

Peirce and Ancient Scepticism*

Peirce e o Ceticismo Antigo

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Abstract: The marking of problematic relationships between Peircean pragmatism and scepticism, noted by his contemporaries as by ours, is all the more complicated than the label of scepticism remains vague. The task doesn't first appear simpler once the label is restricted to its understanding to the Ancient versions: differences vanish as emerges a common agreement on the therapeutic role of philosophy, the infinitely inferential character of thought and on the indubitability of perceptions. The parallelism can be drawn up to the end aimed at by the two paths, both pretending to assure a rational self-control. It highlights then the point on which they diverge, as the sceptic decides for suspension while the pragmatist chooses to keep on inquiry with the hope of infinite growth, which he has then to rescue from sceptical doubts.

Keywords: Doubt. Peirce. Pragmatism. Scepticism. Self-control.

Resumo: *A demarcação de relações problemáticas entre o ceticismo e o pragmatismo de Peirce, notadas tanto por seus contemporâneos quanto pelos nossos, é ainda mais complicada do que o quão vago permanece o rótulo de ceticismo. A tarefa não parece ser mais simples, num primeiro momento, uma vez que o rótulo se restringe ao seu entendimento nas versões antigas: as diferenças desaparecem à medida que emerge um acordo comum acerca do papel terapêutico da filosofia, do caráter infinitamente inferencial do pensamento e da indubitabilidade das percepções. O paralelismo pode ser traçado até o fim almejado pelos dois caminhos, ambos os quais pretendem assegurar um autocontrole racional. Esse paralelismo realça, então, o ponto em que divergem, já que o cético decide pela suspensão do juízo e o pragmatista escolhe continuar a inquirição com a esperança de crescimento infinito, que ele tem, portanto, de recuperar das dúvidas céticas.*

Palavras-chave: *Dúvida. Peirce. Pragmatismo. Ceticismo. Autocontrole.*

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Being called a sceptic was for long considered as an offence, an attack aimed at relegate one's speech apart from true philosophy. From Pascal¹ to Molière, the resolution to doubt is seen as an untenable, almost extravagant posture from which both common sense and philosophy have to be rescued. Yet contempt, polemic or ignorance can turn against those supposed philosophical or wise judgements. As Peirce prevents:

To be angry with sceptics, who, whether they are aware of it or not, are the best friends of spiritual truth, is a manifest sign that the angry person is himself infected with scepticism. (CP 1.344)

The lesson may sound less astonishing for those who are aware of the admiration of Peirce for Berkeley, to whom he might have borrowed such quiet objective consideration, or of his historical critical sense that frequently leads him against the current of the official history of his time. It offers nonetheless a high contrast with its contemporary context, made of hope in science and praise of faith, and within the pragmatic movement that, from James to Putnam, seems far from regarding scepticism with such a neutrality and whose defiant judgements would perhaps fail under Peirce's criticism. Yet, as in Berkeley's dialog², the objective consideration of scepticism doesn't lead Peirce to sympathise with it, and he firmly contest any Humean inheritance (CP 6.605) or the "sceptical and materialistic understanding" (CP 5.402, n. 2) of the pragmatic maxim.

The kindly consideration of scepticism has more contemporary accents³. Thanks to the development both of scholarly works and of the "Era of Suspicion" that elevates systematic distrust to the rank of epistemic virtue, scepticism has been winning more consideration and a place among philosophies. It is then possible to overcome Peirce's own committed statements, and to consider from a less polemical point of view the problematic relationships between his pragmatism and scepticism. The task has somehow been initiated years ago by Christopher Hookway, when noticing that Peirce's uncertainty principle, his fallibilism, "escapes from scepticism only by a crucial hair's breadth"⁴.

The diagnostic may, for sure, be extended to other elements: beyond the theory of scientific fallibilism, all Peircean epistemology, if not the whole pragmatic economy, may be related to scepticism. Fallibilism indeed, as Peirce reminds, is not an isolated recommendation but lies in the heart of his system, objectified in its general doctrines of Synchism and Tychism (CP 1.171). Despite any particular aspect of Peirce's principles, the whole pragmatism seems to have given the image of being a form of scepticism, so as to be defined as such in the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*⁵. In the process of proving its distinction, Peirce's pragmatism could be obliged to show that he cannot be finally considered as sceptical or neo-sceptical.

