Peirce and Wittgenstein on Common Sense

Peirce e Wittgenstein acerca do Senso Comum

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Abstract: I intend to start from Peirce's idea that precision and certainty have different meanings: "it is easy to be certain – he writes – one has only to be sufficiently vague" (CP 4.237). Certainty is not a *result* of inquiry, but a premises of it, and so it is connected with vagueness and uncertainty. Its value doesn't belong to the order of argumentative discourse, but of pragmatic habits.

Wittgenstein in *On certainty* reaches a similar conclusion. Both Peirce and Wittgenstein resolve, thus, a typical Cartesian theme, that of certainty, in a totally anticartesian sense. At the same time, they seem to recuperate some Cartesian topics. Indubitable evidence, *lume naturale*, instinctive insight and primary knowledge are common notions to both the authors that, nonetheless, maintain the totally antiintuitionistic, antidualist and antimentalistic account from which their philosophies rose.

I will analyze some propositions from *On certainty* by Wittgenstein and will show how close are they to some of the leading propositions of Peirce's '68 writings. We begin with all our prejudices, writes Peirce, that "does not occur to us can be questioned" (W2:212); the "play of doubting already presupposes certainty", goes on Wittgenstein (C 115). Our common sense guides us through practice, leading us to be sure of many things, without a real justification. So there is a certainty which we comply with, that goes beyond truth and falsity, that is not a way of *seeing*, but a way of acting, as Wittgenstein says. And, as any pragmatic habit, it is immediate and in some sense final (remember that habit is the Final Logical Interpretant). Yet, as far as we try to explain the reasons of our beliefs, our certainty becomes vague, and so uncertain, and the play of infinite semiosis begins.

Keywords: Certainty. Vagueness. Common Sense. Doubt. Belief. Pragmatics

Resumo: *Pretendo começar da idéia de Peirce de que precisão e certeza têm significações diferentes: "é fácil estar certo – ele escreve – só é necessário ser suficientemente vago" (CP 4.237). Certeza não é um* resultado *de inquirição, mas uma* premissa *dela e, assim sendo, está ligada à vagueza e à incerteza. Seu valor não pertence à ordem do discurso argumentativo, mas de hábitos pragmáticos.*

Wittgenstein, em Sobre a Certeza*, alcança uma conclusão similar. Peirce e Wittgenstein, ambos resolvem, assim, um tema cartesiano típico, o da certeza, em um sentido totalmente anticartesiano. Ao mesmo tempo, eles parecem recuperar alguns tópicos anticartesianos. Evidência indubitável, lume naturale,*

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insight instintivo e conhecimento primário são noções comuns a ambos os autores, que, não obstante, mantêm a abordagem totalmente antiintuicionista, antidualista e antimentalista da qual suas filosofias surgiram.

Analisarei algumas proposições de Sobre a Certeza, *de Wittgenstein, e mostrarei quão próximas elas estão de algumas das principais proposições dos escritos de Peirce de 1868. Começaremos com todos os nossos preconceitos, escreve Peirce, que "não nos ocorrem possam ser questionados" (W2: 212); o "jogo de duvidar já pressupõe a certeza", continua Wittgenstein (C 115). Nosso senso comum nos guia através da prática, levando-nos a estar certos de muitas coisas, sem uma justificativa real. Há, então, uma certeza, com a qual aquiescemos, que vai além da verdade e da falsidade, que não é um jeito de ver, mas um jeito de agir, como Wittgenstein diz. E, como qualquer hábito pragmático, é imediato e, em algum sentido, final (lembre-se de que o hábito é o Interpretante Lógico Final). Sem embargo, tanto quanto tentemos explicar as razões de nossas crenças, nossa certeza se torna vaga e, portanto, incerta, e o jogo da semiose infinita começa.*

Palavras-chave: *Certeza. Vagueza. Senso Comum. Dúvida. Crença. Pragmática*

"It is easy to be certain; one has only to be sufficiently vague" (CP 4.237[1]). With his usual philosophical acumen and surprising dialogical directness, Peirce immediately brings the object of our attention sharply into focus and, as I try to show below, to the fullest extent possible. He went on as follows:

> No concept, not even those of mathematics, is absolutely precise; and some of the most important for everyday use are extremely vague. Nevertheless, our instinctive beliefs involving such concepts are far more trustworthy than the best established results of science, if these be precisely understood. For instance, we all think that there is an element of order in the universe. Could any laboratory experiments render that proposition more certain than instinct or common sense leaves it? It is ridiculous to broach such a question. But when anybody undertakes to say precisely what that order consists in, he will quickly find he outruns all logical warrant. Men who are given to defining too much inevitably run themselves into confusion in dealing with the vague concepts of common sense. (CP 6.496)

I will start, then, from this first acquisition: in Peirce precision and certainty can never mean the same. This is not an innocuous statement, since it negates the long and difficult path that led Descartes, among others, to modern science and its exact, precise and verifiable equipment.

