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THE PRINCIPLE OF HOPE AS THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF PEIRCE'S PHILOSOPHY

> The objection to an ultimate consists in its raising a barrier across the path of inquiry, in its specifying a phenomenon at which questions must stop, contrary to the postulate, or hope, of logic.
> (Peirce, CP 6.610)

1. A radical anti-foundationalist thought.

Charles Sanders Peirce is certainly one of the most anti-foundationalist thinkers of our age. Since his first writings he emphatically rejected Cartesian foundationalism—the attempt to erect the edifice of knowledge on the primacy of the *cogito* and the distinction between two *res*—and also any empiricist form of epistemological foundationalism—the attempt to make immediate sense impressions the basis of knowledge.

In *Questions concerning certain faculties claimed for man*, an essay of the anti-cartesian 1868 series,[1] we may read the Question 7**:** *Whether there is any cognition not determined by a previous cognition.* Peirce attacks the idea that there are cognitions not determined by other cognitions and uses the example of an inverted triangle that is gradually submerged in water. The surface of the water leaves horizontal lines at different times as the triangle is immersed.

Now let any horizontal line represent a cognition, and let the length of the line serve to measure (so to speak) the liveliness of consciousness in

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[1] Cf. CP 5.213-263. Peirce wrote three articles on these themes in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* during 1868, introducing his semiotics, epistemology, logic and ontology. I will generally quote from the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (CP Vols. 1-8). This edition is old and incomplete, but it allows a good uniformity. In some cases, I also quote from *The Essential Peirce* (EP 1-2).

that cognition. A point, having no length, will, on this principle, represent an object quite out of consciousness. […] Let the finite distance between two such lines represent that they are two different cognitions. With this aid to thinking, let us see whether 'there must be a first.' Suppose an inverted triangle ∇ to be gradually dipped into water. At any date or instant, the surface of the water makes a horizontal line across that triangle. This line represents a cognition. […] But draw the horizontal line where you will, as many horizontal lines as you please can be assigned at finite distances below it and below one another. For any such section is at some distance above the apex, otherwise it is not a line. […] So that it is not true that there must be a first. [...] The point here insisted on is not this or that logical solution of the difficulty, but merely that cognition arises by a *process* of beginning, as any other change comes to pass. (CP 5.263)

So, there is no first knowledge that is not mediated by others. Knowledge happens as an infinite process of beginning: an infinite "triadic action" of mediation (CP 5.472) among three poles, whose we don't know exactly either the beginning or the end, as the figure of the semiotic triangle (never really drawn by Peirce) represents very well. For example:

A Sign is anything which is related to a Second Thing, its Object, in respect to a Quality, in such a way as to bring a third thing, its Interpretant, into relation to the same Object, and that in such a way as to bring a Fourth into relation to that Object in the same form, *ad infinitum*. If the series is broken off, the Sign, in so far, falls short of its perfect significant character. (CP 2.92)

Peirce's thought develops into this epistemic and semiotic horizon: reasoning is something like a rope, whose fibres could be even very thin and slender, as long as they were tightly entangled, a rope in which each sign has to resort to another to perform its role. It is by starting from that conception that a new vision of meaning springs: this is no longer understood as a fixed and immutable form, with clear borders and rigid designations, but as a "variety" of thought which lives in a state of constant evolution, whose

"goodness" is witnessed by the adoption of the best habit of response to the needs of understanding. To reject the intuitionist essentialism for Peirce amounts to embracing, within the theory of knowledge, the Darwinian perspective according to which all that lives is in a state of transformation[2]. Meaning is no more a pure form or a clear definition. Meaning is a power: the power of being ready to act, of expanding the disposition to respond, of embodying effectively a certain habit. (Fabbrichesi 2019) Thus, it is not that the meaning *is*, definitely and once for all, as the species; rather, it *makes itself*. Knowing implies an epistemological process which accepts the "wavering" of every truth, its fallibility and perishability. (CP 1.141) Each thought-sign is a form in transit which is born, grows, develops and declines. The concepts, just as the species, evolve and extinguish themselves. And each concept does not come about at one stroke, as if it sprang out of an act of creation, but it "comes to be" – Peirce writes – through infinite real steps, imperceptible and continuous.

