

The imperative for non-rational belief¹

O imperativo para crença não-racional

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Abstract: The varieties of belief and the grounds for believing have long been of concern for philosophers (as well as theologians and psychologists). Typically, we distinguish between practical and theoretical beliefs but usually it is supposed that a proposition is at the core of every belief, thereby providing an intellectual or rational basis for justification. Sometimes, though, core beliefs seem to be more a matter of practice than of intellect, especially those beliefs contemporary philosophers of mind refer to as our folk beliefs. If we accept Peirce's idea that it is more accurate to say that we are in mind rather than that mind is in us, then we may also suppose that we participate in systems of belief that belong more to our society than to us as individuals. These systems of belief may plausibly be supposed to have evolved to harmonize our personal lives with the broader goals and imperatives of our society at large. Such systems of belief may be rooted in and perpetuated by a variety of cultural traditions and practices and are typically absorbed during childhood as we learn our way of life. Not only are these core beliefs not the products of rational consideration, it is essential that they are not grounded in reason, clearly separating them, as matters of vital importance, from the purview of science, and bringing into question the reach of pragmatism. The treatment of belief in the writings of Peirce and James continues to shed light on these important questions.

Keywords: Belief. Habit. Social mind. Theory. Practice. Peirce. James. Clifford.

Resumo: *As variedades e os fundamentos da crença há muito têm despertado o interesse de filósofos (bem como teólogos e psicólogos). Caracteristicamente, distinguimos entre crenças práticas e teóricas, porém, geralmente, supõe-se que exista uma proposição no cerne de cada crença, oferecendo assim uma base intelectual ou racional como justificativa. Mas, por vezes, crenças essenciais parecem ser mais uma questão de prática do que de intelecto, especialmente aquelas crenças que os filósofos contemporâneos da mente designam como nossas crenças populares. Se aceitarmos a ideia de Peirce de que é mais correto dizer que estamos na mente e não que a mente está em*

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nós, então podemos também supor que participamos de sistemas de crença que pertencem mais à nossa sociedade do que a nós como indivíduos. Esses sistemas de crença podem, plausivelmente, ter evoluído para harmonizar nossas vidas pessoais com os objetivos e imperativos mais amplos de nossa sociedade em geral. Tais sistemas de crença podem estar enraizados em, e perpetuados por, uma variedade de tradições e práticas culturais, e são caracteristicamente absorvidas na infância à medida que entendemos nosso modo de vida. Além dessas crenças essenciais não serem produtos de considerações racionais, é essencial que não sejam fundamentadas na razão, separando-as claramente como questões de importância crucial, no âmbito da ciência, e pondo em questão o alcance do pragmatismo. A abordagem da crença nos escritos de Peirce e James continua a lançar luz sobre essas importantes questões.

Palavras-chave: *Crença. Hábito. Mente social. Teoria. Prática, Peirce. James. Clifford.*

To broach the subject of belief, with philosophers, is likely to turn their thoughts to technical epistemological problems or the specialized concerns of our colleagues who devote their research to cognitive science. In recent years, a vast quantity of philosophical brain power has been expended on the question of belief, and from many different angles, ranging over such diverse interests as how to address troubling counter-examples to the old ‘knowledge is justified true belief’ formula, or how we can have beliefs about something we have never even conceived of, or how to install identical beliefs in someone’s replica or laboratory-fabricated doppelgänger.²

For present purposes, I will not delve deeply into technical matters but will consider only provisionally and somewhat informally some possible ramifications of Peirce’s views on belief.³ Along with many admirers of Peirce, I was at first surprised and somewhat perplexed when I learned that he claimed that belief is out of place in science, but I have come to understand why he held that view, one I now share. To make sense of Peirce’s claim, it is necessary to review the ambiguous idea of belief and consider Peirce’s views in relation to other ideas. In doing this, we will see that Peirce anticipated some of the diverse ways belief is dealt with today and that he may have something new to contribute. What Peirce says about belief will at least suggest a way to account for important beliefs that are not supported by reasons and might help us understand why humanity may not be following a path of reason toward truth.