¹ PASCAL, *Pensées* (427 L, 194 B).

² BERKELEY, *Three dialogs between Hylas and Philonous*.

³ We should except the seventeenth and early eighteenth century in European philosophy, where scepticism found numerous famous defenders. On those topics, see BURNYEAT (1983) and POPKIN (1979).

⁴ HOOKWAY (1985, p. 73).

⁵ Cf. BALDWIN (1902) note to "Probabilism" by SORLEY, p. 344. After Sorley's reference to the Sceptics of the Academy, Baldwin adds that "it is logically related to pragmatism".

Once extended, the relationship between those two systems of thought also has to be specified. The prudence inherited from Sorites should make us suspicious about sharp boundaries and wonder which hair is actually sufficient to pass from scepticism to fallibilism and pragmatism, as from baldness to hairiness. The reading of modern studies on vagueness, and even on the scepticism/pragmatism relationships, can sound pessimistic: there are perhaps no sharp boundaries in our concepts, and pragmatism – even limited to the classical pragmatists, or to Peirce himself – is so broad that it permits no firm grasp and distinction. The most elementary prudence, if not the simplest way, may thus be to start by a definition of scepticism.

Peircean Pragmatism on Sceptical Crossroads

Peirce's own contradictory definitions and judgements about scepticism⁶, added to his terminological concerns, encourages such a definitional care. He declares here that he is a "hidebound sceptic" (MS 880⁷) but refuses to be affiliated with the sceptical school or compared to Hume, who is "a purely negative critic" (CP 6.605). At once he is seen "applauding the doubts of sceptics with all [his heart]" for their virile aggressiveness (CP 1.344) or their scientific fertility (MS 880), and then calling his method to "shatter the doubts of sceptics, like the celestial fire upon the altar of Elijah" (CP 5.425). He avows to have "feel the pleasure of praise" when he was said "never absolutely certain of [his] own conclusions" (CP 1.10); and to be deprived of certainty, isn't this what scepticism means? Peirce's judgements about doubt or scepticism in general and more specifically about his so-called scepticism can easily be misleading. Lighted by a restricted definition of scepticism to its ancient versions, they can be clarified, half abandoning some important, yet infinite, problems, half revealing a true similarity. One can hope thus to spot where pragmatism forks from the sceptical way.

However, the suspense mustn't be exaggerated, as sceptical threats have been clearly pushed back by Peirce himself, as he repeats that pragmatism is a philosophy of belief, of scientific progress and goes along with a firm theory of truth, whereas scepticism, broadly taken, challenges the possibility of knowledge and praises such or such form of epistemic withdrawal. This is the centre we mustn't forget, while wandering into specific qualifications.

The confidence and devotion to knowledge, so distant from scepticism, has nonetheless not be acquired on dogmatic paths, where guides are authority, tenacity or some illusive sense of evidence. The marking is thus complicated, all the more than Peirce places on these paths the so-called "modern sceptics" of Cartesian⁸ or Humean kind, that, by their radical or hyperbolic character, join the absurdity of absolutism or dogmatism they intended to challenge. They both follow an illusive impression of doubting, mistaken for a real doubt (CP 5.265) and persist in their hidebound uncriticised method.

⁶ For an exhaustive review, see FLORIDI (1998).

⁷ References are to Manuscripts of the Houghton Library, listed in ROBIN (1967).

⁸ By this, one must understand the cartesian sceptical challenges stated in the *First Meditation*.

It is to say that confidence in knowledge hasn't been stated first, but has to be acquired and preserved along the path itself. Peirce chooses thus the way of inquiry and, if he constructs it greatly by himself, with huge efforts and revisions, it is not impossible that he finds then again some ancient road, some Greek acceptance of "scepticism" where it meant "the fact of observing" and went with the "zetetic" virtue of inquiry.