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[1]   I quote from: *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Ed. by: C. Hartshorne & P. Weiss (v. 1-6); A. Burks (v. 7-8). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58. 8 v., with the usual abbreviation "CP" followed by the volume and paragraph number; and from: *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*: A Chronological Edition. Ed. by "Peirce Edition Project". Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982-96. 6 v., as "W", followed by volume and page numbers, and from: *The Essential Peirce*: Selected Philosophical Writings. Ed. by: N. Houser & C. Kloesel (v. 1); "Peirce Edition Project" (v. 2). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992-98. 2 v., as "EP" followed by volume and page number. I preferably quote from the latest and more revised editions.

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Certainty is not a *result* of the process of inquiry, but a *premiss* for it – this may serve as a summary of both Peirce's and Wittgenstein's positions, which I now proceed to explain. Certainty is not something that we acquire *a posteriori*, as a conclusion to a methodical process aiming at logical evidence; rather it maintains some *a priori* validity, a kind of primitive validity, absolutely coextensive with the total vagueness of our first sense (and common sense) experiences. Certainty, then, goes hand in hand with vagueness and for the late Peirce – the non-Parmenidean Peirce, we could say – this is no contradiction at all. Its value doesn't belong to the order of argumentative discourse, but of pragmatic habits: it belongs entirely to the immediacy of practical matters, not to the illumination which follows from a good logical sequence.

Let add here that this is how both Peirce and Wittgenstein address a typically Cartesian theme – that of certainty – yet in a totally anti-Cartesian sense. At the same time, however, they seem to recuperate some Cartesian ideas. Indubitable evidence, intuition, *lume naturale*, instinctive insight, primary knowledge are common notions in both writers, whose questioning sticks to the form of methodical doubt in search of a criterion for reaching conceptual clarity. Nonetheless, their philosophies retain the totally anti-intuitionistic, anti-dualistic and anti-mentalistic approach that first inspired them. I will attempt to show that their positions are perfectly coherent, despite the apparent ambiguity of some terms and some important changes in their perspectives over time.

As is well known, during the last months of his life Wittgenstein wrote down some important observations on the theme of certainty, inspired by one of Moore's books which had a very good reception in the '30s and '40s, *A Defence of Common Sense*[2]. In this work Wittgenstein could perceive a kind of profound truth, yet one so badly formulated and argued that it required several important corrections. Moore maintains that our common sense leads us to be absolutely certain of some propositions concerning our immediate experience that we simply cannot bring into question. He refers to certain cognitive evidence that, in his opinion, common sense testifies to beyond any reasonable doubt. For example: I know that here there is my hand, I know that I am a human being, I know that there are physical objects, that the earth existed long before my birth, that my body has never disappeared, etc.

It's child play here for Wittgenstein to demonstrate that Moore starts from the very standpoint that is not firmly established but needs to be explicated: our total confidence in the elementary propositions of common sense, "I should like to say: Moore does not *know* what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him, as also for me; regarding it as absolutely solid is part of our *method* of doubt and enquiry" (C 151[3]).

Evidence, doubt, belief, common sense, and inquiry: Wittgenstein makes it clear that he is interested in the philosophical (that is, linguistic and grammatical) circularity of such notions in any proposition introduced by the assertion "I know that". But open the pragmatic, or better the pragmaticistic, works by Peirce, and you'll immediately encounter an identical hermeneutic horizon.

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[2] G.E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense", in *Contemporary British Philosophy, 2nd series*, ed. by J.H. Muirhead, 1925; now in *Philosophical Papers*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1959.
[3] I use this abbreviation, the letter "C" followed by the paragraph number, for: L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*. Ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979.

Let's start with the theme of doubt, a great methodological *incipit* for modern thought and modern science, the ground of a new, powerful figure of subjectivity, endowed with skeptical consciousness and critical awareness. It seems to me that, separated by just a few years and – it's worth recalling - without knowing each other's works, Peirce and Wittgenstein both respond with resounding laughter to this kind of foundational pedestal. Peirce writes in *What pragmatism is*:

> Dismiss make-believes Philosophers of very diverse stripes propose that philosophy shall take its start from one or another state of mind in which no man, least of all a beginner in philosophy, actually is. One proposes that you shall begin by doubting everything, and says that there is only one thing that you cannot doubt, as if doubting were 'as easy as lying'. Another proposes that we should begin by observing 'the first impressions of sense', forgetting that our very percepts are the results of cognitive elaboration. But in truth, 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' – a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself if you would; [...] But not make believe; 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. (EP 2.336)

