

The Greek Roots of Pragmatism: A New Name for an Old Way of Thinking

*As Raízes Gregas do Pragmatismo:
Um Novo Nome para um Velho Modo de Pensar*

Rossella Fabbrichesi

Department of Philosophy
State University of Milan - Italy
rossella.fabbrichesi@unimi.it

Abstract: In this talk I intend to defend three theses:

- 1) that our society is in various aspects very close to the results-culture or shame-culture sketched in the *Iliad* poem.
- 2) that pragmatism seized these aspects and translated them in a new philosophical attitude, that succeeds in being revolutionary and fruitful of unforeseeable consequences. I would intend it as a sort of “new use of old powers”, in a pure Darwinian spirit.
- 3) I will sustain, thus, that the “Pragmatist revolution”, as I will call it, is deeply rooted in the archaic foundations of our culture.

Key-words: Pragmatism. *Iliad*. Greek culture. Results-culture. Effects. Truth. Practical consequences. Efficacy.

Resumo: *Nesta palestra tenciono defender três teses:*

- 1) *que nossa sociedade está, sob vários aspectos, muito próxima a cultura-resultados ou cultura-vergonha delineadas no poema *Iliada*.*
- 2) *que o pragmatismo apossou-se desses aspectos e os traduziu em uma nova atitude filosófica bem-sucedida em ser revolucionária e geradora de conseqüências imprevisíveis. Pretendo que seja uma espécie de “novo uso de velhos poderes”, em um espírito puramente darwiniano.*
- 3) *sustentarei, assim, que a “Revolução pragmatista”, como a chamarei, está profundamente enraizada nos fundamentos arcaicos de nossa cultura.*

Palavras-chave: *Pragmatismo. *Iliada*. Cultura grega. Cultura-resultados. Efeitos. Verdade. Conseqüências práticas. Eficácia.*

I. Pragmatism works to reshape the notion of truth, questioning – perhaps for the first time in the history of thought – the existence of truth in itself; truth as independent from the *practices* enacted to achieve truth, and from *beliefs* which sustain it. In other words: in Pragmatism the focus of the philosophical question is not *truth* itself, but the *effects* of truth; the *results* deriving from considering true a concept, and so *efficacy*, or transformative power of specific human behaviours. What is, then, efficacy? And what is truth? Which is the goal that Pragmatism aimed at in assimilating these concepts?

I chose to begin my paper with a series of interrogatives, because the question that I want to pose is one that not only probes our consciousness of philosophers, but also our consciousness as inhabitants of the West and therefore inheritors of a Western tradition of thinking. Indeed, our society is unquestionably founded on the excellence of the results, on the necessity of producing relevant, measurable, visible effects. Thus, our society is founded on the interpretation of truth, as that which generates practical relevant consequences. Notions which are themselves inescapably connected with force: energy that is aimed at accomplishing actions, directed towards the achievement of a goal and ultimately connected to the idea of success of an ongoing enterprise. This is well known to those involved in academic research. The first thing a referee asks is to produce attestable results and, in the scientific field, computable results (accountability).¹ The more productive researchers are the ones who are destined to receive funds to become even more productive. Therefore, philosophical researches, fruitful only on an intellectual level, are generally regarded with contempt.

I will try to demonstrate how the ancient Greeks conceived of the notion of the value of an action as heroic *arete*, in a similar way. Thus demonstrating that since the most archaic ages, Western society has been grounded on the notion of the power of the effect, of the accomplished result, and of the doing (*prattein*) as involvement and action aimed at fulfilling a purpose. In ancient Greek society, the one who acted well was an *agathos*, a good one (not the opposite!); the one who was successful and achieved the acknowledgement of his peers was consequently highly estimated and honored. But if one failed to achieve these things, he would become *kakos*, a bad one and an ugly one, no matter what the conditions of that failure were. The value of a deed was the measure of the value of the actor and not the opposite.

Before developing my argument, I want to emphasise, in the clearest way possible, the terms through which Peirce expresses his pragmatic vision in the 1870's. I will dwell mainly upon the first phase of his exposition of the doctrine, a phase which is more functional to my argument, but the evolution in Peirce's pragmaticist thought will not be ignored either, especially the writings produced at the turn of the century. My contention is that the fundamentals of pragmatism do not change between Peirce's early *pragmatism* and his later *pragmaticism*. Even in later years when Peirce invites us always to interpret the practical under the label of "conceivably", with an awareness of the conditional and

¹ Cp. on these topics the enlightening article of a scientist who well understands the limits of this conception: LONGO, Giuseppe. "Fundamental and 'Industrially Oriented' Research: What about 'negative' results?". English translation available online at the address <http://www.di.ens.fr/~longo/> of the French article "Savoir critique et savoir positif: l'importance des résultats négatifs". *Intellectica*, 40/1, 2005.

purely potential generality which has to be present to enable us to receive an impression of any singularity, the importance accorded to the notion of effect, and to the practical consequence of ideas remain constant in his analysis.