This was, for sure, a non dogmatic form of scepticism, refusing to follow authorities, challenging respectable metaphysical obscurities, questioning any accepted evidence. Ancient scepticism is animated by a true philosophical ambition which leaves nothing outside human right to inquire, a way to refuse the ultimate, the unexplainable, an almost vertiginous acceptance to examine everything, that is no so far from some of Peirce's declarations, when he leaves for instance outside criticism neither "the laws which are known to us *a priori*, the axioms of geometry, the principles of logic, the maxims of causality, and the like" (CP 1.144) nor criticism itself (CP 5.442, MS 831⁹).

Yet in what sense does this form of questioning escapes from the reproach against paper doubt? The strength and coherence of Ancient Scepticism comes probably from their keeping away from any kind of theorisation, without stopping to philosophise. Their philosophy is a path, made not of systematic deduction from certain principles but of a linking of arguments.¹⁰ Ancient scepticism is above all a "method", in the true sense of the term, that is something which guides along a path, helping its followers to question the things *as they present themselves*, and not to doubt once and definitely of everything. Peirce and Sextus Empiricus (but also Wittgenstein) agree on conceiving philosophy as an activity, more precisely therapeutic (HP §280, CP.2.201, 6.212),¹¹ a work that is judged from its effects, as none of its proposition is such that it cannot be then revised.

Is there however some historical argument that could support this curious similarity? Nothing of course that can show a true or direct influence. "The Greek influence on Peirce's last philosophy",¹² brilliantly highlighted by Max Fisch, reveals the increasing interest marked by Peirce in Epicurean and Aristotelian¹³ systems, and a real inspiration from them. Peirce declares himself an "Aristotelian" and says that the philosophy of the Garden is "one of his pets" (Ms 1604). Of any interest in Ancient Scepticism, there is apparently no trace. This one nonetheless exists, but remains broadly unedited. To begin in the proper sense of the term, it mainly appears from the unpublished Ms. 1604 and 1605, in which Peirce lists his readings in Ancient philosophy and claims to "have studied a good deal" and almost "spent a year" on the *Adversus Mathematica* and the *Pyrrhonian Hypotyposes* of Sextus Empiricus. Some other clues, and mostly his extensive

⁹ Quoted by TIERCELIN (1992, p. 237).

¹⁰ See the parallel with PEIRCE (CP 5.265).

¹¹ The similarity between these two ways has to be underlined as they adopt close positions on the idea of effects itself: the effects aren't defined first in terms of happiness or individual practical utility, but as a purgation from negative and ill beliefs. Happiness can only be a secondary effect of this first curative action, as illustrates the example of the painter Appelles (Sextus Empiricus, HP I, § 25-30) that meets only incidentally success, after having departed from his sterile pas behaviour.

¹² This repeats the subtitle of FISCH (1986).

¹³ On this topic, see also TIERCELIN (2004).

scholarship and range of interests, suggest that Peirce have not ignored Ancient scepticism and its specificity, and even been interested in it; reading historians as Zeller, Grote, but also Diogenes Laertius, Cicero, Philodemus, or even Montaigne and Gassendi, Peirce shows some interest for Pyrrho's life (CP 1.617), alludes to the third mode of Agrippa (CP 5.327) and takes sides in the ancient debate on self-contradiction of scepticism (CP 5.318). He appears to be aware of the difference between the Academy and Scepticism (CP 1.137) and explicitly refers his own fallibilism to the doctrine of the former. If he claims filiation with Socrates (CP 5.11, 6.490), it is partly for his ironical method and his questioning of established meanings,¹⁴ that has lead some critics to consider him as a sceptic. If the historical acquaintance is thus real, and not deprived of marks of respect and interest, it must be considered prudently, as remarks remain rare and as it is almost impossible to distinguish real borrowings from a general bathing in a vague sceptical tradition and general epistemic modesty, that finally belongs to any philosophy. We must thus content ourselves with the fact that Peirce's way of inquiry seems to walk on the sceptical paths of the Ancients, so that the comparison is theoretically sustainable, given their common agreement on hypothetical and therapeutic aspects of philosophy, conceived as an activity more than as a set of propositions, but also, as we shall see, on the reliability of phenomenon and importance of self-control.¹⁵

It may be then objected that, rather than clarifying our ideas, the comparison brings a supplement of obscurity and qualifications, and hinders the project to draw precisely the difference between pragmatism and scepticism. Yet, one cannot separate from a way he never takes or crosses: things must first be confused in order that the idea of distinction makes sense. It is perhaps just now, after having nearly merged Peirce's pragmatism and scepticism, that we are able and justified to wonder where the two diverge. For which reason then? And which new way does Peirce pretend then to open or follow?¹⁶

At first sight, the answer is given by Peirce himself, when he mocks the Ancient Sceptics for not being able to live in accordance with their doctrine (CP 1.617). The ethical aspect is a distinctive character of Greek philosophy, and Greek scepticism

¹⁴ On the Socratic inheritance in Peirce, see RANSELL (2000).