A same conviction was held in 1868:

> We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned. Hence this initial skepticism will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt; and no one who follows the Cartesian method will ever be satisfied until he has formally recovered all those beliefs which in form he has given up [...] Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts. (W2:212)

It is not by chance that this last quotation belongs to the series properly known as "anti-Cartesian essays". If true means free from doubt, all men living in a community and sharing the same linguistic behavior – including the skeptic – live in the truth, because they do not question any single minute whether their hands are part of their body, whether their bodies are on the earth, an earth that has been there for a long time, since far before they were born, etc.; they do not feel a real need to clarify all their certainties about these things, to gain new evidence and more profound truths about them. As Peirce adds again in *How to Make our Ideas Clear* "to accept propositions which seem perfectly evident to us is a thing which, whether it be logical or illogical, we cannot help doing" (W3:259).

I wish to focus exactly on this point: the propositions that our common sense welcomes as true, are not verified, that is rendered true or argumentatively discussed, clarified and made free from obscurities. They are very simply, and very firmly, believed as if they were absolutely true; they are prior to the possibility of something being considered true or false, and precede any rational evidence different from our total confidence in common sense; better still, they constitute the first step in our world experience.

Wittgenstein was of the same opinion: "It may be for example that *all enquiry on our part* is set so as to exempt certain propositions from doubt, if they are ever formulated.

They lie apart from the route travelled by enquiry" (C 88) – they are not to be questioned, wrote Peirce; and Wittgenstein, almost as if in continuation, said that: "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (C 115). "What I need to show is that a doubt is not necessary even when it is possible. That the possibility of the language-game doesn't depend on everything being doubted that can be doubted" (C 392). Thus, definitively: "At the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded" (C 253).

Doubt is neither philosophically noble nor original, as modern thought maintained; on the contrary, doubt follows belief – "Doubt come after belief" (C 160), "There is every reason to suppose that belief came first, and the power of doubting long after" (CP 5.512) – and belief in this sense is not established in virtue of a rational decision or an act of introspection, "is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life" (C 559).

So we need to take another step in our inquiry: we normally use any proposition denoting certainty ("I surely know that…") as something habitual, almost instinctive; yet, when we are called upon to explain it, we don't know how to, we don't know how it originated and when we learned how to use it. We find ourselves close to St Augustine's position, who, when asked to explain what time is, replied: if nobody asks me, I know what it is; if I have to say what it is, I no longer know. Wittgenstein often refers to this in his writings, but let us also hear what Peirce has to say: "For I can almost hear you argue that you must either believe a proposition or doubt or disbelieve it. If you believe it, you do not doubt it and cannot criticize it; if you doubt it, it cannot be indubitable" (CP 5.498).

Similarly, at the very moment it is expressed, certainty becomes suspect, and so highly uncertain. It is submitted to the powerful device of doubt and criticism: it immediately loses its character of immediacy and cannot escape from the realm of argumentation, where the demand is for logical and critical foundation. As von Wright puts it, the fact is "*that* we know many things without being able to say *how* we know them"[4] .

We can now return to Peirce's quotation at the beginning: for him absolute certainty is wrapped up in the most total conceptual vagueness, while any argumentation is overwhelmed by a never-ending circle of pressing objections and precise clarifications. The possible fallibility of critical inquiry, of the infinite semiotic chain – to use Peirce's terms – in some sense coexists with the absolute certainty of all the indubitable propositions that guide our everyday practical life; their expression in behaviors is in accord with their inexpressibility and logical vagueness. Against the principle of non contradiction, fallible and infallible may well intermingle, as long as we keep in mind that practical infallibility is the only sense of the word "in which infallible has any consistent meaning" (CP 1.661), while "theoretical infallibility" is a "mere jingle of words with a jangle of contradictory meanings"[5]. "The test of doubt and belief is conduct" (EP 2.433).

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[4]   G. von Wright, "Wittgenstein on Certainty", in *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Garland Series Publication, v. 8, New York and Land, 1986.

[5]   Cf. on this topic A. Johanson, "Peirce and Wittgenstein's 'On certainty'", in *Living Doubt*, ed. by G. Debrock and M. Hulswit, Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994. Cf. also on the theme of intuitionism vs. pragmatism the profound reflections by V. Colapietro, in his "Testing our traditional 'Intuitions': pragmatic reflections on a complex inheritance", *ACPA Proceedings*, v.73, 2000.