“Consider what effects, that 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” (EP 1:132, repeated in CP 5.2).² Clearly, this must be our point of departure. This quotation represents the first formulation of the pragmatic maxim of 1878. A maxim many times restated, and later reformulated, but nevertheless always holding on to its foundations. These foundations can be summarised in the following way: the meaning of any event – in traditional terms: any concept that occupies our mind – is completely identified with the idea of the effects that could possibly derive from it, if enacted. “Our idea of anything IS our idea of its sensible effects”, Peirce writes not much further on, and “there is no distinction of meaning so fine that it consists in anything but a possible difference of practice”. It has to be remembered that the English word “effect” comes from the Latin “*effectus*”, which is the past participle of “*efficere*” (also the etymological root of “efficient” and “effective”) that is in turn a compound of “*facere*”. Thus, “effect” denotes which results are performed, executed and accomplished, in other words the fulfilment of a projected goal. In this term, “effect” arguably resides the meaning of what I call a “pragmatist revolution”. Both Peirce and James are united in the conception of Pragmatism as a method to make our ideas clear, in the sense of weakening metaphysical debates. The principle behind this method instructs a person, when facing a given conceptual question, to ask: what conceivable difference could it produce in my practice if it were true? “Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical differences that must follow from one’s side or the other being right”³ and “different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise” (EP 1:129). Thus - and I want to underscore this point – the pragmatist revolution consists in focusing one’s attention, not on truth as an abstract and purely theoretical analysis of propositions and concepts, aimed at establishing a correspondence with supposedly “real” objects; but on truth as a result configured by different modes of *action* (practical or theoretical, moral or epistemological) which are developed in public and consolidated praxes. The consequence of this latter conception of truth is that reality is not considered to be a *given*, existing *in se* and *per se* and

² I quote from the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard University Press. C. Hartshorne e P. Weiss eds., Voll.1-6, 1931-5; A. Burks ed., Voll.7-8, 1958) with the usual abbreviation CP followed by the volume and paragraph number; and from *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce. A Chronological Edition* (edited by the “Peirce Edition Project”, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Voll.1-6, 1982-1996) as W, followed by volume and page numbers; and from *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings* (ed. by N. Houser and C. Kloesel, Vol.1, 1992; by the Peirce Edition Project; vol.2, 1998, Bloomington: Indiana University Press) as EP followed by volume and page number. I preferably quote from the latest and more revised editions of articles or manuscripts.

³ JAMES, William. *Pragmatism: a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907 (Dover-Thrift Edition, p.43).

unchangeably so; on the contrary – as Peirce writes – reality is “the normal *product* of mental action” (W2:471), an outcome whose validity can only be established in the future of the semiotic long run, thus being an *effect* of truth, and not an “incognizable *cause*” (*ibid.*).

In order to comprehend fully what this last statement means, we need to examine the meaning of Peircean Pragmatism in more detail. Peirce writes in the draft of *Pragmatism* in 1905: “In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception”(CP 5.10). In this quotation, the pragmatic maxim of 1878 is restated, but here the author proceeds well beyond the first definition and asks himself: what do we really mean when we speak of the meaning of a concept? He answers: the meaning of a concept coincides with the total sum of all the practical consequences which could necessarily result from the adoption of that concept as a maxim of truth (we can see here the kind of pragmaticist reference that is emphasised more and more in works produced at or after the turn of the century). In particular I want to emphasise what is meant by the phrase: “the potential sum of all conceivable practical consequences.” All conceivable practical consequences is something which, by definition, we will never be able take the measure of. To conceivably exhaust the meaning of a proposition would require consideration of all the interpretation of a potential community of inquirers and thus it could only happen *in futuro*. Consequently, the meaning of any proposition is never fully expressed in single and immediate practical actions (“Pragmatism – Peirce will write in EP 2:141 – is completely volatilised if you admit this sort of practicality”). In Peirce’s conception of pragmatism, what we are dealing with is a conception of truth developed on the basis of a scholastic realist perspective. The meaning of a concept is not readable in the *immediately* practical effects which it produces (Peirce never talks of the primacy of the action), but has to be connected to the *whole* potential and *conditional series* of the resolutions to act that a person is *prepared* to do in order to display his understanding of that concept. The reference is not to the simple action, but to the “potential” actualisability of a behaviour, to what we are prepared to do (EP 2:142), according to a general rule of conduct, therefore “no agglomeration of actual happenings can ever completely fill up the meaning of a ‘would be’” (EP 2:402), because that would be conceived in the sense of what we would be ready to do.⁴

In fact, there is still what we highlighted before: Peirce speaks of truth as of something that produces practical consequences, as of something that produces relevant actual, or only potential, effects in the sensible reality. In any case, it is always *effecta* which are examined, that is, results originated from a certain modality of doing; better, from a habitual performing of certain actions, rather than a dynamic, reactive and immediate doing. In *Pragmatism*, Peirce extinguishes any possible remaining doubt about this issue, by stating: “The test of doubt and belief is conduct” (EP 2:433).

⁴ “More simply stated, the whole meaning of an intellectual predicate is that certain kinds of events would happen, once in so often, in the course of experiences, under certain kinds of existential circumstances” (EP 2:402).

The truth of an event, its being believed existent and significant (real, in Peircean terms) is thus a *function* of the *effects* it is able to produce. The *fact* that Napoleon once lived and conquered Europe – Peirce writes in one of the *Illustrations of the Logic of Sciences* (CP 2.714) – is a pure hypothesis, an abduction, to which we give value according to the computation of the effects that this notion has acquired over the long time that it has been considered as being true. These are effects which the notion has produced and still produces. We see effects, traces, signs of the passage of Napoleon in history: documents, monuments, memories, deeds. The simple *fact* that we take as a proof of his earthly existence is nothing else than the set of these *effects* – as the Stoics properly said: meaning is an “idle vapour” – and paradoxically the meaning of the proposition “Napoleon existed” could even be indifferent to the fact that Napoleon truly existed in that distant time, because the belief in his existence is what produced the relevant truths which actually changed the conduct of men, not the fact of his existence. It is in this sense that I believe we have to interpret the following sentence in *Issues on Pragmaticism*: “the belief that Christopher Columbus discovered America really refers to the future” (EP 2:359). Any supposed “fact” is an effect, that is to say, something which is produced as the result of an action that in turn gives meaning to the fact. Thus a belief only becomes true if it is given value by a consequent behaviour. There is nothing to be “verified” in its given objectivity: and exactly because any objectivity is nothing else than a sign, a reference in the chain of Interpretants, an “event indefinitely future” (W2:252).