Therefore, inquiry does not require a strong foundation of the sort both traditional rationalists and empiricists argue for, but its "foundation", its first principle and its force, reside in its complete fallibilism. This is clear if we read the words, often repeated in Peirce's writings: "Don't block the road of inquiry". Accordingly, there are three things which we can never hope to attain by reasoning, "namely, absolute certainty, absolute exactitude, absolute universality". (*ibidem*) We may read these important quotations in a 1897 draft significantly titled by the CP editors "Fallibilism, continuity, ad evolution". (CP 1.141-175)

How you do know that a priori a certain truth is certain, exceptionless, and exact? You cannot know it by reasoning. For that would be subject to uncertainty and inexactitude. Then, it must amount to this that you know it a priori; that is, your a priori judgments at their own valuation, without criticism or credentials. That is barring the gate of inquiry. (CP 1.145)

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[2] On the analogies between Peirce's pragmatism and evolutionism see the classical Wiener 1949. See also Parravicini 2009, Fabbrichesi 2011.

2. The basis of Pragmatism and the social theory of reality

In *Pragmatism*, with his well-known figurative efficacy, William James wrote that pragmatism is to be identified as that method consisting in *"The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories,' supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts"*. (James 1978) What he had in mind was probably another - equally icastic - definition given by Peirce, who had wanted to summarize his thought some years before by appealing to the religious thought of the Fathers, in the following way: "By their fruits ye shall know them". [3] (EP 2:401)

Peirce had expressed his own pragmatic maxim in thicker terms in 1878:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (CP 5.402)

The meaning of an object is totally identified with the idea of the effects that the object might bring about. Nothing rigid and determinate, but vague and overt. Any ideal and abstract notion coincides with the sum of all the practical consequences which necessarily *might* result from the adoption of that concept as a principle of truth. Therefore, we can refer to the potential sum of all the thinkable (and even non-thinkable, as we will see) practical consequences, something which, by definition, we will never be able to experience, nor foresee, but something which is entrusted, through an act of "faith and hope", to the unlimited semiosis of the public and communitarian interpretation. As he clearly explains: "The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries

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[3] Max Fisch (1986: xxix.) very clearly synthetizes: "The essential element in these steps was giving 'real' and 'reality' a forward rather than a backward reference".

of me and you".[4] (CP 5.311) Not independent, however, from thought "in general," from "public" truth, or from the beliefs of the community that make a certain concept true. This theory was called by Peirce himself "social theory of reality". (CP 6.610). All absoluteness is therefore to be dismissed, if one embraces such an ontological conception, and rather one must arrive at a "socialistic or agapastic ontology" (*ibidem*), as a community aspiration, not as a truthful foundation. "All that we are entitled to assume is in the form of a hope that such conclusion may be substantially reached concerning the particular questions with which our inquiries are busied". (CP 6.610-612) "This great hope is embodied in the conception of truth and reality." (CP 5. 407) This hope takes the form of a love, an "agapism" addressed to the whole community that will sustain the inferences of today.

In the 1878 series *Illustrations on the Logic of Science*, exposing his *The Doctrine of Chances* (CP 2. 645-668), Peirce explains how it is not logical to reason about a single case: we have always to appeal to the endless chain of signs that underpins every cognitive inference, to the *belief* in that "*would be*" which in an extreme conceptual synthesis projects before me the totality of the possible chances (Putnam 2013).-Every single interpreter relies on the infinite possible interpretations of the community to which he belongs, identifying himself with the community. It is this reference to an interpreting community – "without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge" (CP 5.311) that is the prevalent element in

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[4] "This activity of thought by which we are carried, not where we wish, but to a fore-ordained goal, is like the operation of destiny. No modification of the point of view taken, no selection of other facts for study, no natural bent of mind even, can enable a man to escape the predestinate opinion. This great hope is embodied in the conception of truth and reality. The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I would explain reality". (5.407) Let us not assume the word fate superstitiously, writes Peirce just above: this activity of thought which I have just described, by which we are led not where we want, but to a sort of predestined goal, is like the operation of destiny. "That is to say, I hold that truth's independence of individual opinions is due (so far as there is any 'truth') to its being the predestined result to which sufficient inquiry *would* ultimately lead" (CP 5.494), he will repeat again later on.

the 1878 *Illustrations*. Peirce explains knowledge, semiosis, and the very development of the concepts of truth and reality by appealing to the hope that an ideal and unlimited community will come into being that bears solid witness to the transmitting of every symbol, making its meaning true and actuating its effects. To believe in the intrinsic logicality of events in spite of the fallibilism of all theories is a heroic act (like that of the soldier in battler, ready to sacrifice himself for the final victory of the whole battalion): it is the ability to immolate one's own finite belief in the Final Ultimate Interpretant (simply, the best habit of response, see EP2:28).[5]