Put more clearly: this kind of infallibility doesn't derive from any logical or sillogistic conclusion, but coincides with the concrete operativity of doing, of any minute practice in our ordinary life. I will explain this assertion – the guiding thread in my talk – by first citing some of Wittgenstein's propositions in this regard. "Why do I not satisfy myself that I have two feet when I want to get up from a chair? There is no why. I simply don't. This is how I act" (C 148). "Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. (That is very badly expressed and probably badly thought as well)" (C 358). And on several occasions, he liked to quote from Goethe's *Faust*: "In the beginning was the deed".

On certainty (C 94) tells us that there can be two systems of grammatical propositions (and in a minute we will look at this statement's extraordinary affinity with Peirce's 1905 division between dubitable and indubitable assertions). The first concerns a certain picture of the world: "it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" (C 94). "The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mithology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules" (C 95). "It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became fluid" (C 96). "The mithology may change back into a state of flux, the river-bed of thoughts may shift. But I distinguish between the movement of the waters on the river-bed and the shift of the bed itself; though there is not a sharp division of the one from the other" (C 97). "And the bank of that river consists partly of hard rock, subject to no alteration or only to an imperceptible one, partly of sand, which now in one place now in another gets washed away, or deposited" (C 99).

As is very well known, Wittgenstein was haunted for a long time, not unlike Peirce, by the problem of the foundation of knowledge. Is there a first premiss, a bedrock for interpretation? How far back can we go in retracing the original ground of what we know? And can we really say that one interpretation leads to another, in a dizzy spiral with no final end? "To be sure there is justification; but justification comes to an end" (C 192). The chain of reasons has an end, he often repeats[6]: "But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting" (C 110).

For the late Wittgenstein (but isn't it the same also for the early Ludwig?), beyond the propositional horizon there extends a non-propositional space – the space of ethics, of practice, of mystical. The space of the untranslatable, of what we can only show but not say. Something that can be just described in these poor terms: "This is what human life is like"[7]. In fact, we cannot help but show that we are quite certain of some truths,

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[6] For example in *Philosophical Investigations* (ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953; from now on PI followed by paragraph number) § 326, and § 485: "Justification by experience comes to an end. If it did not it would not be justification". But also in *The Blue Book*, *The Philosophical Grammar*, and *Zettel* we find similar notations.

[7] L. Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough'", in *Philosophical Occasions*, ed by J. Klagge and A. Nordmann, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1993, p. 121.

displaying it in silence – the same silence that closes the *Tractatus* - and letting our acts, gestures, and habits do the talking.

So, we are faced with a pragmatic, not a theoretical, final justification, exactly in line with Peirce's opinion: our infallibility rests on a practical ground, and cannot stand up to a logical or analytical explanation. Is this still a foundation? "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing" (C 166). We must accept that the foundation for any possible act of knowing is truly that kind of non-foundation (a foundation already ever-existed, and never properly founded) that coincides with the pressing flow of our *vis activa*, something that is simply" there – like our life" (C 559). What we have, then, is a certainty which we comply with, that goes beyond truth and falsity, that is not a way of *seeing* – an illumination - but a way of *acting* – the play of a game - as Wittgenstein says. "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language – game" (C 204).

"It is so difficult to find the *beginning*. Or better: it is difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back" (C 471). Presumably, as we all know to be the case for Peirce, also for Wittgenstein there is no real beginning and no final end, but just the continuous sequence of mobile linguistic games and "the chain of reasons". Yet, the latter does have an end: "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'this is simply what I do'" (PI 217).

This final end is thus a limit to the chain and not part of the chain itself; it is a kind of intuition, of *Anschauung*, a first, absolute certainty that, nonetheless, can be considered *together with* the process of endless interpretation, or *Auslegung*, as an original immediacy that lives through mediations. It is the certain immediacy of any pragmatic habit: "If I say 'Of course I know that that's a towel' I am making an *utterance* (*Äusserung*). I have no thought of a verification. For me it is an immediate utterance: I don't think of past or future (And of course it's the same for Moore, too). It is just like directly taking hold of something, as I take hold of my towel without having doubts" (C 510). This is the very origin, the *primum*, the instant of "*This* is how we think. *This* is how we act. *This* is how we talk about it"[8]. A place void of reasons, but full of sense, that coincides with that living praxis which can be strongly identified with an immediate and intuitive act of grasping something.

Was Peirce so far from such a perspective on the activity of knowing? I do not think so. And although it may be superfluous to recall his powerful theory on unlimited semiosis and the inferential nature of any immediate intuition - because everyone here, I think, is well acquainted with it – it's worth dwelling on his presentation of the role of the Final Logical Interpretant, since we can find some interesting points in it.