¹⁵ These points of agreement seem to bring Peirce's thought closer to Sextus Empiricus scepticism, whose work he has studied. Moreover, the empirical Sceptics advocate a form of generalisation from experience which isn't far from the Epicurean conception, studied and praised by Peirce and Marquand (about this, see FISCH [1986] and De LACY [1978]). If one has to choose, it would thus be to this kind of Ancient Scepticism that Peirce is closer, rather than, for instance, the extravagance of Pyrrhonism (on classification of Ancient Scepticisms, see BROCHARD [1884], BRUNSCHVIG [1996], LÉVY [1996]). But the choice deserves probably a greater prudence, first because pragmatism is also really close to some views of this borderline case of scepticism that constitutes the Academy of Carneades, second because it is still difficult and highly debated to know which part of Sextus Empiricus' thought is due to a Pyrrhonian inheritance (BROCHARD [1884], CONCHE [1994]) and finally because Peirce would firmly object to some central points of Sextus' thought, such as his critics on Signs and Logic.

¹⁶ We won't deal here with the problem of knowing whether, in his splitting up with scepticism, Peirce draws a new path or joins some other ones, old or modern, the opinions being as numerous as the potential candidates.

particularly, which is underlined both by the historians (Diogenes Laertius, Zeller, Brochard...) and Peirce (CP 1.618); it is also a common target for its adversaries, since Epictetus who ironically asks to the Sceptic: “And where do you raise you hand when you eat? To your mouth or to the eye?”¹⁷.

Is Peirce’s contempt of the “Hellenic tendency to mingle theory and practice” (*idem*) sufficient yet to separate his pragmatism from Ancient scepticism? The argument seems fragile. From a general point of view, a factual inability doesn’t hold for the legitimate possibility¹⁸. From a Peircean point of view, it must be remind that practical effects in terms of happiness or success can’t evaluate the rightness of a theory. It can be indeed rational to choose death (CP 2.654) and inversely, care for life can lead to irrational decision, as to apply probability to a single event (CP 2.652). It is thus indifferent to know whether Pyrrho was happy or how many times he risks his life. If the hazards encountered by the Sceptics can raise the hope that a better hypothesis or posture is possible, they do not suffice, in themselves, to disqualify the sceptical path.

The distinction between pragmatism and scepticism can’t neither occur on a second point, also noticed by commentators and Peirce, that is the indubitable character of perceptions, as it becomes irrelevant in case of the Ancient versions. If some differences remain, of course, between the phenomenism of Pyrrho or Sextus, and Peirce’s complex theory of “immediate perception”, it is certainly not on this ground that the two theories really diverge, but rather on the ground of ethics, or rather “esthetics” in Peirce’s sense, where the possibility and value of knowledge is advocated. It is somehow when scepticism shows its aporetic character, and comes to the dead-end of suspension that Peircean way forks – or rather keep on advancing. The way of inquiry *must not* be blocked, as recommends Peirce, but also *cannot* be blocked: for being finalised, it is nevertheless infinite.

The “Striking” Argument

As Claudine Tiercelin shows in a recent study¹⁹, to escape scepticism, one has to advocate a satisfying empirical realism that necessarily implies “to refuse the perfect transcendence of reality to human mind and to affirm an access to reality that passes through a kind of immediate perception”, and this, for Peirce, passes, from the 1880’s, through the insistence on “the external pressure, the strength, the ‘percussivity’ (NEM IV, 318) and reactivity” of the percept, which is supported from the 1880’s by the development of an indexical and iconic logic²⁰. Peirce’s answer toward the one that “may walk down

¹⁷ Epictetus, *Talks*, II, 20. About refutation for living impossibility, see BENATOUÏL (1997, p.13-6).

