefully at what he actually did say. And secondly, part of my aim is to draw attention to a structure in Peirce's writings on pragmatism that has thus far gone unnoticed.

Those who are less interested in whether I have got Peirce right and more interested in the pragmatic account of truth *per se* might want to focus on Chapter 4. For it is there that the broad outline of the pragmatic account of truth is articulated. For those who want the whole picture, the book proceeds as follows. In Chapter 1, I distinguish the pragmatic project from the project of providing a definition or a logical equivalence. Peirce does not want to offer a straightforward biconditional of the sort: *H* is true *if and only if*, if inquiry were pursued as far as it could fruitfully go, *H* would be believed. But it turns out that he is well on the way to getting himself such an equivalence. He argues that it is a consequence of '*H* is true' that, if inquiry were to be pursued, *H* would be believed. So he seems to hold the left-to-right conditional—the conditional which moves from truth to the deliverances of inquiry. And his pragmatic scruples prevent him from holding that there is more to a true hypothesis than what is provided by the right-to-left conditional: *if*, if inquiry were pursued as far as it could fruitfully go, *H* would be settled upon, *then H* is true.

In Chapter 2, I argue that, despite first appearances, the right-to-left conditional (the conditional which moves from inquiry to truth) is something that is reasonable to suppose. Once the notions of inquiry and belief are construed in the proper way, the beliefs which inquiry would finally produce deserve the title 'true'. This conception of inquiry is fleshed out in Chapter 3 with Peirce's supplementary doctrines of logic; there we see why Peirce thought that inquiry would deliver beliefs that we would want to call true.

In Chapter 4, I try to identify the senses in which objectivity is preserved in the Peircean account of truth. The left-to-right conditional (the conditional from truth to inquiry) is taken up and its status is shown to be that of a regulative assumption of inquiry. I then return to the conditional which says that if a belief would be permanently settled by inquiry,

then it is true. I spell out what is unique and important in Peirce's account of truth and suggest that even those who are suspicious of pragmatism can none the less accept some of these points. But the pragmatic arguments are powerful and I conclude that the whole of the pragmatic account of truth should be accepted.

I should note at the outset that the view of truth offered here rests on the assumption that a satisfactory account of the objectivity of subjunctive conditionals can be offered. I do not undertake the onerous task of providing an account of the status of these conditionals. I take it for granted that some ordinary hypotheses of the sort 'if you were to do x , then y would result' are sensible and determinately correct or incorrect.

Reference Policy

Referring to passages of Peirce's work is a complex business. He never threw away any of his scribbblings and there is a tremendous bulk of material. Only three of a projected twenty-two volumes of a chronological edition of his work are in print as I write. The older (soon to be superseded) collection is incomplete and loosely arranged by subject.

My reference policy is as follows: if the passage appears in the new *Chronological Edition*, volumes 1–3, I cite that source as ‘CE n, m’, where n, m is volume number, page number. If it is not in the first three volumes of the *Chronological Edition*, but in the older *Collected Papers*, I cite the *Collected Papers* as ‘CP n. m’, where n. m is volume number, paragraph number. If it is available in neither, then I cite the manuscript number in the microfilm edition of Peirce's papers, as MS n, where n is the manuscript number. Occasionally I refer to *The New Elements of Mathematics* as NE, n, m, where n is the volume number and m is the page number. Full details of these works can be found at the beginning of the bibliography.

Unless specified, all emphases in quotations are Peirce's. I do not correct his spelling.

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Introduction

Pragmatism is in fashion in certain philosophical circles. But most 'analytic' philosophers are quick to heap scorn upon it. This poor reputation is due in part to the founder of pragmatism himself, for Peirce was an iconoclastic thinker given to awkward expression and cumbersome terminology. But the reputation is mostly due to those who call themselves pragmatists and go on to put forward a view that the founder of the doctrine would have found abhorrent. These new pragmatists follow Peirce in eschewing a 'transcendental' view of truth, but they go much further than Peirce in arguing that this rejection entails that there is no sensible notion of truth to be had at all.

Peirce wanted to reject views which hold that truth goes beyond inquiry. But he also wanted to retain the notion that there is a right answer to a given question. In order to maintain such a precarious position, much subtlety is required. Peirce's view does not lend itself to snappy summaries. Even when it is put in the best light, it needs extended explanation before it can be seen as plausible.

But once the view is properly understood, some philosophical positions firmly in the analytic tradition and some positions scorned by that tradition can be seen to have affinities to Peircean pragmatism. These include positions which emphasize the context of inquiry, admonish us to take our background beliefs seriously when we theorize about the growth of knowledge and the revision of belief, and take the notions of community, consensus, and convergence to be central in discussing rationality and truth. The Peircean spirit is alive in the works of Popper, Ramsey, Quine, Putnam, Habermas, and a host of others.

Pragmatists of all stripes, however, might have profited by paying more attention to Peirce himself. For I shall argue that he succeeds in establishing a position which avoids taking truth to be something that transcends all perspectives and