When in 1907, in *Pragmatism,* he tried to summarize his research on Interpretants, he distinguished three types: the emotional, the energetic and the logical interpretant The latter has some effect, but could we say that this

> effect may be a thought, that is to say, a mental sign? No doubt, it may be so; only, if this sign be of an intellectual kind – as it would have to be – it must itself

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8   L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. by G.E.M Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967, § 309.

have a logical interpretant; so that it cannot be the ultimate logical interpretant of the concept. It can be proved that the only mental effect that can be so produced and that is not a sign but is of a general application is a habit-change [...] The real and living logical conclusion is that habit; the verbal formulation merely expresses it. I do not deny that a concept, proposition, or argument may be a logical interpretant. I only insist that it cannot be the final logical interpretant, for the reason that it is itself a sign of that very kind that has itself a logical interpretant. The habit alone, which though it may be a sign in some other way, is not a sign in that way in which that sign of which it is the logical interpretant is the sign [...] The deliberately formed, self-analyzing habit — self-analyzing because formed by the aid of analysis of the exercises that nourished it — is the living definition, the veritable and final logical interpretant. Consequently, the most perfect account of a concept that words can convey will consist in a description of the habit which that concept is calculated to produce. But how otherwise can a habit be described than by a description of the kind of action to which it gives rise, with the specification of the conditions and of the motive? (EP 2.418)

The only and veritable Final Logical Interpretant of any sign's relation may be the pragmatic habit, that habit of response that makes any interpretation true, showing in practice what "we are prepared to do". Interpretation is not a mental state, either for Peirce or for Wittgenstein, it is simply a praxis. Moreover, interpretation does not continue endlessly from sign to sign, but constantly finds – in any single and minute practice that delimits our actions in the world – the *demi-cadence* of the habit of action, which closes "a musical phrase in the symphony of our intellectual life" (W3:263). This seems to be in a certain sense the opposite of any hermeneutic circle: yet, "at the same time that it is a stopping-place, it is also a new starting-place for thought".

Peirce formulated this idea better in his 1905 *Monist* writings, especially in the so-called pragmaticistic articles: I think that these important studies, almost contemporary with the passages quoted above, represent an important turning-point not only in his pragmatic approach, but also in his semiotic and theoretical views. Let us then briefly summarize the results of Peirce's first system, say from 1868 writings to the 1898 Cambridge lectures, in order to grasp the change of perspective. Peirce maintained in 1868 that we have no power of intuition, no power of introspection and that the only possible knowledge is knowledge in signs, the infinite reference from a thought-sign to another thought-sign in an endless semiosis. Therefore, not only thought, but reality and truth have an inferential nature, and man itself is a sign. Assuming this, we have to admit that the knowledge process, interminably hauled from sign to sign, exists within the space of reference, transition, mediation. So it is inevitably vague, fallible, uncertain. No knowledge can be said to be final, no fact is really inexplicable or uncognizable. It follows then that "fallibilism is the doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy. Now the doctrine of continuity is that *all* things so swim in continua" (CP 1.171). Fallibilism means exactly this: never accepting the existence of ultimate facts, or ultimate premises. For, just as a continuum is not composed of ultimate parts, neither is knowledge composed of ultimate explanations, nor reality of definite elements. The only justification for choosing a hypothesis is that it explains something. If, however, its explanation is that what we have are inexplicable facts, the road of inquiry is blocked off: inexplicabilities cannot in fact be considered possible explanations, and whatever is supposed to be ultimate is

supposed to be inexplicable (CP 6.174); but if any thought-sign refers to another thought-sign in an everlasting chain, everything can be subjected to more and more interpretation and never be final. This means, conversely, that it is absolutely uncertain or fallible at every single passage in the chain. The only possible explanation of knowledge, then, is that any explanation is not the only possible one, that the only certainty resides in the acceptance of the total uncertainty of the wavering in the continuum.

This was the way in which Peirce the semiotician expressed himself. But during the first years of the new century he moved towards the critical common-sensistic theory, and his general conception seems to change course (yet, his 1905 writings are permeated by many synechistic considerations, so it was more of a widening than going down a different path).

> *Common-sensism.* The doctrine that every man believes some general propositions and accepts some inferences without having been able to genuinely doubt them, and consequently without being able to subject them to any real criticism, and that these must appear to him to be perfectly satisfactory and manifestly true.[9]

This theory presents six characters that Peirce introduces in *Issues of Pragmaticism*: 1) it admits "that there not only are indubitable propositions but also that there are indubitable inferences". Here Peirce the anti-intuitionist seems to contend with Peirce the common-sensist. The very definition "critical common-sensism" implies a contradiction in that either everything is dubitable (subject to criticism) or something avoids doubt altogether (and appears immediately certain). But Peirce, I think, is able to hold on tight to both poles and, against the non-contradiction principle, oscillate between one and the other presenting them together. Let us see how.