¹⁸ For instance, no one keeps on saying that Kantian morality can’t stand because it is actually impracticable

¹⁹ TIERCELIN (2005, p. 207 sq.) and especially on Peirce’s theory of immediate perception and its qualifications, p. 225-37 .

²⁰ TIERCELIN (2005, respectively p. 211 and 226). I owe the full consciousness of the chronological aspect of the argument and of its complexity to Claudine Tiercelin.

Wall Street debating within himself the existence of an external world” is clear and firm: “If in his brown study he jostles up against somebody who angrily draws off and knocks him down, the sceptic is unlikely to carry his scepticism so far as to doubt whether anything beside the ego was concerned in that phenomenon” (CP 1.431).

The argument is not so far from Molière’s mockery against the sceptical Doctor Marphurius, who recommends to “speak about everything with uncertainty” and never gives a determinate answer to Sganarelle’s questions. Sganarelle finally gets exasperated and hits him, explaining that he “should then not say that [he was] hit but rather that it appears to him that [he has] been hit.”²¹ Yet it comes to an end against ancient scepticism which, as Victor Brochard stated, “doubts of everything except phenomena”²², and doesn’t contest the objectivity of perceptions. Phenomena, for Ancient Greeks and specially Sceptics, are conceived both as objective and relative – either to a subject, or a point of view, or a context that is independent of the way the phenomenon is thought; or, in Peircean terms, real. There is no contradiction in linking together these characters; and movement, for instance, is no less real for being relative. There is no sense in doubting that honey appears to be sweet when it does, as explains Sextus Empiricus, but “that it is sweet in essence, that is questionable”; “[the] questioning doesn’t aim at phenomenon, but at what it said of phenomenon; it is not the same thing as doubting the phenomenon itself” (HP §19).

Peirce agrees on this factual indubitable or “uncriticized” character of perceptual judgements (CP 5.442):

Direct experience means simply the appearance. It involves no error, because it testifies to nothing but its own appearance. For the same reason, it affords no certainty. (CP 1.145)

Neither the Sceptic nor the Peircean pragmatist see any sense in questioning that something appears, that something reacts independently of my control, and that it has some equally given quality (the sweetness of honey, “the color of magenta, the odor of attar, the sound of a railway whistle [...] in themselves, which are mere may-bes, not necessarily realized” 1.304). Firstness, or Feeling, and Secondness, or Reaction, are real and with them, phenomenon where they relate, so that pragmaticism covers a form of phenomenalism (CP 5.428). Peirce has actually a more accurate consciousness of perceptual process than the Ancients, but he arrives at the same point as their naive short-cut: phenomenal data are arranged in a perceptual judgement which, for being instantaneous, is nonetheless mediate and lies on inferential process²³. Yet this process is practically beyond our rational control and critical ability, so that its conclusions can’t

²¹ MOLIÈRE, *Le Mariage Forcé*, 5.

²² BROCHARD (1884, I, 1).

²³ This nonetheless would make a difference if we were to inquire deeper in these subjects: the percept is only given in a perceptual judgement, from which it is abstracted as irreducible to this judgement. We thus don’t have a pure access to the phenomenon in its purity: regarding quality, “every description of it must be false to it” (1.357); pure reaction is dumb (7.622). Somehow, to stay in pure phenomenon would condemn us to silence and, as far as it is possible, to the reduction of thought up to the minimum – a solution for which historical Pyrrhonism (as solution of silence) should appear as the most coherent scepticism.

be doubted of. Our perceptual judgements are moreover practically infallible (which is the only case in which infallibility makes sense), so that we are justified in not looking for doubting them. Doubts, to state it simply, arise when one pretend to infer some general knowledge from the series of perceptions.

Given the Ancient versions, the status of sensible impressions, the existence of external world, and the reliability of our most immediate perceptions can be left aside in the debate between pragmatism and scepticism. It lightens and somehow derives it from the infinite and complex subtleties of the “scepticism in its modern or ‘Cartesian’ form, for which our claim to knowledge of the external world sets the original and paradigmatic problem”²⁴.