With the development of his studies, Peirce placed even greater emphasis on the dynamic and productive exercises that are entangled with the construction of logical meaning: there is no truth that does not descend from a conduct that *constitutes the truth* that is not the application of some expressive and semiotic *power*. What we think is to be understood in terms of what we are prepared to do in support of that belief. When we speak of what we deliberately choose to do (EP 2:142) we speak of the impulse to act consistently, to have a definite intention (EP 2:241) - thus, logic has an intimate connection with ethics (and aesthetics). Peirce’s theory could therefore be summarised in the following way: truth resides in the pragmatic efficacy that the object of our conception acquires during a certain process of practice, thanks to a *disposition to respond* (EP 2.347) and a *resolution to act* (CP 1.592) which are shared on a collective level by a community of inquirers and are crucial in the production of sense. Or, in simpler words – as Peirce would prefer to say – referring to the biblical passage: “by their fruits ye shall know them” (EP 2:401).

Peirce reiterates in *Lectures on Pragmatism* that pragmatism is a guide to action and a maxim of conduct (EP 2:139). I now want to consider in more detail this reference to conduct and action, because I consider it to be the core of the “pragmatist revolution.” Peirce says a “judgment, [...] is the sole vehicle in which a concept can be conveyed to a person’s cognizance or acquaintance, is not a purely representitious event, but involves an act, an exertion of energy, and is liable to real consequences, or effects” (CP 5.547). This point is of great importance: any assertive judgement involves an intentional act of some kind. This can be defined as an exertion of energy which in concordance with an assumed rule produces real consequences. The idea of force, as conceived of by Peirce, is an explicative paradigm for his primitive pragmatism, since the idea that the word force excites in our minds has no function other than to affect our actions, and these

actions can have no reference to force other than through its effects. Consequently, if we know what the effects of force are, it means that we are acquainted with every fact which is implied in saying that a force exists, and there is nothing more to know (*How to make our ideas clear*, CP 5.404).⁵ Thus, Peirce constitutes a new ontology, an ontology completely based on the concept of expressive force, conceived of as a power capable of generating effects. In Pragmatistic terms, the idea of truth as a thing-substance is abandoned, as a depository of attributes and qualities; in its place is the idea of an event-action that subsequently shapes and constitutes realities and qualities. It does this by producing consequences that are neither completely predictable, nor completely exhaustible, because they are nothing other than signs, always endlessly referring to other signs in a semiotic chain.

II. Force, efficacy, action, practical results are terms which have resonated with a profound impact on the culture of the 20th century. I claim this is also by virtue of the widespread acceptance of the principles of Pragmatism, although these principles have been often misunderstood and simplified. Yet, I will argue that our whole civilization has built its foundations on these notions and I will call as a witness the first poem of European literature: Homer's *Iliad*. I believe that Peirce would have accepted a similar procedure, because we can find in CP 5.11 this assertion: "Any philosophical doctrine that should be completely new could hardly fail to prove completely false; but the rivulets at the head of the river of Pragmatism are easily traced back to almost any desired antiquity". Pragmatism plunges its roots in ancient ages, in particular in the rich soil of ancient Greece: about whose culture and whose thought Peirce was an acknowledged expert.

The society portrayed in Homer's poems is a tribal one, founded on a warrior aristocracy whose values were created in the bellicose activity in which men are constantly involved. Although there were kings, nobles enjoyed a considerable amount of personal power and the decisions were usually taken in the circle of the warriors, in respect of common goals. In the *Iliad*, the figure of Homer appears to be the author of a coherent sage detailing the vicissitudes of the Mycenaean civilization and its assault on Troy, however scholars have revealed that the poem is in fact composed of various stratified parts. Some parts recall the shining age of the past, from memories of tales passed down through the ages, while others narrate the present circumstances of a Greek society coming with difficulty out of the so-called "dark ages": four long centuries in which any trace of culture, and even writing, had been lost. This latter age is at the dawn of the 8th century B.C. a time when the Greek civilization of the *polis* did not exist as such.

For Europeans, it is impossible to conceive of the *Iliad* as anything other than a beginning of Western culture. Although many studies show how it is in fact the definitive and stiffened version of a long series of oral compositions, sung in the streets and in the palaces by *aidos* and rhapsodes over the course of two centuries (presumably between

⁵ Nietzsche – in an incredibly similar way – writes in the fragments of *Wille zur Macht*: "Has a force ever been demonstrated? No, only effects translated into a completely foreign language." (NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *The Will to Power*, transl. by W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Random House, 1968, § 620).

the 8th and the 6th century B.C.), until the time of Pisistratus, when they were finally transcribed. The Greeks of the classical age for their part experienced the *Iliad* as a *primum*, or as the primary and principal event of Greek history. So much so that three and a half centuries later, Plato could write, “Homer has been the educator of Hellas”.⁶ Many authors insist on the fact that the *Iliad* does not represent a historical document of ancient Greece as much as it represents an encyclopaedic handbook of uses and customs (*etbos*) that any Greek knew by heart, and according to which he learned to live and to behave. In this sense the *Iliad* was much more than a historical recording of facts, it was a grand and celebratory transmission of the memory of a people. We could say that it was a breviary of practices, and as such able to shape generations of first Greeks, then Romans, and, in the modern era, Europeans - and, through the spreading of their culture through explorations and colonisations, also of the people of the new world. So for a great part, the values of the *Iliad* are those of Western culture, our own.