"In one sense, anything evident is indubitable; but the propositions and inferences which critical common-sensism holds to be original, in the sense one cannot 'go behind' them (as the lawyers say), are indubitable in the sense of being acritical" (EP 2.347). The consonance with Wittgenstein's reading of Moore's texts is quite substantial, I think. Peirce maintains that there are some kinds of evidence that present themselves with an original certainty, unrelated to the interplay of criticism, truth and falsity. They are absolutely *a priori*. Peirce names some of them: the existence of a natural order, the confidence in our first perceptual judgments, or in some moral beliefs.

Against the greater part of Western modern thought, Peirce and Wittgenstein show that they believe in the existence of a solid bedrock of indubitable beliefs (Peirce) or certainties (Wittgenstein) that avoid reason's critical court and, despite their groundlessness, constitute the solid ground of any possible knowledge. Peirce even thinks that it is possible to "draw up a complete list of the original beliefs" (this marks the second character, EP 2.349), that may change, but "the changes are so slight from generation to generation, though not imperceptible even in that short period", that they

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[9] Definition proposed for the *Century Dictionary* and quoted by J. Brent (*Peirce: a life*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 300).

constitute "a body of propositions and inferences" which are uncriticizable[10] . Read again C 94 and you will find exactly the same remarks. Consequently, fallibilism attains the condition in which beliefs are established, but the total confidence in which we adhere to them remains firm and steady as long as we adhere to them.

Now we come to the third character: "the Scotch philosophers recognized that the original beliefs, and the same thing is at least equally true of the acritical inferences, were of the general nature of instincts" (ivi). Peirce adds then this important notation to his analysis: indubitable truths – common-sense beliefs – have the nature of instincts, are nearly innate truths, "instinctive insights", as he had said in the 1903 *Lectures on Pragmatism*. Remind that abduction, the main tool of scientific discovery, is for the late Peirce an act of insight, "the faculty of divining the ways of Nature" (EP 2.217), and "no reason whatsoever can be given for it, as far as I can discover; and it needs no reason, since it merely offers suggestions" (ivi). "This faculty is at the same time of the general nature of instinct, resembling the instincts of the animals […] We call that opinion reasonable whose only support is instinct" (EP 2.218). Reason as a sort of instinct (a "rational insight", a *lume naturale*): was that a real Copernican turning point for the main upholder of anti-intuitionism and anti-Cartesianism in the XIX century? Is Peirce really going back to some kind of innatism, of instinctive behaviorism? Was he in the last part of his life totally absorbed by metaphysical and religious concerns? Many interpreters favor this thesis and, if they come from the semioticians' camp, simply brush aside these later considerations[11] . But I don't think Peirce is an author we can read picking out what we like and deleting what we don't, because what he had in mind was an "architecture of theories".

We do in fact know that when Peirce talked of instincts and insights, the prevailing considerations in his work were cosmological and synechistic: as we read in *A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God*, the instinctive mind is a mind "attuned to the truth of things", and this, exactly as Wittgenstein had written in the *Philosophical Investigations,* is the solid "bedrock" (both of them use this very word) on which "my spade is turned":

> There is a reason, an interpretation, a logic, in the course of scientific advance, and this indisputably proves to him who has perceptions of rational or significant relations, that man's mind must have been attuned to the truth of things in order to discover what he has discovered. It is the very bedrock of logical truth. (EP 2.444)

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10 "I should return to a variety of Common-sensism which has always strongly attracted me, namely, that there is no definite and fixed collection of opinions that are indubitable, but that criticism gradually pushes back each individual's indubitables, modifying the list, yet still leaving him beliefs indubitable at the time being [. . .] Consequently, Common-Sensism has to grapple with the difficulty that if there are any indubitable beliefs, these beliefs must have grown up; and during the process, cannot have been indubitable beliefs. Still, I see no reason for thinking that beliefs that were dubitable became indubitable" (CP 5.513).

11 Johanson, for example, avoids discussing this part of Peirce's thought. He suggests that natural instinctive thoughts are hypotheses, but forgets that hypotheses are grounded, for Peirce, on *lume naturale*, not on a fallibilistic account.

I cannot here continue along this path, which would fully reveal the entire horizon lying behind Peirce's reference to instincts. I will limit myself to saying along with Brent that " for him instinct did not mean the mechanism of inherited behavior except as a degenerate form of it; it meant that Mind is embodied – is instinct – in the physical universe and in us as a part of that"[12].