The varieties of belief and grounds for believing have long been of concern for philosophers (as well as for psychologists and theologians). Typically, in ordinary parlance, belief is held to be something like a commitment to a big idea

2 Two key wellsprings for the nearly two generations of focus on these problems concerning belief are the classic articles by Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” (GETTIER, 1963), and Hilary Putnam, “Meaning and Reference” (PUTNAM, 1973).

3 For an impressively accomplished and technically sophisticated Peirce-inspired treatment of belief in the context of contemporary epistemology, see HAACK, 1993.

or a cherished way of life: we believe in social equality, or freedom of religion, or democratic socialism, or capitalism. But our day-to-day lives are governed by a multitude of less exalted beliefs which we never consciously attend to: that our morning coffee will help get us going, that the floor we stand on will support our weight, that the money in our bank accounts will be there when we ask for it. A vast number of humans believe in a supreme being. It is surprisingly common to equate belief with the feeling of confidence we have that what we believe is true or as we believe it to be.

When we take a more scholarly approach to the study of belief, we often distinguish between practical and theoretical beliefs, or between beliefs that equip us for the practical and ordinary affairs of life, on the one hand, and beliefs that concern more abstract or theoretical matters, on the other. We might regard beliefs as cultural products (as cultural anthropologists do), or as psychological or brain states (as psychologists and cognitive scientists usually do), or as epistemic states (as traditional philosophers generally do). Whatever scholarly approach is taken, it is usually assumed that what is believed when we believe something is a proposition, or a representation with propositional import—something that makes some kind of claim about how things are. To believe that São Paulo is the largest city in Brazil is to be in the right kind of mental state with regard to the proposition that São Paulo is the largest city in Brazil—to have an attitude of acceptance of the truth of that proposition. So the usual view is that a proposition is at the core of every belief and that believing amounts to having a special accepting or affirming attitude about that core proposition, which is said to be the content of the belief. A belief, then, is said to be a mental state identified as a propositional attitude. It was Bertrand Russell, in 1921, who first introduced this way of understanding belief and he pointed out that there can be many different propositional attitudes all with the same content.⁴

Probably everyone, except for a few dissident philosophers, is convinced that beliefs influence what we do. The common view is that beliefs direct actions through the agency of desire. Desires are said to be the motivating force enabling beliefs to function. Together, beliefs and desires constitute the causal nexus for intentional acts. This belief-desire thesis, together with the usual assumption that at the core of every belief is a proposition that is accepted as true, furnishes the logical framework needed for regarding beliefs as reasons for the actions they generate and for supposing that beliefs should be subject to rational and ethical justification.

Concerns about belief and the need to justify belief have seemed critical for philosophy because of the fundamental role belief plays in the age-old quest for knowledge. I will not overly complicate matters by bringing the question of knowledge too centrally into the picture, but it is germane that, at least historically, knowledge has been, more or less, the gold standard for philosophy. According to the standard view, at least the traditional view, knowledge involves three factors: a truth, belief in that truth, and justification of that belief. Put simply, knowledge is said to be justified true belief, so we can see that beliefs and how beliefs can be justified are thought to be essential for knowing.

4 Take any proposition P. Not only can we believe P; we can hope that P, or expect that P, or fear that P, or be in any number of different mental states with regard to P. See RUSSELL, 1921, p. 243.

We all grew up taking it for granted that civilization has amassed a great body of knowledge and that we personally know more than a little. Leave it to philosophers to tell us that in order to really know anything we have to justify the beliefs central to our knowledge claims. But there is a lot of disagreement about how to justify beliefs or even about what justification really is. I will forego reviewing competing theories of justification but will just point out that ordinarily, assuming that the content of a belief is a proposition, when we ask for justification we are asking for reasons to believe in the truth of the proposition in question—logical or inferential support from other propositions. But some theories base justification on non-propositional and non-inferential considerations such as the right kind of generating conditions or supporting experience or evidence. Over the last half century it has become more and more common to forego justification altogether and substitute the reliability of a belief's linkage to truth by virtue of the dependability and predictability of the underlying psychological or causal processes. But however we go about it, as long as we aspire to knowledge, we want some assurance that our beliefs represent the truth. In fact, according to some philosophers, we have a moral obligation to justify our beliefs or make sure they are reliably true.