What are those values, exactly? The Homeric hero is a warrior chief who is charged to fulfil a specific social duty: that is, to defend the community and thus his own honor, in the process achieving eternal glory in the eyes of future generations. In the absence of an institutional legitimacy (there were neither established powers, nor public institutions in the Homeric society), the warrior gained his honor and the respect of his peers by his actions both on the battlefield and in the forum. How? *Ergois kai logois*, the Greeks say. With the actions and with the words; by the strength of his weapons and of his speech. Even today, the strength of actions and words are the two pillars which support our society - Praxes and signs, as Peirce would call them. However, what needs to be emphasised is that praxes and signs impose themselves with power, and often with abuse. As Simone Weil writes,⁷ the *Iliad* is the poem of force. Force being a necessary third condition that always comes with the development of praxis and semiotic activity: since actions and words have no power without the efficacy of force. We always have to be capable, to be able to impose our practices and our discourse; and the sign of value (*arete*) is measured relative to the ability of the hero to impose himself on others, and to be the one whose own strength prevailed in the *agon* be it a bellicose or a dialectic one (where the second one is clearly a metaphor of the first).

Aretè means virtue, and it is significant that it often appears together with the word *bia*, violence, therefore the agonistic and bellicose context of the heroic value is often conjoined even at the level of naming.⁸ But strength was also valued as *aretè* in the debating council where powerful rhetoric was admired: thus strength manifested itself in both the battlefield and the assembly (another *agon*) and the hero had to be the master of both forms, as adept with sharp words as he was with a sharp sword. The sophists in particular excelled in this new *agon*: and used words as swords, in order to excel, harm and dominate. In response to the provocation of sophists, Plato inveighed himself in a heroic fight to wrest control of words from rhetoric: by imposing a “true” word, index in the form of a pure definition of things, *in se* and *per se*, valid for everyone, and not subject to partisan or “polemical” manipulation.

⁶ PLATO, *Respublica*, X, 606a.

⁷ WEIL, Simone. *The Iliad or The Poem of Force: A Critical Edition*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003.

⁸ Cp. for instance *Iliad*, 9.498.

Prevailing in the bellicose or dialectic *agon* helps the hero conquer fame, *kleos*, which the Greek warrior valued more than life itself, according to Homer. Fame was linked with honor, *time*, without which the life of the hero was worth nothing. But to achieve both, one needed the respect of one's peers, which meant winning the favour of those who at the same time were brutally subject to one's will. Thus the Iliadic society is constructed on a paradox, between the necessity of granting respect to any chief and the impossibility of actually doing this. In a warrior society, the achievement of the hero unavoidably implies the negation of the rival. And the hero is only considered as such because he is the winner and is thus respected, or rather he is successful at being respected, at subjugating the will of his peers to his own will. The problem is that subjugated peers are not, by definition, peers anymore, because if they are subdued, they are defeated, if they prevail it is them subduing the rival. In either case, the pact of mutual acknowledgement on which the archaic society is based is violated and the upshot of this is that in the impasse of this infinite pendular game – as Simone Weil writes – the Homeric society atones for its incapability to become state. Indeed, the agonistic self needed to yield to a collaborative “we”,⁹ in order for the structure of the *polis* to be established. Society is therefore premised on those forms of cohabitation determined by the symmetrical, reversible and equal position of the individuals of the community, to be manifested. But this is precisely what is not possible in a society constructed on the values of strength and honor.

It is according to these premises that historians describe Homeric society as a shame-culture or results-culture.¹⁰ Let me explain what this is in more detail, because it also establishes the core thesis of my argument. In Homeric society, every military chief was considered an *agathos*. In the language of classical Greece, this word defines goodness of a particularly ethical and moral kind (*kaloskaiagathos*). However, in the archaic Greek society in which the *Iliad* is set, the word simply described the “being good at...”, in the sense of being capable to act in a skilful way. We could therefore say that the archaic connotations of “virtuous” was in the sense of being pragmatically effective. With this last point, the idea is again reiterated that value emerges out of strength and readiness to act. In the Greek warrior society, to be “good at” is always connected with the fight, or anyway with some change of what already exists. In other words, the idea of an action is that which is enacted to change the course of things. Moreover, the change must be valued since excellence always has to be accompanied by the success of the action. Conversely, without success there is no goodness of intentions; and no concomitant abstract ability of being good (*agathos*), since without good “actions” and without the visible effects of being good there is no goodness. Thus, goodness is expressed not in *being*, but rather in *doing*: in *acting* well, behaving as an *agathos* and doing good ventures.

⁹ Cp. on these issues VEGETTI, Mario. *L'etica degli antichi*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1989, chap.II.

¹⁰ Cp. in particular ADKINS, Arthur W. *Moral values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece*. New York: Norton, 1972; ID., *From the Many to the One. A Study of Personality and Views of Human Nature in the Context of Ancient Greek Society, Values and Beliefs*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970; DODDS, Eric. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1951.