Truth is not an idiosyncrasy, says Peirce – truth is public. But that also means that truth is not an empirically verifiable fact. Truth is a value entrusted to interpretations on a semiotic basis and reality is "the *final* product of mental action, and not its incognizable cause." (EP 1: 91) It is therefore final in both senses of the word: "last" and destined, terminal and desirable (Hausman 1993). "Logic depends upon mathematics, still more intimately upon ethics." (CP 4.240) "It is therefore impossible to be thoroughly and rationally logic except upon an ethical basis." (CP 2: 198) To believe in the universality of logic and in the value of our hypotheses is an ethical commitment, a pure act of faith, a hope:

That hypothesis is that the facts in hand admit of rationalization, and of rationalization by us. That we must hope they do, for the same reason that a general who has to capture a position, or see his country ruined, must go on the hypothesis that there is some way in which he can and shall capture it. […] Animated by that hope, we are to proceed to the construction of a hypothesis.[6] (CP 7. 219)

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[5] "He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is, as it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences, collectively. Logic is rooted in the social principle." (2.654)

[6] It would be interesting to investigate the close relationship between hypothesis (abduction or retroduction) and the principle of hope. Cf on this Brioschi 2022. See for example: "Retroduction goes upon the hope that there is sufficient affinity between the reasoner's mind and nature's to render guessing not altogether hopeless, provided each guess is checked by comparison with observation. It is true that agreement does not show the guess

3. Hope as the basis of inquiry

In engaging in any kind of ampliative or synthetic reasoning, therefore, I reason as if the totality of experiences were ideally given to me, not only those that I could legitimately have in an infinite space of time but also those which the hypothetical community of researchers could manage to produce *in the long run*. Every human being has an implacable inclination to identify with every other human being in a potentially infinite series of references and interpretations that delineate the site of his or her form of life, as Wittgenstein would have put it. All this requires a conceived identification of one's interests with those of an unlimited community.

This identification, again, is not *logically* reasonable; if anything, it is *ethically*, nearly *sentimentally*, reasonable – nothing stops us, according to Peirce, from having "a hope, or calm and cheerful wish, that the community may last beyond any assignable date." (CP 2.654) That is to say, logic is founded on three sentiments (not on reasons): the interest in an indefinite community, the recognition of the possibility of this interest being made supreme, and the hope in the unlimited continuance of intellectual activity. (2.655) As a direct analysis of this type of "faith" demonstrates, these three sentiments allude to the evangelical principles of "Charity, Faith, and Hope." (CP 2.655) The supreme interest that guides us does not provide us with certainties, but with hopes: the hope that the community lasts and guarantees my inferences beyond any assigned limit, that it acts at every moment as a witness of the general truth of my choices, and that reality proves to be true, sooner or later, in the final opinion of the Ultimate Interpretant.

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is right; but if it is wrong it must ultimately get found out. The effort should therefore be to make each hypothesis, which is practically no more than a question, as near an even bet as possible. (CP 1.121)

Notwithstanding, twenty years later, he noted that the "sooner or later" has no absolute reference, it was not an inevitable goal to achieve.

I thought just the reverse […] that all absoluteness was removed from reality by that theory […] We cannot be quite sure that the community ever will settle down to an unalterable conclusion upon any given question […] All that we are entitled to assume is in the form of a *hope* that such conclusion may be substantially reached. (CP 6.610, to P. Carus, 1890)

In his commentary to James' work, Bergson (1911: 275) rightly detects this aspect as the authentic "trademark" of the "pragmatistic factory". "True" is not what is relative to something that is, "out there", or to something which has been, but subsists in relation to something which does not exist yet, which is progressively "in the making".

The sense of what we might call "Pragmatistic revolution" lies in these words – effect, consequence, result. It consists in focusing the attention not on foundational principles of reasoning, or on truth as an abstract analysis of propositions and concepts, aiming at establishing a correspondence with supposed real objects, but on *truth* as a resulting *effect* characterised by different modes of *action* (practical or theoretical, moral or epistemological) developed within public and well-grounded practices. Reality, as a consequence, is not a *datum*, existing in and for itself and unmodifiable, but an outcome, always projected beyond, in the semiotic long run. A *result* of our knowing practices, therefore, and not their incognizable cause. In sum, such a theory turns reality into "something which is constituted by an event indefinitely future" (CP 5.332). Even more, besides the consequences the person who accepts the word knowingly commits himself to,

there is a *vast ocean of unforeseen consequences*, which the acceptance of the word is destined to bring about, not merely consequences of knowing, but perhaps revolution of society. One cannot tell what power there may be

in a word or a phrase to change the face of the world; and the sum of these consequences makes up the upper grade of meaning. (CP 8.176)