In 1876, an esteemed acquaintance of Peirce's, William Kingdon Clifford, delivered a lecture to the London Metaphysical Society in which he made the famous claim that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." This lecture, entitled "The Ethics of Belief," was published the following year and, according to Timothy Madigan, "it has never since ceased to be a focal point of discussion for individuals interested in the overlap between the fields of epistemology and ethics" (MADIGAN, 2010, p. 1).⁵ Although Clifford was concerned about beliefs of all kinds, he was decidedly antagonistic toward religious beliefs, which he was convinced could not be justified. According to Madigan, Clifford was "something of a fanatic" when it came to religion. "Not only did he speak of the clergy as enemies of humanity, and of Christianity as a plague, but he also attacked all belief in God" (MADIGAN, 2010, p. 112). Clifford has been compared with his contemporary, Nietzsche, in his "battle to free the minds of human beings from outmoded superstitions" (MADIGAN, 2010, p. 113).⁶

William James, Peirce's lifelong friend and cofounder of the Cambridge Metaphysical Club, where pragmatism was born, took up his pen against Clifford—albeit two decades later and long after Clifford was deceased—to defend what he called "the justification of faith" and "the right to believe." James was troubled by the growing positivistic attitude among scientists, and the general spread of free thought among the faculty and students at Harvard, but the focus of his concern was what he regarded as Clifford's attack on religion.⁷ In his celebrated essay, "The Will to Believe," James championed the right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters even when our merely logical intellect is not coerced. James

5 For publication information about Clifford's lecture see CLIFFORD, 1877.

6 Madigan references Frederick Copleston on the comparison of Clifford with Nietzsche (See COPLESTON, 1967, p. 136).

7 See MADIGAN, 2010, p. 97-107, for a good account of James's motivations and for his similarities to and differences from Clifford. On p. 107-12 there is a good account of Peirce's thought on the same issues.

delivered his essay first in 1896 as an address to the Philosophy Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities and quickly published it in a journal of popular literature (JAMES, 1896). It was reprinted early the following year as the leading essay in a book also entitled *The Will to Believe* (JAMES, 1897). James dedicated his book to Peirce.⁸ Although James, himself a man of science, agreed with Clifford that whenever possible beliefs should be based on evidence, he thought there were important exceptions when the intellect is stymied by an absence of evidence but when one cannot avoid adopting a belief and acting on it. In such cases, it is necessary to follow the guidance of our passional nature. “Our passional nature,” James wrote, “not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds” (JAMES, 1897, p. 11).⁹ John Passmore once expressed the main thesis of *The Will to Believe* in the simple phrase: “men cannot help going beyond the evidence” (PASSMORE, 1966, p. 102).

It seems clear that James hoped his argument, a variant of Pascal’s wager, would encourage his auditors and readers to choose the path of religion. Even though we cannot prove that God exists, nor justify epistemically our belief in God’s existence, Pascal had recommended that we “bet on God” anyway. If we choose God we stand to gain eternal happiness in the afterlife in case our belief turns out to be true. All we lose if our belief turns out to be false is whatever world happiness a non-believing life might bring us—but that is trivial, Pascal thought, when balanced against the possibility of eternal happiness. The sensible thing to do is to bet that God exists. James’s wager is more abstruse. Like Pascal, James seems to have accepted that there is no epistemically convincing basis for belief in God or the truth of religion yet, as he put it,

If religion be true, I do not wish [...] to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side,—that chance depending [...] on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passional need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right. (JAMES, 1897, p. 27)

Unlike Pascal, James was not seeking the payoff of a blissful afterlife but was promoting the satisfaction of living one’s Earthly life in harmony with eternal values. For James the value of living a religious life so greatly outweighs the value of agnosticism or atheism that, along with Pascal, he recommends betting on God.¹⁰

8 James’s dedication reads: To My Old Friend, Charles Sanders Peirce, To whose philosophic comradeship in old times and to whose writings in more recent years I owe more incitement and help than I can express or repay.

