

## Peirce On Truth: To Deflate or Destroy?

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Dave Beisecker argues that the aim of inquiry should be to produce beliefs “that are the most defensible or resistant to serious challenge.”<sup>1</sup> This characterization of inquiry differs from what we might call the “common conception,” which aims at discovering Truth.<sup>2</sup> Beisecker gives two compelling reasons for preferring his version. First, an inquiry that aims at discovering Truth must presuppose the existence of an “external permanency,” a stable, detached reality that is experienceable by everyone. Because it is undeniable that myriad disparate, and potentially incommensurable cultures interact with the world in different ways, it is reasonable to suspect that there is not one, *universal* reality. Such an external permanency ought to be, as a result, rejected. Beisecker’s second reason is simply that the “common conception” of inquiry is inaccurate. Rather than finding positive evidence for a hypothesis and uncovering progressively more aspects of universal reality, real inquiry works through a Popperian falsifiability by figuring out which hypotheses are *unworkable* and rejecting them accordingly. This reorientation towards negative, as opposed to positive, inquiry represents a compromise between the imperialistic universalism of, say, Christian fundamentalism, and the vulgar relativism characteristic of certain fringe elements of American politics.<sup>3</sup> Beisecker’s argument is a laudable effort at finding a middle ground between two irreconcilable opposites. By embracing a Rortyan solidarity and a Popperian falsifiability, Beisecker articulates a vision of inquiry that rejects notions of impartial Truth in favor of an open-ended progression away from our “ignorant,” “barbaric” origins. In what follows, I use Charles S. Peirce to address two concerns I have with Beisecker’s argument. First, the notion that truth is irrelevant, and second the *incommensurability* of discourses.

### TRUTH AS IRRELEVANT

Beisecker is correct that the traditional concept of Truth has proven to be impenetrable and politically problematic. He is also correct that, if the point of reference is a capital-T Truth that is eternal and universal, then a deflationary

account would be warranted. Where Beisecker errs is in both attributing such a notion of Truth to Peirce, and in concluding that truth should be discarded altogether. Peirce does *appear* to endorse a strong, universal Truth. He writes that “if pedantry has not eaten all the reality out of you, recognize, as you must, that there is much that you do not doubt, in the least. Now, that which you do not at all doubt, you must and do regard as infallible, absolute truth.”<sup>4</sup> It is also reasonable to ascribe to Peirce a belief in an “external permanency,” particularly when he defines truth as “that to a belief in which belief would tend if it were to tend indefinitely toward absolute fixity.”<sup>5</sup> A closer examination of these claims, however, suggests that Peirce’s argument for truth is qualified and deflationary. Peirce would agree, for example, that an inquiry that takes its point of departure from a “detached perspective” is an impossibility.<sup>6</sup> He writes that “there is but one state of mind from which you can ‘set out,’ namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do ‘set out’ ... laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed.”<sup>7</sup> Where Peirce would disagree with Beisecker is in the latter’s conclusion that truth is irrelevant. For Peirce, lower case-t truth is very much within the reach of humanity. His belief in an “ideal vocabulary” or “final opinion,” in which the community of inquirers have solved all possible questions, is less a concrete prediction than a theoretical acknowledgment that there are things that transcend finite *individual* consciousnesses, though not of consciousness altogether.<sup>8</sup> Peirce’s “final opinion” *would* be reached if our inquiry were “indefinitely extended,” meaning that inquiry should, and will, continue into eternity.<sup>9</sup> Though capital-T Truth would, then, be *practically* precluded in Peirce’s account, he argues that humans achieve (small-t) truth when our expectations about the future bear out in experience. When I drop a rock from my second story balcony, I expect it to fall to the ground. Since we know that the rock *will* fall, and it *does* so fall, it is futile, for Peirce, to deny that it is true that the rock will fall. Peirce’s pragmatism is therefore one not merely of semantics but of *conduct*, which means that any appeal he makes to absolute truth refers to a truth with definite, practical—and therefore partial—implications for behavior.<sup>10</sup>

## THE INCOMMENSURABILITY OF DISCOURSES

Perhaps Beisecker could respond that our expectations and behaviors need not bear any necessary connection to truth. If inquiry works as Beisecker argues that it does, then inquiry “is not so much a commitment to there being a ‘truth’ of things, so much as it is of ensuring that one doesn’t embrace a hypothesis that is demonstrably *unacceptable*.”<sup>11</sup> Beisecker rids inquiry of a Truth in which non-material ideas must be correlated and aimed at a material, external reality. Without such a regulative correlation, “there may be multiple divergent paths for successful inquiry to proceed, some of which may be incommensurable.”<sup>12</sup>