The *Iliad* is studded with references to the heroes as *agathoi*, or, in the superlative form of the term, *aristoi* (which is obviously connected to *arete*). *Aristoi* designated the strongest ones, the best ones and this was a judgement which existed independently from any moral connotation (the suitors of Penelope are *aristoi*, and certainly Homer does not judge them well, cp. *Odyssey* 4.778). Only later did the meaning of the word change to indicate the nobility of a person's heritage and of his soul. But originally, its meaning is quite close to the analogous *phertatos* (superlative *pherteros*), from the verb *phero*, to produce, achieve, or generate effects. Therefore the best one, the one who is most skilful and valiant, is the one who best produces, the one who acts, and who achieves results. In this way, the Homeric *aristos* is the emblem of the *homo pragmaticus*.

So, through etymologies, we have reached an understanding of the results-culture of the *Iliad*. As many historians and anthropologists explain, in the archaic society of the *agathoi*, neither the intention nor the will of the subject matters, nor indeed the external forces that impress themselves on a battle but show no favour to either side: nothing else matters but the accomplished result.¹¹ Thus, in this world there is no real difference between guilt and a simple mistake, because what matters is the result of the conduct: if it is nefarious, the hero, like the result itself, will be considered *kakos* (evil and *thus* ugly).¹² Similarly, no human quality has any actual value unless it leads to success in the form of visible and acknowledgeable actions which entail expected results. Simonides writes that when any man is in good condition and is acting well, *eu prattein*, he is *agathos*; but on the other hand, he is *kakos* when he is in bad condition, for instance conditions of passivity and impotence. And so in this way, the evil one also becomes ugly.¹³

As Adkins observes, the qualities to be admired in the Homeric hero could be described in terms of: 'strength-and-bravery-and-wealth-leading-to-or-preserving-success',¹⁴ the hyphens between the words are there to designate the absolute unitariness of the values that identify the notion of *arete*. And to reiterate, these are the very values on which the society of the *Iliad* is founded. Thus to be moderate in behaviour, balanced in judgement and reasonable in thought counts for naught in the ethics of the *Iliad*. Not because these values are thought to be wrong and thus are contested, but simply because they are not even taken into account. Reason, justice, reflection, cooperation, such concepts do not exist in Homer's time. As such, Achilles is the Homeric hero *par excellence*, because he emerges with all the fury of his *menis*, or anger, just like an indomitable lion.

¹¹ Cp. *Odyssey* 18.223.

¹² In the same way, according to a famous example by Piaget, the child in a pre-school age, will always judge the unpropitious event that leads a person to slip and to break the pile of plates s/he is carrying as the effect of a malevolent gesture, no matter if it comes from a merely unfortunate causality.

¹³ In *On the Genealogy of Morals* (NIETZSCHE 1998: §10) Nietzsche writes, commenting the ideology of the archaic man: "Similarly they knew, as complete men, overloaded with power and thus necessarily active, they must not separate action from happiness. They considered being active necessarily associated with happiness (that's where the phrase *eu prattein [do well, succeed]* derives its origin)".

¹⁴ ADKINS 1970:30.

It is thanks to this fury that he wins all his battles: and is loved and acknowledged as a chief as a result. In the *Iliad*, these excesses of drive, absences of reasonableness, and bestial and overcoming fury are described as Achilles' most relevant qualities. Indeed, the important thing is Achilles' ability to win battles and thus preserve his community; or as Peirce might say, the important thing is that Achilles' strength produces its effects and leads the Achaeans to victory. "Our idea of anything IS our idea of its sensible effects". Homer does not blame his *thymoleon* hero, his hero with a lion-heart, in this respect: on the contrary, blame (*elencheie*) is reserved for weakness exhibited to the enemies, to the action pursued without vigour, and thus failing to achieve a desired result. What Nietzsche wrote in the following passage in *On the Genealogy of Morals* is well applied to the Homeric hero: "To demand that strength does not express itself as strength, that it must not consist of a will to overpower, a will to throw down, a will to rule, a thirst for enemies and opposition and triumph – that is as unreasonable as to demand that weakness express itself as strength. [... T]here is no "being" behind the doing, acting, becoming. 'The doer' is merely invented after the fact – the act is everything" (NIETZSCHE 1998: §13).

But let us go back to the source of this persistent attitude of our thinking, an attitude which is expressed both philosophically and in common sense (it shines through in the writings of Goethe, Husserl and Wittgenstein; indeed Goethe's motto "In the beginning there was Action" was later reused by them). In the world of heroes, only what is produced through action is noteworthy. There is no good to be found in reflection, intention nor in planning: all strategies which seem in the modern era to be the necessary accompaniment to successful action, they have no place in the Homeric scheme of things.¹⁵ I could add that they have no place, because at that time there was no concept of *psyche* nor of spirit, since the first uncertain words with which our culture named these supposed inner realities came from the words for the agitations of the breath, heart, lungs (*thymos*, *phrenes*, *kardie*, *etor*), that is, from the experience of physical organs in tension, activated in the stream of action and identified with an emotion powerful enough to overcome the subject. However, these names, conceived of as symptoms were never themselves considered to be signs of the existence of a psychological inwardness from which our modern and strong notions of personal identity descend. However, proper consideration of this matter would open up too wide a parenthesis in this argument.¹⁶ Let us limit ourselves to restate the concept: *kakoi*, bad ones, as opposed to good ones, *agathoi*, are those who do not protect their own interests,

¹⁵ Weil (2003:22) states that the poem is centered on the idea of force: brute and incoercible force, often random, to which it is possible to oppose only another force, be it divine or human. "Between the impetus and the act there is never room for that brief interval in which thought blooms" .