It can be thus noticed that Peirce and Ancient Sceptics agree on some form of dismissing of the dream argument that challenges the reality of existence²⁵: “A dream, as far as its own content goes, is exactly like an actual experience. It is mistaken for one.” (CP 5.217; see also CP 1.27, 1.145, 2.141). If there is any difference for Peirce, it is in the knowledge that can be inferred from experiences, according to their continuous and common character. Mathematical objects are experimented in imagination, as dreams in a sense, yet allow for a true knowledge which signifies their reality.

The adoption of ancient version has thus the advantage, beyond its clarifying the realism of phenomenal existence, to avoid the common dichotomy between real and imaginary that is quite irrelevant for Peirce. It also skirts around the external / internal distinction, using the more Peircean difference between what is actually present²⁶ to the mind and what is then inferred, and thus only potential. This temporal floating distinction is not so strange for Ancient sceptics that also acknowledge that thought is infinite. “Every exercise of mind is an inferential process” (CP 5. 318), never stopping on something else than thought, that requires further interpretation. Peirce recognises the rightness of the sceptical modes of Agrippa, for instance, of the third mode of infinite regression, on which he notes:

It is a very ancient notion that no proof can be of any value, because it rests on premises which themselves equally require proof, which again must rest on other premises, and so back to infinity. (CP 5.327)

On the ground of this common diagnosis on infinitely inferential nature of thought, Sceptical and Peircean are nevertheless different.

²⁴ WILLIAMS (1996, p. 1).

²⁵ A limited dismissing for Peirce, who develops a complex system against these challenges. See TIERCELIN (2005).

²⁶ Present doesn't mean then instantaneous, nor that immediately conscious: “what is present to the mind at any ordinary instant is what is present during a moment in which that instant occurs. Thus, the present is half past and half to come” (CP 6.126). The difficulty comes from the fact that Peirce defines sometimes present as instant (thus nothing is present to the mind), sometimes as a “passing moment” (CP 7.348) (thus something is “present” or *actualiter* to the mind). See CP 1.38, 1.284, 1.310, 2.44.

In Front of the Infinite Regression: Pessimism of Infinite Progression or Optimism of Progress?

The foundational quest is vain: from such an inquiry, we can expect nothing, except to stop on false obvious principles or to keep on questing forever, as show Agrippa's modes. Thought is thus infinitely regressive, it has no absolute beginning. The same conclusion is drawn by Peirce, since his famous articles of 1868.

From this, Sceptics move to the second conclusion that thought is also infinitely progressive: how would it reach an end, since it reaches no foundation? Therefore, they suspend their inquiry. We may first object to their logic: from the infinity of regression, can it be truly concluded a symmetrical infinity of progression? From the past disputation between contradictory propositions, could it be conclude that none of their heir could ever find some agreement? Although it sounds very pessimistic, the reasoning seems defensible, inasmuch as it generalises past experience, what scepticism allows.

Sceptical pessimism can't be thus attacked on its incoherence. However, he fails in being too impatient, that is in jumping too hastily from a just diagnostic to a dead end conclusion, without taking time to measure the path it has accomplished. If thought is infinitely regressive when it looks for some stable or certain ground, this is not absolutely vain and without effects: it leads actually to broader, yet not ultimate, premises that governs the development of many other propositions. There is thus an evolution, and a path without absolute beginning is nonetheless a path. Keeping on the previous logic, there may be a symmetrical progressive evolution, toward more precise propositions. Translated in epistemological terms, it means that thought consists in linking ascents to general laws of phenomenon and "descent" to the minutest discrimination of behaviours. From the same diagnostic as the Sceptics, Peirce defends then an optimistic view of knowledge as evolutionary.

Let's compare sceptical and Peirce's recommendations: I observe a bottle that appears to be indubitably green. Yet it appears darker, almost black, when observed from another viewpoint, by someone else or according to every relative case exposed in Aenesidemus's tropes. We face two propositions that seem incompatible but must be equally acknowledged as valid: "this bottle is green" and "this bottle is black" (CP 6.493). This is not a particular example, as everything goes like this once we consider several cases: fire burns my hand for instance, and doesn't burn, water for instance etc. From this, Sceptics conclude that the bottle is no more green than black and that fire is no more burning than no burning. The pragmatist, for his part, shows that, from various observations, it is always possible to enounce a vague, yet synthetic proposition such as "the bottle is coloured" or "something is coloured". From this we can expect to explain the plurality of phenomenon by establishing, identically, generalities about perception and its laws. This is, finally, how every thought proceeds.