To the claim that different discourses can be in principle incommensurable, Peirce would vehemently object. Peirce’s objective idealism denies the distinction between materiality and immateriality that traditionally insert a sharp break between the mental and the real.<sup>13</sup> Peirce regards universals as real and experienceable because they imply testable expectations about the future. If I believe that my concept of “horse” is real, then I will behave in specific ways when I encounter horse-like beings. “Perceptual judgments,” Peirce writes, “contain elements of generality,” such that universals are a “directly perceived” aspect of reality.<sup>14</sup> To the charge that universals are intangible products of thought, Peirce concedes, though he does so while insisting that reality, too, is mental. Since human thought is a *part* of the universe, it is unwarranted to insert a gap between mentality and the rest of reality. That humans are conscious creatures whose thoughts bear out in experience further suggests, for Peirce, that “physical events are but degraded or undeveloped forms of psychical events.”<sup>15</sup> Forming habits, for example, is a quality characteristic of beings as diverse as humans and rocks, whether assenting to a moral duty or falling to the ground at a specific rate of gravitational pull.

Truth, then, can no longer be a correspondence between mental representations and material reality. Put simply, Peirce’s account equates “real” with “true,” such that if the rock is *really* going to fall to the ground, then we are warranted in saying that it is *true* that the rock will fall to the ground. Though the premises for such beliefs are identified through local needs and contingencies, they are not *merely* subjective or cultural. True things are “independent,

not indeed of thought in general, but of all that is arbitrary and individual in thought.”<sup>16</sup> Diverse perspectives are, then, the *modes of access* to objective reality, not the seclusion of individuals and communities to incommensurable realities. As Susan Haack explains, all cultures “are alike seeking explanatory stories to accommodate their experience,” interacting with the same mental reality and utilizing the same modes of reasoning and logic.<sup>17</sup> Different paths of inquiry cannot be *incommensurable*. There is instead, a “commonality underlying surface divergences.”<sup>18</sup>

I argue that Peirce’s qualified, partial truth is preferable to the absence of truth, a robust theory of the relation between mentality and reality preferable to one in which solidarity, sentiment, and courage are the only arbiters of desirability. Though Beisecker qualifies that he does not “wish to give any aid and comfort to the philistines with their cynical nihilism,” it is difficult to conceive of any argument he might mount against them, particularly considering that his vision of inquiry is one characterized by solidarity and incommensurability. In Peirce’s account, on the other hand, the principles of logic and reason are fundamental aspects of one, mental reality, participants of which include the “cynical philistines” Beisecker wishes to critique. A reality such as this, in which truth is exigent and logic compelling, is the only one that allows for objective progress away from anti-intellectualism and violence.

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## REFERENCES

1 Dave Beisecker, “The Ballistics of Inquiry in a Post-Truth Age,” *Philosophy of Education* 80, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.47925/80.1.084>

2 Beisecker, “The Ballistics of Inquiry,” 2.

3 The irony of overlap is not lost on the present author.

4 Charles S. Peirce, “What Pragmatism Is,” in *The Essential Peirce, Volume 2*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 336.

5 Pierce, “What Pragmatism Is,” 336.

6 Beisecker, "The Ballistics of Inquiry," 5.

7 Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," 336.

8 Charles S. Peirce, "Doctrine of Necessity Examined," in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition, Volume 8: 1890–1892*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 114.

9 Peirce, "Doctrine of Necessity Examined," 114.

10 Charles S. Peirce, "The Maxim of Pragmatism," in *The Essential Peirce, Volume 2*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 139-141.

11 Beisecker, "The Ballistics of Inquiry," 7 (emphasis in original).

12 Beisecker, "The Ballistics of Inquiry," 10.

13 Charles S. Peirce, "Fraser's the Works of George Berkeley," in *The Essential Peirce, Volume 1*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 83-106, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpwhg1z.10>

14 Charles S. Peirce, "The Nature of Meaning," in *The Essential Peirce, Volume 2*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 212.

15 Charles S. Peirce, "Man's Glassy Essence," in *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition, Volume 8: 1890–1892*, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 180.

16 Pierce, "Fraser's the Works," 89.

17 Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 145.

18 Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, 145.