¹⁶ Cp. on these topics SNELL, Bruno. *Die Entdeckung des Geistes. Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*. Hamburg: Claassen Verlag, 1948; ONIANS, Richard B. *The origins of European thought about the body, the mind, the soul, the world, time and fate*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954; JAYNES, Julian. *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976; CLAUS, David. *Toward the Soul: an Inquiry into the Meaning of Psyche before Plato*. New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1981; FABBRICHESI, Rossella. *Corpo e passioni: uno sguardo sul tempo degli eroi*. In *Corpo e linguaggio*, C.Sini ed. Milano: Cisalpino, 2007.

who have no success, who do not exhibit *proofs* of their superiority. It did not matter what means they used to hold on to power as long as they were successful. Any failure, even if it was the effect of randomness, of divine hostility, or of will, was considered to be, by definition, *aischros*, shameful. *Agathos* is Agamemnon who imposes himself on Achilles and makes him forgo his prize of Briseis, and who in turn did not want to renounce to his own prize of Chryseis, daughter of Chryse the priest.¹⁷ And what did it matter if, in the end, he repented his behaviour? Since Agamemnon's repentance was not from newfound moral feeling but because it was the only way to push Achilles into the battle, and therefore into the defence of the Achaeans. And it is for these acts that Agamemnon will be thus honored as the king of kings and the conqueror of Troy.

But there is also another element which is fundamental in the construction of the Homeric ethical system, which is that the value of a hero does not rely on his being valiant and thus victorious but on his being acknowledged publicly as such, in his deeds being so immense that they are worthy of being sung by future generations. The hero is therefore extremely vulnerable to the collective judgement of his people, from whom he gains his legitimacy. The loss of a hero's honor is always potentially there, since it is determined not by the coherence of a fair behaviour, but through the circle of the *aristoi*, according to their recognition of the hero's achieved results. "But now, Hector cries, Hector who led army out of the walls (*Iliad* 22.105)¹⁸ – seeing I have brought the host to ruin in my blind folly, I have shame of the Trojans, and the Trojans' wives with trailing robes, lest haply some other baser man may say: 'Hector, trusting in his own might, brought ruin on the host.' So will they say; but for me it were better far to meet Achilles man to man and shay him, and so get me home, or myself perish gloriously before the city". Hector did not intend to make a mistake, nevertheless he made one. In the judgement of his people, his intentions count for nothing, only the results of his action matter and the collective sanction of his ill-omened gesture are relevant. Thus, *aidos*, shame, is on Hector, ratified by the collectivity, whose judgement is threateningly anticipated (and interiorised) in the words of the hero, words that could simply be transcribed as: what will the people say (*demou phatis*)? Today, although our ethical values are far removed from those of the hero of Troy, we can still understand Hector's torment.

For the Greek hero, punishment for wrong behaviour is not experienced in feelings of discomfort or guilt, nor is it expressed in an appeal to inwardness and moral values. Rather it is a burden carried through the sense of shame (*aidos*) that affects all those who fell short of the socially agreed model of excellence. Thus, there is – as Vegetti writes – a "radical vulnerability of the hero to that social judgement from which he gained his only possibility of legitimacy".¹⁹ This imposes an ethical code completely exterior and public, as opposed to the interior and introspective one characteristic of Christian and modern behaviour. In Homer's world, inwardness did not exist since the principle of consciousness itself (and even less of a consciousness aware and at peace with itself) was never ratified. What mattered was public esteem, and the favourable

¹⁷ *Iliad* 1.275.

¹⁸ Cp. also *Iliad* 6.442,15.561.17.91, 6.351.

¹⁹ VEGETTI 1989:19.

opinion of the circle of the *aristoi*. Thus, it did not actually matter if the hero was strong, or felt strong; what mattered was that he was said to be strong, and for this strength to be sung about and thereby remembered. Here we return to the idea of the strength of the effects and to the strength of the results, in the form of an ethic translated into visible behaviour, proposed as models of conduct, beautiful or ugly ones. The efficacy of behaviour is, thus, always a public and social result, never a private and subjective impression: it does not even matter if the result is a genuine reflection of the achievements of the hero, nor of the rightness of his actions. What matters is that the hero's behaviour is perceived as being worthy by the community, and that the result is ratified, for then the strength of the hero gathers momentum, preserved and recalled long after its initial force has dissipated, and it thus becomes capable of producing long-term transformative effects.

III. It is exactly on this regard that I believe the results-culture of Homer and pragmatism can be compared, as they both share a strong regard for the publicness of truth. “The very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge” (W2:239), and “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth” (W3:273). Peirce asks, “What is usefulness if it is confined to a single person? Truth is public”.²⁰ Thus, usefulness relies on the final opinion, as we read in the review of *Fraser's The Works of George Berkeley*, on the “catholic consent” (W2:468), a general agreement that warrants, with the persistence of beliefs, the reference to the interpretative long run and the unlimited semiosis. Peirce's provocative contention that “The belief that Christopher Columbus discovered America really refers to the future,” is exemplified by Homer as truth is that which will be sung by generations to come.²¹ If the identity of the hero depends *in toto* upon what the others believe him to be, and if there is no possibility of possessing an idea of oneself that is not premised on the esteem of other members of the community, then the truth of Peirce's assertion that “man is a sign” is realised. Man is a sign relying on the interpretations of the community, a sign that develops and that is completely identified with the words that indicates it (W2:241).