Nevertheless, scepticism must be blamed more for the consequences than for the false content of its perspective on knowledge. Its formulas aim at suspending the exercise of judgement (*epochè*) and ending the quest for knowledge. Sceptical toils and modes are voluntarily *aporetic* (from *aporèin* to be unable to pass) which means in other terms that they block the road of inquiry. What could Peirce propose to keep it open? Actually, he uses series of arguments against vices of sceptical attitude.

On the first hand, it is careless, as has been shown: they hastily conclude from the

plurality of appearances to the impossibility of real knowledge:

[his] objection is intended to go much further than this [i.e. that “some judgment precedes every judgment inferred”], and to show (as it certainly seems to do) that inference not only cannot produce infallible cognition, but that it cannot produce cognition at all. (CP 5.327)

The laws which are inferred from experience cannot, of course, give us a perfect determinate certainty, on what will happen for instance, and we will probably be surprised or disappointed, sooner or later. It is never certain indeed that the various parts from which we reason correspond exactly to the whole. Peirce agrees with Sceptics that there is no absolute certainty; even when something appears to be certain, when science seems to have come to a definite conclusion, no certain criterion allows us to be certain that it won't change. If we are never certain to have reviewed the whole range of things, the only fact that things belong to a whole offers us both a general knowledge and a way to develop and correct it, by synthetic reasoning: these are the lessons of logic, from which Sceptics carelessly ignore.

This ignorance points to a second vice: sceptics claim to enounce a purely epistemological thesis, while they make metaphysics, even hypothetically or minimally. They stress epistemological impossibility on the background of existent determinate objects (which is Sextus Empiricus' implicit ontology) or even suppose that the world is indeterminate, as Pyrrho's disciple, Timon, seems to have reckoned. To think about the status of knowledge, even for showing its extreme limitation to pure present, requires thinking about the nature of reality, which limits it. If Sceptics are unable to keep on walking and fall in *aporia*, it is partly because they are, as many others, embarrassed by implicit metaphysics: “the attempt to avoid these only leads to careless and noxious solutions of them” (CP 7.418).

Impatient, imprudent, the Sceptic finally seems too demanding toward knowledge: its weariness can be explained by nothing but an ambitious demand in an utopian end. Knowledge must be perfect and definitive at the level of individual mind, or is not. What pragmatism teaches is that knowledge is irreducibly vague, fallible and this all the more than it is individual. Its modesty diverges from sceptical radicalism: epistemologically, they fork on the individual or public character knowledge, morally, on the question of self-importance or humility. Before definitively diverging, they thus celebrate a common agreement on the desperate character of private knowledge.

The Argument of the End

It is then about End that scepticism fails, coming to a cul-de-sac. As Victor Brochard wrote, scepticism differs from circumstance doubt by its deliberate character. Deliberation implies the existence of a norm, of an ideal of conduct. If the Sceptic takes the resolution both to doubt (which is the virile part of his posture) and to keep on doubting, to refrain from ever believing anything, he aims finally, with this ultimate gesture, at a control of himself that the floating variability of judgements doesn't offer to him. The subtlest idea of scepticism, fruit of the disillusion of Platonic theory of knowledge, yet heir of Greek esthetical ideals, may lie there: that the true relationship of man to world isn't certainty, but self-control. Knowledge doesn't allow for such a control, as it offers only fragile and

infinite steps: the only norm that can (and must) then be stated, is the end, the refusal of knowledge. Ancient scepticism is truly ethical: it suggests a norm of conduct, which is suspension. Even the wise Pyrrho departs sometimes from this ideal and loose his self-control, going back to it only when he remembers that there is no norm or, as Sextus Empiricus says, in “stating nothing about what is naturally good, and what is naturally evil” (HP I, §28).

If he doesn't recommend any kind of suspension of judgement, Peirce also advocates the importance of self-control. The control of thought is a particular case of “control of conduct, and of action in general, so as to conform to an ideal” (CP 1.573), and reason is the capacity of controlling and criticising oneself. Logic, ethics, and esthetics are linked, as they give the norm of development of every conduct and thought, assuring thus the pursuing of inquiry.