9 A genuine option is one which is live, forced, and momentous. For a helpful brief discussion of James’s appeal to genuine options, see Jeffrey Jordan’s article, “Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

10 This account is based on Ruth Weintraub’s analysis of James’s wager in WEINTRAUB, 2003. See, also, SLATER, 2009.

It turned out that soon after the 1897 publication of *The Will to Believe*, James arranged for Peirce to give a series of eight lectures in Cambridge.¹¹ James's principal motive in arranging for those lectures was to provide Peirce with some much-needed income but, as he indicated in the dedication of his book, he was always eager to engage with Peirce's ideas and no doubt he was anxious for his students to meet this storied giant of American philosophy. James knew that Peirce's thought gravitated to the technical and formal so he urged Peirce to keep his lectures accessible, perhaps by treating a variety of topics "of a vitally important character."¹² Now Peirce, who read James's essay within weeks of its publication,¹³ would not have missed that in the opening paragraph James had announced that, even in the midst of so much "freethinking and indifference," not everyone at Harvard had lost interest in vital subjects—certainly he had not—and his defense of our "will to believe" would address one of those vital subjects: the importance and value of religious life. So even though Peirce could not restrain himself from treating some complicated logical and mathematical topics in his Cambridge Conferences lectures, even presenting his distinctive formal theory of continuity, he was sufficiently provoked to devote considerable time to his concern over what he regarded as James's unwise attempt to apply philosophical argumentation to religion and conduct.

The title of James's essay, "The Will to Believe," was, by itself, enough to raise philosophical eyebrows. Bertrand Russell, for example, said that rather than preaching the will to believe, as James did, he would rather preach the will to doubt: "If only men could be brought into a tentatively agnostic frame of mind [concerning matters of religion and politics], nine-tenths of the evils of the modern world would be cured" (RUSSELL, 1977, p. 116). Peirce's objections were more nuanced but equally strong. In his fourth lecture, clearly as an alternative to James's "will to believe," Peirce argued for "the will to learn" and introduced his *first rule of reason*: "in order to learn you must desire to learn and in so desiring not be satisfied with what you already incline to think." As a corollary to this rule, Peirce advanced the dictum: "Do not block the way of inquiry" (EP 2: 48).¹⁴ James's "will to believe" seemed almost designed to block the way of inquiry in the special cases when, according to James, we have the right to believe.

But James's essay stimulated Peirce to reconsider the question of belief and to introduce important distinctions that are not yet fully understood and perhaps of unexplored relevance for contemporary philosophy of mind. It is well-known that in tracing the origins of pragmatism to deliberations in the Metaphysical Club, Peirce usually remarked on the importance of Alexander Bain's definition of belief as "that upon which a man is prepared to act" (EP 2:399). Such was the importance

11 The series of eight lectures, entitled "Reasoning and the Logic of Things," was delivered in February and March, 1898, at the Cambridge Conferences Studio House on Brattle Street. The lectures were published by Kenneth Ketner in Peirce 1992b.

12 The interactions between James and Peirce are recounted in Ketner's and Putnam's introduction to Peirce 1992b (for the quotation see p. 25).

13 Peirce read James's essay in March, 1887 (see Peirce to James, 13 March 1897, James Papers, Houghton Library at Harvard University).