Up to now, I developed analogies between the Homeric world and the one prefigured by Pragmatism, which intercepted the *Zeitgeist* of the beginnings of the last century, especially in its emphasis on the force of action and the practical consequences of success. These are the ideas that pass from a level of existential and cultural praxes and even common sense, to become the subjects of philosophical essays and occupy thinkers of the most attentive theoretical reflection. Thereby becoming ideas which are

²⁰ Quoted in PERRY, Ralph B. *The Thought and Character of William James*. Boston, 1935, vol. II, p.437.

²¹ Helen says to Hector in *Iliad* 6.350-358 that Alexander, her beloved husband, “was never yet to be depended upon, nor never will be, and he will surely reap what he has sown”, while Hector and even she, “my hateful self”, although she is subjected to “toil” “Jove has doomed to be a theme of song among those that shall be born hereafter”.

“destined”, in the Peircean sense, to become public truths. But it could be objected that Peirce would have felt alienated by this way of posing the question, since force, action, and consequence are all notions that in the Peircean system belong to the level of pure *Secondnesses*, of active and immediate reactions, and not to the level of the *Thirdnesses*, of the habits intended as self-controlled responses able to embody a general rule in the way of conduct. Certainly – according to Peirce – there is no doubt that *Secondness* is associated principally with the idea of “sensible effect”. And this is defined as an action and reaction which is individuated and forms the ground of the idea of Peirce’s Energetic Interpretant (CP 5.475). Peirce is always extremely clear about highlighting the inadequacy of a single act, to delineate the notion of habit. An actual praxis is not sufficient to determine the proper logical conclusion of an argument (CP 5.491), and thus cannot be the Final Logical Interpretant of a concept. However, it is also true that Peirce says that the habit itself is nothing but an effect, a rebound of symbolic understanding, formed with the aid of the analytical exercises which nourish it. In the light of this conception, how else could a habit be described other than in term of the kind of action to which it gives rise, with the specification of the conditions and of the motive for that action? (CP 5.476).

To explore this aspect of habit in more detail, it is well known that habit is a keyword in the Peircean lexicon that conjugates two capacities: the capacity to refer to a general rule and, at the same time, the capacity to translate it into an immediate practice, which keep thus together the Rule and the Action; the generality and the particularity. As the pragmatic maxim magisterially teaches us, there is no difference between a soft thing and a hard one, and their difference remains a mere linguistic distinction, if we do not connect these words to a habitual practice, in the form of a conduct – a “know-how”. The truth about a diamond being hard is meaningless until we are able to DO something with it, to emphasise its validity through our actions which underscore all the sensible effects that hard things produce in their surrounding reality.

Try to break a hard thing, Peirce says: it will resist the pressure. This resisting that I put on a trial in the praxis which happens as a punctual action, is the meaning of the word “hard”. This simple predicate that refers to the dynamicity of an existing act, an event that – as in the Stoic conception – is just a pure effect, is the only place of sense. Nothing either abstract or purely linguistic, or concerning a psychical inwardness: since meaning is nothing more than the habit of response to which I am ready to commit when I acknowledge a given thing as hard. An action, thus? Yes, a physically efficient action, as Peirce writes in 1905, that changes the environment in which I live, but it also testifies to my understanding of a general truth: hardness means resistance to pressure. It is at the same time both a particular action and a general abstraction. Peirce illustrates the marriage of generality and the particular in habitual action in this passage from *What Pragmatism is*: when I feel that the air in my office is stuffy, I get up and I go to open the window, sometimes without even giving it a thought. This is an example of how compliance to a general rule (the universal proposition “Stuffy air is malsain”) determines a physical effort – as Peirce says – that affects reality. Thus he reaches the conclusion that, “not only may generals be real, but they may also be *physically efficient*” (EP 2:343). The ideas of freedom and justice, the author adds, are, indeed, the mightiest of the forces that move the world (*ibid.*), while being at the same time absolutely potential and vague *generals*. Here is how we pass so easily from the world of the abstract

concepts and of general truths to the world of facts and experience. But the big truth that Peirce teaches us is that these two worlds are neither distant nor separated: we just deal with one world, and both its specular images. Therefore the event of praxis has to be considered as the natural translation of logical meaning, and practice has to be regarded as the most excellent and completely argued exercise of theory.

Like both Goethe and Nietzsche, Peirce could have perhaps proclaimed: to act – to act is everything. But this position does not exalt a praxism of an empiricist kind, because the general rule that moves the act always shines through it, in terms of making it *efficient*, productive of effects of sense, in relation to the interpreting community. On the contrary: Agamemnon is considered *agathos* thanks to his single supremacy act performed on Achilles. This act has to be continuously repeated in order for Agamemnon to keep his *agathos* reputation. What matters is the single battle won. What counts is the actually achieved result, not the one that would be achieved in any conceivable circumstance according to an habitual and normative principle. Indeed, the obedience to a conditional of this kind would lead us to consider Agamemnon an *agathos in se*, independently of the battles won. This would open up a logical-propositional conception of a realistic kind that could not be conceived by the archaic mentality.²²