What interests us here more is that Wittgenstein is probably not saying anything different when he writes: "But that means that I want to conceive it [certainty] as something that lies beyond being justified or unjustified; as it were, as something animal" (C 359); "I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct, but not ratiocination. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination" (C 475); and we already know, "the origin and primitive form of the language game is a reaction", "In the beginning was the deed"[13]. Peirce, for his part, insists that his theory " is intended as an apology for resting the belief upon instinct as the very bedrock on which all reasoning must be built" (CP 6.501).

Logic rests on a natural and primitive, almost instinctive, ground. This means: the foundation of logic is something neither logical, nor rational. It belongs properly to *pragmata*, not to *logoi*. How far Peirce has come from his first syllogistic and epistemological studies is shown by the last words in 1908 *A Neglected Argument*, that re-defines Pragmaticism as that "which implies faith in common sense and in instinct, though only as they issue from the cupel-furnace of measured criticism" (EP 2.446); so it is "an inquiry which produces, not merely scientific belief, which is always provisional, but also a living, practical belief, logically justified in crossing the Rubicon with all the freightage of eternity" (EP 2.449). A practical belief, that is a "habit of conduct": Peirce's conclusions reach the very same ground – the ground of practice, of use – on which, climbing up his own ladder, Wittgenstein himself settled. "Sure evidence is what we *accept* as sure, it is evidence that we go by in *acting* surely, acting without any doubt" (C 196).

Before continuing, however, let me briefly point out the last common-sensistic characters: 4) the acritically indubitable is invariably vague, according to Peirce. And vague is something "indefinite in intension", something that has to be defined in the course of inquiry. Indubitables and dubitables can co-exist, in a certain sense, against the principle of non-contradiction, since we have already stated that the only absolute certainty about knowledge is the absolute uncertainty of any definite characteristic, or - as is asserted by the 5th and 6th character - as the principles of common-sensism can be critical (Kantian!) and doubt can dwell inside absolute certainty. Contradiction perhaps belongs to logic, but in the sphere of pragmatics it doesn't worry us at all[14].

Peirce's main teaching resides, in my opinion, in the way he solves this apparent ambiguity that runs through his later work between the extreme dubitability of fallible semiosis and the certain indubitability of habits of conduct. Rorty grasps this apparent

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[12] J. Brent, *op. cit.*, p. 345.
[13] L. Wittgenstein, *Culture and value*, ed. by G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 31. Cf. also *Zettel*, § 545 e § 541: " For our language-game is behavior (Instinct)".
[14] Vagueness doesn't mean thus conceptual weakness (just remember that for Wittgenstein, too, sense vagueness is one of the resources of rational meaning). I can't follow here this path and so I make reference on this regard to my *Continuità e vaghezza*, Milano: CUEM, 2001.

contradiction very well when he says: "The permanent possibility of *practice* is what renders harmless the indefinite horizontal regress of interpretations, oscillating as they do between the purely determinate ("nothing accords with the rule") and the purely indeterminate ("everything accords with it")"[15]. It is practice that de-fines the infinity of hermeneutical reference: "Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it" (C 501).

The *practice* of language: what is primary for both authors is the life phenomenon ("a fact of living"), which, on becoming established, breaks the semiotic chain, displaying a form foreign to interpretation, yet, nonetheless posited by the latter's references. Perissinotto, an Italian interpreter who has worked on *On Certainty*[16], writes: "any linguistic game resides in this: that some symbols, some signs and gestures are not (I don't say: cannot be) further interpreted".

> What happens is not that this symbol cannot be further interpreted, but: I do not interpret. I do not interpret because I feel natural in the present picture. When I interpret, I step from one level of my thought to another. If I see the thought symbol 'from outside', I become conscious that it *could* be interpret thus or thus; if it is a step in the course of my thoughts, then it is *a stopping-place* that is natural to me, and its further interpretability does not occupy (or trouble) me. As I have a railway time-table and *use it* without being concerned with the fact that a table can be interpreted in various ways.[17]

"A stopping-place": remember that Peirce used the very same word when referring to the habit as Final Logical Interpretant. "There is a moment – continues Perissinotto – in which we are not interpreting any more and within this natural not interpreting we exhibit the game we are playing".

The game we are playing, the "natural stop" was for Peirce the habit, and indeed for him the habit was no different from an interpretation, but, rather, the very interpretation, the meaning of sign in its purest form. As I have already said, interpretation is not a mental activity, but a praxis; and clearly in a praxis we need no longer interpret, because we simply embody the meanings of our beliefs.