14 See also RLT: 170-171.

of that definition that Peirce regarded Bain as the grandfather of pragmatism. A careful look at the famous two papers that launched pragmatism, “The Fixation of Belief” and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” confirms that the question of belief, what it is and its role in our cognitive and experiential lives, was the key issue at the birth of pragmatism. In “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” the paper Hillary Putnam named the manifesto of pragmatism (BORRADORI, 1994, p. 62), Peirce began with his distinctive claim that “the action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt” and that thought “ceases when belief is attained” (EP 2:127).¹⁵ It follows from this, Peirce said, that “the production of belief is the sole function of thought.” Peirce was aware that his use of the terms “doubt” and “belief” were technical and not common in ordinary language where they usually “relate to religious or other grave discussions.” But as he used these words, they designated “the starting of any question, no matter how small or how great, and the resolution of it.” For Peirce, belief had three key properties: “First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a *habit*.” For Peirce, a habit was something like what today we would call a stored program which, given the stimulus of the perception of circumstances meeting certain conditions, would generate actions of a certain type.¹⁶ In the early days of pragmatism, Peirce often described habits as physiological states, but later he would equate them with conditional propositions. Even in this early paper, however, when Peirce enunciated his pragmatic maxim, instead of referencing habits he referenced conceptions, indicating that what he had in mind were mental states. So it seems that in the early days of pragmatism, Peirce supposed that beliefs were the end result of thought processes and he described beliefs (or what we might call the content of beliefs) in two ways, as habits (embedded behavioral programs) and as conceptual rules of action (more or less as conditional propositions).

These two ways of describing belief correspond to two differing accounts of Peirce’s general theory of belief. It is sometimes claimed that Peirce “operates with a standard belief-desire psychology” (HUTTON, 2014, p. 52), which holds that desires provide the motivating force to activate beliefs and determine actions. As noted earlier, it is customary, on this account, to assume that the content of beliefs are propositions taken to be true, thus providing a rational and justificatory framework for beliefs and the actions they give rise to. On this view, beliefs are more or less the ordinary sort that philosophers-cum-cognitive scientists have dubbed “folk beliefs.” If you think that your belief that you will get wet if you walk uncovered in the rain, along with your desire to remain dry, explains why you take an umbrella with you

15 The rest of the quotations in this paragraph are also from “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.”

16 My treatment of Peirce’s conception of habit is limited to the role of habit as the content of natural or practical beliefs. I should be noted that habit is of central importance in Peirce’s thought. For a fuller and richer treatment see COLAPIETRO, 2009. Peirce’s conception of habit is the focus of a forthcoming book edited by Myrdene Anderson and Donna West (Anderson & West 2016)—see especially the chapter by Winfried Nöth, “Habits—Human and Nonhuman—and Habit Change According to Peirce,” for a systematic account of Peirce’s far-reaching conception of habit.

when it's raining, then you believe in folk beliefs and the belief-desire theory. While there is some support for this view in Peirce's writings, it cannot be ascribed to him straightforwardly.¹⁷

An alternative account of Peirce's general theory of belief is one based more fundamentally on his claim that a belief is a disposition to act. In his well-known book on the origins of pragmatism, Sir Alfred Ayer analyzed Peirce's account of belief in some depth along these lines (AYER, 1968).¹⁸ According to Ayer, on Peirce's view, belief is equivalent to a propensity to action and, contrary to the belief-desire thesis, it is not an attitude toward a proposition. In fact, on this behavioral account, when one believes that P, one does not believe a proposition-entity at all (BROADRIBB, 1986, p. 182). Although Peirce did hold that "to be deliberately and thoroughly prepared to shape one's conduct into conformity with a proposition" does amount to believing that proposition (AYER, 1968, p. 30),¹⁹ Peirce thought more generally that to believe the proposition P is just to say that one is disposed to act in such-and-such a way (BROADRIBB, 1986, p. 183). Furthermore, Peirce also thought that one might have a belief that is not consciously related to a proposition at all (EP 2:336). Quine, too, described Peirce's theory of belief as a behavioral account, claiming that insofar as Peirce's account depended on propositions or sentences, he promised to give a behavioral (dispositional) account of them as well (QUINE, 1981, p. 29). Quine credited Peirce with scoring "[...] a major point for naturalism [...] in envisioning a behavioristic semantics [...] when he declared that beliefs consist in dispositions to action" (QUINE, 1981, p. 36-37)