This conception of results as connected to the “would be”, to the conditional chain of “if... then”, to a complex set of counterfactuals, always implied in the consideration of a simple action, is what distinguishes the refined pragmatism of Peirce. According to him, it was exactly this passage that James did not understand, and that led to his misunderstanding of the whole doctrine of Pragmatism. Indeed, in his version of pragmatism James mainly emphasised the reference to pure concreteness, to facts, to action and power, and he identified true with the useful and good. Thus he insisted on the process of verification.²³ “Truth consists simply in what is advantageous to our thought, just like right is simply what is advantageous to our conduct”,²⁴ in what achieves success. It is well known how adverse Peirce was to this way of thinking. When seeing his philosophical child all grown up and accepted by both Yankee audiences and popular journals alike, he changed its name from Pragmatism to Pragmaticism, in order to distance his version of pragmatism from James’s. Pragmaticism, recalling the Kantian distinction between *praktisch* and *pragmatisch*,²⁵ emphasised the epistemological and even metaphysical implications of actions and effects, and thus the “inseparable connection between rational cognition and rational purpose” (EP 2:333). Peirce also specified that the reference to the practical effects, which was so fundamental in the Maxim of 1878, was in fact a reference to the pure conceivable effects, not just to immediate ones, and thus it should have been read in the spirit of scholastic realism, or of “propositivism”, as Peirce called it (EP 2:339). Thus, “if Pragmaticism really made Doing to be the Be-all and the End-all of life, that would be its death” (EP 2:341). The difference between Pragmatism and any other theory is not its emphasis on action, doing and the achievement

²² I would like to thank Susanna Marietti for the discussion on this topic and to have suggested these considerations to me.

²³ Cp. JAMES 1907: 43, 52, 204.

²⁴ JAMES 1907:215.

²⁵ While James, instead, explicitly recalled Greek *pragmata*.

of an immediate result: since for Peirce generality was an indispensable ingredient of reality, and the pure and unaware action without any regularity is a nullity. “Accordingly, the pragmatist does not make the *summum bonum* to consist in action, but makes it to consist in that process of evolution whereby the existent comes more and more to embody those generals which were just now said to be *destined*, which is what we strive to express in calling them *reasonable*” (EP 2.343).

Without any doubt, Peirce moves away from a pragmatist conception intended as a dynamic and individualist practicalism²⁶ with these propositions and makes pragmatism part of his realist and synechistic soul. I would argue that today this is Peirce’s most impressive legacy. A heritage which is still to be continuously interpreted. It is a legacy which can, perhaps, direct us towards a different way of thinking, which is quite far removed from the Homeric idea of good connected to the expression of strength and to the value in the successful act. But in this paper, I am more interested in investigating the common roots of the two traditions than the differences that could be spotted even by a non-specialist. Then, as I tried to demonstrate in this paper, I still believe that the reference to a notion of truth founded on the idea of operative power (*en-ergon*, in Greek), capable of producing good results, is as intrinsic both to the results culture of ancient Greece as it is to Pragmatism. Truth descends from the very resolutions aimed to determining it, and furthermore it is measured by the consequences which it produces. I would summarise the issue in these terms: the core of what I called “pragmatist revolution”, instigated by the work of both Peirce and James, is in conceiving of truth, not according to one’s faith in a substantial reality to which our concepts should be adequate, but on the bases of the potential effects that are produced by a belief in that very truth being shared. Truth is therefore not a *primum* that has to be reached in its purity and is immutable, but a product; the result of a fallible construction, which is therefore fated to change many times: “The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories’, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts” (JAMES 1907:48), James writes with his usual clarity. The term “towards” is used because Pragmatism does not hold truth and reality as original data, assumed as absolute; it holds them, on the contrary, as the result of a semiotic long run, of a “mental *action*”, of a gradual emergence of effective interpretations, which are further legitimised by the common use and consensus. Truth and reality are therefore conceived of as final constructions inside the house of knowledge, rather than constituting its foundations; their perfection is realised in the future, not in their supposed immaculate origin. It is not by chance that Peirce privileged the implicative (retroductive) Stoic inference “if–then”, and he placed a strong emphasis on the conclusion of the “then”, that is to say, on the expected and conceivable consequences of the “if”. In this sense: “by their fruits ye shall know them” is in Peirce a fundamental maxim and his philosophy preserves – I could express myself in this way – an “heroic” conception of the *doing* (*prattein*),²⁷ shaped on the Iliadic result-culture. The “pragmatist revolution” was thus in

²⁶ The author well clarifies this point in a letter to James (EP 2:492): “The Final Interpretant does not consist in the way in which any mind does act but in the way in which every mind would act”.

²⁷ Remember that Helen in the *Iliad* claimed as natural that the hero should “reap what he has sown”, to be a hero (cp. *supra*).

some sense “destined”, as Peirce would have said, necessarily implied, as it is, in our culture’s roots.

As a matter of fact, Peirce is the one who writes that Pragmatism, meant as “the true meaning of any product of the intellect lies in whatever unitary determination it would impart to practical conduct under any and every conceivable circumstance”, is to be considered a very ancient philosophy, maybe even to be identified with the primitive Socratic method. Thus, it has to be conceived as “an old way of thinking” (CP 6.490). The subtitle of *Pragmatism* by James, *A new name for some old ways of thinking*, seems to underscore this point. How ancient this way of thinking was, perhaps, neither Peirce nor James suspected.

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Address/Endereço

Rossella Fabbricheci
Dipartimento di Filosofia
Università degli Studi di Milano
Via Festa del Perdono 7
20123, Milano, Italia

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