The first remark that can thus be addressed to the sceptical solution is its trickery: it is vain to hope to control anything is suspending every end, as control need a positive ideal to which actual conduct can be compared and on which resolutions can be established (CP 1.574). There is no sense in speaking about control if there is no aim to be thought of. Peircean pragmatism thus show that thought cannot be separated from its ideal which is Truth, as it is in itself, as far as it is rational, purposive (CP 8.322).

If reason is the deliberate conduct of thought, its development thus requires somehow a science of its own purpose, of its ideal. But how can such a science escape from fallibility? The pragmatist may be no more coherent than the sceptic and its absence of end, if he pretends to inquire forever on a fallible purpose. On his first reproach, the pragmatist thus has to advocate a stable ideal. Without this, he cannot be assured that he has opened another path, and also that he won't get exhausted because of its infinity and turn back to sceptical way. As regards these aspects, Peirce's thought gets really dense, so that we must content ourselves with a general sketch of his solutions, to show broadly how the Peircean conception of Ideal, of which Truth is a specification (CP 1.575) can escape scepticism while remaining coherent with fallibilism and assuring self-control.

The strength of its definition lies in the resort to generality. Every determined logic, ethics or esthetics is open to error and imprecision. A pragmatist normative science doesn't aim to define a particular Ideal that “whatever the professions of moralists may be, [it is] nothing but a sort of composite photograph of the conscience of the members of the community” (CP 1.573). The Ideal has the form of a habit (*id.*), that is of a general (CP 1.608, 1.614). If thought proceeds toward a final opinion, nothing determines what this opinion will finally look like. Moreover, the “opinion” must be conceived as a general habit of thought, that is a common way of inference and interpretation, an ordered actualisation of particular thoughts in conformity with a general idea, rather than as a definite, exact substantial content.

The Peircean conception of generality succeeds in supporting a positive idea of Truth while taking in account the possibility of its history and evolution: not only can we say that various or divergent “truths” does not attest the unreality of Truth, but also that Truth itself is nothing but these very truths: it is actually what allows to determine those special existing sciences, what is visible in the order imposed to existents, yet never exhausted by them, and so not reducible to them.

To say that the Ideal is general is to say almost nothing specific (and thus fallible), except that it cannot be reduced to or exhausted by the series of effectively imprecise,

temporary and questionable definite conducts or ideals. Peircean Ideal thus both escapes specific doubts on its fallibility, and assures its infinite realisation, its infinite growth, the “concrete reasonableness” (CP 5.3).

Peirce’s various definitions of Ideal can of course be objected, besides their grandiloquence, their being nonetheless fallible inasmuch as they say something. They have indeed to take up the challenge to express something which doesn’t allow easily for expression, which is pure presence, here pure presence of reason to itself. It is not to say that Peirce’s solution is wholly satisfying or reveals no problems; yet, it seems clever enough to escape, by more than a “hair-breadth”, the sceptical aporia.

Ancient and Modern Therapies

From diagnosis on perception and nature of knowledge somehow similar to those of Ancient Sceptics, Peirce advocates a more optimistic view of knowledge as evolutionary. His philosophy is then of a different order, in charge not *to cure from thought* but *to cure thought*, by offering it the means to know its own process, to get him safer, and to insure thus a better accomplishment of its own end, that is its own growth, the development of a “concrete reasonableness” (*id.*).

The consideration of Ancient Scepticism, then, isn’t sufficient to keep pragmatism away from other accusations of scepticism, nor to reveal all the parades it reserves against them. In a sense, it also actualises new answers from its general rules, according to the context and the exact content of the attacks²⁷. Thus, it is unfair to stay on this, and to confine scepticism to the role of a villain: if one has to be immunised from scepticism, the most modern method is, as noticed John Dewey²⁸, to leave him react *into* our thoughts, and not against it. From this viewpoint, it is probable that Peircean pragmatism allows its germs, up to the most ancient, to work in itself.

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²⁷ See TIERCELIN (2005) for a extensive bibliography on these emerging answers, and a specific kind of answering.

²⁸ DEWEY (1901).

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