Before returning to Peirce's response to James's will to believe for a closer look at how it refocused his thought on the question of belief and influenced his views, it is worth noticing the extent of Quine's influence on the path philosophy of mind took during the second half on the 20th century. The naturalism that Quine thought Peirce had pioneered with his behavioristic account of belief became a mission for Quine, and his 1969 article, "Epistemology Naturalized," where he urged philosophers to "surrender the epistemological burden to psychology," became the

17 According to Peirce, desire is general and vague; he writes that "it is always some *kind* of thing or event which is desired; at least, until the element of will, which is always exercised upon an individual object upon an individual occasion, becomes so predominant as to overrule the generalizing character of desire" (EP 2:118). And even though desire "implies a tendency to volition" and we take it for granted that we *desire* to do what we *will* to do, yet Peirce notes that we do not always do, or even *will to do*, what we *desire*. Peirce guessed that this capacity to refrain from *willing to do* what we *desire to do* might well be "the root of our consciousness of free will" (CP 1.331). Sometimes Peirce imagined that objects of desire were dreamlike—characterized by firstness according to his category scheme. The object of experience that might in fact satisfy our desire is a second. But "in seeking to attach" the object of desire, the dream, to the object of experience, the actuality, desire "is a third, or medium" (CP 1.342). So it seems that Peirce did not think that our desires provide the motivational and volitional element necessary to make our beliefs operational in experience and, consequently, he could not straightforwardly have been a belief-desire theorist.

18 See especially Ch. 2. For discussion of Ayer's account of Peirce's theory of belief, see BROADRIBB, 1986, p. 182-186.

19 For the Peirce quotation, see EP 2: 440.

manifesto for a new breed of naturalized philosophers who would soon take up the label “cognitive scientists” (QUINE, 1969).²⁰

The movement leading to Quine had perhaps begun with the shift to experimental psychology around the turn of the 19th century. According to Jerry Fodor, it was the acceptance of the experimental methods of the physical sciences that led psychologists to abandon theories of mind that postulated entities beyond the scope of the new methods (FODOR, 1981). By the 1920’s, J. B. Watson’s behaviorist psychology had taken hold and mental terms lost their role in psychological explanations. Ordinary language philosophers found ways to save mentalist terminology for philosophy but some worried that they might be taking language on holiday. As naturalized philosophy gained dominance, the almost universal mindset of analytic philosophy became an entrenched physicalism fervently anti-Cartesian and intended to bring philosophy into full harmony with the physical sciences. Commonly it was assumed that in the fullness of time mentalist terms could be eradicated from language and replaced with terms referring exclusively to physical relations and processes. Paul Churchland proposed a new scientific paradigm where folk psychology would be replaced with an extended physics with a focus on human-world relations and interactions in purely physicalist terms (CHURCHLAND, 1979). Stephen Stich famously introduced the principle of psychological autonomy which “states that the properties and relations to be invoked in an explanatory psychological theory must be supervenient upon the current, internal physical properties and relations of organisms” (STICH, 1978). In other words, if you were somehow duplicated molecule for molecule to obtain your exact physical replica, then this new you would automatically share all of your psychological states—all of your beliefs and desires. In fact, if the new you were secretly switched with the old you while you slept, you could never know which you you were. The trend today is to view philosophy of mind as neurophilosophy, an interdisciplinary merging of neuroscience with philosophy.

Perhaps surprisingly, an enthusiasm for a naturalized philosophy of mind that is fully harmonious with physics and neuroscience was not alien to James and Peirce. Both men were trained in experimental science and well-informed in researches in experimental psychology and brain science, such as it was in their time, and both had been strongly swayed by Darwin’s naturalism. In an interesting footnote near the end of “The Will to Believe,” James stressed that “belief is measured by action” and noted that, consequently, “the whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action.” If the actions “required or inspired by the religious hypothesis” are no different than actions arising from “a purely naturalistic scheme of belief” then “religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away.”²¹ Of course, James concluded that religious faith contributed something valuable to human life that went beyond what a pure naturalism could account for.