I think that the extreme originality of the writings devoted by both authors to certainty resides in a new awareness of the nature of knowing. Knowledge is no longer (or is not only) structured as an infinite chain of continuous references linking signs, thoughts and things, never reaching a true end or locating a real beginning, but has rather to be considered an infinite "*process* of beginning", as Peirce says (W2:211). The process of infinite progression and regression, which shows that there is no thought-sign that does not address another thought-sign (Peirce) nor any linguistic game that denominates a class of real objects (Wittgenstein) *has* to cease – or better still, simply and soon comes to a rest – within a system of firmly fixed beliefs that we never doubt as long as we practice them, for the simple reason that we practice them. Worshippers of unlimited semiosis and of the extreme fluidity of forms of life, in their later years Peirce and Wittgenstein seem inclined towards embracing an original pragmatics that

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[15]   R. Rorty, "Pragmatism, Categories and Language", in *Philosophical Review*, 70, p. 221, 1961.

[16]   L. Perissinotto, *Logica e immagine del mondo*, Milano: Guerini, 1991, p. 210.

[17]   L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. by R. Rhees, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974, §
99. (My emphasis.)

delimits a kind of knowing that is neither fluid nor transitory, but is, as it were, as solid as a rock. On this ground we *do* have absolute truths and definite responses.

I wish to conclude by matching two different passages by our authors in which they use nearly the same words for – it seems to me – the same purpose. Peirce writes in *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities*:

> At no one instant in my state of mind is there cognition or representation – but in the relation of my states of mind at different instants there is. In short, the Immediate (and therefore in itself unsusceptible of mediation – the Unanalysable, the Inexplicable, the Unintellectual) runs in a continuous stream through our lives; it is the sum total of consciousness, whose mediation, which is the continuity of it, is brought about by a real effective force behind consciousness. (W2:227)

And Wittgenstein in the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, I.630:

> Instead of the unanalysable, specific, indefinable: the fact that we act in such and such ways, e.g. *punish* certain actions, *establish* the state of affair thus and so, *give orders*, render accounts, describe colors, take an interest in others' feelings. What has to be accepted, the given – it might be said – are facts of living/forms of life (*Tatsachen des Lebens/Lebensformen*).

Immediate and given: the *simple fact* that we act in such and such ways, *to pragma autò*. And remember: in the beginning was the deed. Could we not then read Peirce's proposition – we have here an infinite *process* of beginning – in this sense: first of all come our habits of action, which are also our Final Logical Interpretants; but in the very instant we recognize, test, and inquire into them, semiosis begins again and these habits become signs of an infinite, fallible chain. They have therefore this double nature: certain beliefs that guide us through practice and fallible sign relations that are pulled along indefinitely by the semiotic train. Infinite semiosis and finite praxis co-exist together in any single way of acting we are familiar with.

It is so difficult to find the beginning, wrote Wittgenstein; for any beginning leads us further and further backwards in an infinite hermeneutical regression, and, at the same time, reveals itself here and now, in our very practice of naming and meaning it, in our particular form of life, which is interested in finding a cause and a beginning. A form of life, a fact of living, in Wittgenstein's terms is what "has to be accepted" (PI xi), what is absolutely primary (PI 656). It is not the first in the series of logical deductions, but the most evident, the most luminous, the most certain, a sort of Goethean *Urphänomen*. "It was not a trivial reason, for really there can have been no *reason,* that prompted certain races of mankind to venerate the oak tree, but only *the fact* that they and the oak were united in a *community of life*, and thus that they arose together not by choice, but rather like the flea and the dog. (If fleas developed a rite, it would be based on the dog). One could say that it was not their union (the oak and the man) that has given rise to these rites, but in a certain sense their separation. For the awakening of the intellect occurs with a separation from the original *soil*, the original basis of life (The origin of *choice*)", we can read in the R*emarks on Frazer's* Golden Bough[18].

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[18]   L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, cit., p. 139. Note the extraordinary affinity between this quotation and the one by Peirce from the *Neglected Argument*, where he talked of the mind "attuned to the truth of things". The original soil is, once again, Peirce's "bedrock" (EP 2.444).

Not only is there a strong pragmatistic inclination in the second Wittgenstein, in a way that I do not intend to go over in depth, because others have already done so, but there is I would say a synechistic attitude in some parts of his thought. It may be less than a cosmology, but more than a simple anthropology, since Wittgenstein too investigated that life experience, that "original basis of life" which logic originated from.

Any pragmatic habit, any gesture, any way of acting or *Lebensform*, is immediate, certain, and in some sense definite and final. The chain of reasons has an end, writes Wittgenstein; any habit is a Final Logical Interpretant, says Peirce, and this end interrupts the unlimited semiosis, showing its practical ground. Finally, therefore, fallibilistic semiosis and indubitable certainty, hermeneutics and pragmatics can be thought together, providing that we make a careful reading of the works of Peirce and Wittgenstein.

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