4. Hope as an ontological principle

In a nutshell, the truth of an event, its being believed as really happened and meaningful (i.e. real, in Peirce's terms) is a *function* of the *effects* which this *event* is able to produce. The fact that Napoleon has existed and that he has conquered Europe – as Peirce writes again in the *Illustrations of the Logic of Sciences* (CP 2.642)– is a pure hypothesis, an abduction, which we endorse by virtue of the calculation of the effects that this notion, deemed true for a long time, has produced and still produces. We see the effects, the traces, the signs of Napoleon's passage into history: documents, monuments, memories, undertakings. The simple *fact* which we adduce as a proof of his mundane existence is nothing but the set of these *effects* and, paradoxically, the fact that Napoleon has really lived in that remote time might have no real importance, because the belief in his existence has anyway produced relevant truths that have changed men's conduct. This is, as I believe, the respect in which an important claim in *Issues on Pragmaticism* is to be understood. In that work Peirce writes: "a belief that Christopher Columbus discovered America really refers to the Future." (CP 5.461) It is not a fact, but a belief according to which I am ready to behave in a certain way. It is entrusted to that solidarity of interpreting practices that will continue to hold this certainty as true, which therefore proves to be a projection beyond the present in the form of a desirable destination. We will have a hope, that is, a quiet and joyful desire, that the community that bases its cohesion on the basis of the discovery of Columbus "can last beyond any assignable date." Each supposed "fact" is therefore an effect, that is, something which is produced, employed, handled, something resulting from a bundle of habits that gives sense to the whole; a belief which becomes true only if followed by a behaviour endowed with efficacy. There is nothing to be "verified" in its given objectivity: every reality is nothing but a sign, a reference in the chain

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of the interpretants: "Reals *are* signs. To try to peel off signs and get down to the real thing is like trying to peel an onion and get down to onion itself." (To F. C. Russell, 1905, cited in Brent 1998: 357)

There is no pre-formism, so to say, but just an "epigenetic" growth of knowledge. The vital process is not the unfolding of the lines enveloped at the origin of the conception, but the growing, unpredictably, in every direction of the living beings and of the living signs. This kind of thought is underlined in a short passage from the Lowell Lectures of 1903, where Peirce, referring to all "the evolutionary ideas" of his days, to "these ideas of progress and growth […] that teach us that reason always looks forward to an endless future and expects endlessly to improve its results", notes that "the *essence* of Reason is such that its *being* never can have been completely *perfected*. It always must be in a state of incipiency, of growth." (CP 1.614, my emphasis) An incipient essence is an essence constantly de-formed and trans-formed. Truth ripens, as a fruit. It is constantly in the process of formation and proliferation, as a coral.

This kind of thinking developed its full argumentative power and its normative and ontological connections towards the turn of the last century. Peirce highlighted more and more in the last years this reference to a dynamical, socialistic and agapastic ontology.

Let me then move to the last step of my argument. In trying to find a precise definition of the term "real" Peirce uses a terminology that we could explain in the following way: reality is a *habit of expectation* (cf. CP 8.294), capable of being dynamically organized and of placing one's meaning into the indefinite future. This means that the real consists in what my habits of expectation lead me *to hope will or would happen* in the long run. In a 1904 letter to James (CP 8.284, see also 8.330), Peirce remarks that according to "pragmatic idealism" (his own theory, namely, the "true idealism[7]") "reality consists in the future." (*ibidem*) I define this process, he says, "mellonization," from the Greek *mellon*:

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[7] On this crucial theme cf. Mayorga 2009, Lane 2018, Colapietro 2021.

By mellonization (Gr. {mellön} the being about to do, to be, or to suffer) I mean that operation of logic by which what is conceived as having been (which I call conceived as *parelelythose*) is conceived as repeated or extended indefinitely into what always will be […] Therefore to say that it is the world of thought that is real is, when properly understood, to assert emphatically the reality of the public world of the indefinite future as against our past opinions of what it was to be. (CP 8.284)

What *species* of reality we are going to encounter in the future we'll not know. We simply hope that it will confirm our habits. Reality is not a fact standing in its stony presence in front of us; reality is over there, around the horizon, along the paths of inquiry. Reality awaits us as a hope of continuity in the long run of our beliefs. Being *becomes* real: it depends "from the growth of concrete reasonableness" (CP 1.615), that is, from the movement of the triadic and phenomenological semiosis.

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