20 See Dennett (1978) for discussion of Quine’s “Epistemology Naturalized” and its influence on the subsequent development of the philosophy of mind. It is well-worth considering whether the naturalized philosophy of mind that arose, at least partly in consequence of Quine’s exhortation, is a form of anthropocentric philosophy of the sort Peirce rejected (see IBRI, 2012).

21 JAMES, 1897, p. 29-30, n. 1. This is, quite clearly, a classically pragmatic prescription.

Peirce, whose scientific training included physics, was more inclined than James was to seek biological and physicalist explanations of psychological and mental properties and operations. He wrote of thinking as cerebration and supposed that it was subject “to the general laws of nervous action” (EP 1:200). We know that, for Peirce, thinking, or inquiry as he called it in his early pragmatism papers, aims to remove sources of cerebral irritation, thus resolving doubt, and concludes in a state of belief which he identified with habit. Peirce thought that the power of forming habits is “the most characteristic property of the nervous system,” and is the physiological basis of learning (EP 1:264). This “physiological basis” involves nerve stimulation (a kind of irritability) and reflex activity which persists with random variations until the irritation is alleviated. So habit formation is a kind of cerebral programming that, in effect, prepares us for future experiences. Peirce said that “a cerebral habit of the highest kind, which will determine what we do in fancy as well as what we do in action, is called a *belief*” (EP 1:201).

But Peirce did not suppose that the physiological explanation of habit told the complete story of what it is to believe. Even though it is correct to call Peirce a naturalist, he was not a physicalist like the naturalized scientific philosophers of today. He was a profound but nuanced realist who rejected the nominalist view that reality consists exclusively of concrete particulars, and that properties, abstract entities, kinds, relations, laws of nature, and so on, are only conceptual devices for referring to many individuals in concert. Peirce distinguished reality from existence and admitted general and abstract entities as reals without attributing to them direct (efficient) causal powers. Peirce held that these non-existent reals could influence the course of events by means of final causation (conceived somewhat after Aristotle’s conception), and that to banish them from one’s ontology, as nominalists require, is virtually to eliminate the ground for scientific prediction as well as to underwrite a skeptical ethos unresponsive of moral agency.²² Now, just as Peirce thought that desire is general, belonging to his category of thirdness, insofar as the content of belief is a habit, or a rule of action that can be expressed in a proposition, it, too, is general. This means that a belief, as a rule of action, is a state of mind and not a simple brain state. So to complete the story of what it is to believe, we must say that to do their work of guiding us into the future, beliefs must act semiotically, not efficiently. Semiosis is the agency of final causation. A belief as a rule of action, would, as such, lack efficiency, just as a belief, as a pure brain state in its physicality, would at most be a source of aimless compulsion. As Peirce liked to point out, a court without a sheriff, or the means of creating one, could not function as a court at all (CP 1.213). But though Peirce was confident that mental states could somehow determine physical compulsion to bring about their ends (CP 1.211-212), he couldn’t say how. As he wrote to F. C. S. Schiller, how “logical sequence is converted into mechanical sequence [...] we are in my opinion as yet entirely ignorant.”²³

When Peirce entered Studio House on Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on Thursday evening, 10 February 1898, to deliver the first of eight

22 For a recent treatment of Peirce’s conception of final causation, see SHORT, 2007. For an in-depth study of Peirce’s anti-nominalism, see FORSTER, 2011 (and see HOUSER, 2012 for a review of Forster that summarizes his argument).

23 Peirce to Schiller, 1906 (CP 8.320).

lectures on “Reasoning and the Logic of Things,” one of his aims was to challenge some of the ideas James had argued for in “The Will to Believe,” the essay Hilary Putnam calls the “opening gun in the war for James’s own ‘Pragmatism’” (PUTNAM, 1992, p. 56). Six months later, James would deliver his famous lecture to the Berkeley Philosophical Union and publically introduce pragmatism by name acknowledging Peirce as its father. How much Peirce’s thought really differed from James’s remains a bit murky. Peirce was not opposed to James’s general appreciation of the value of religion, and in later years he even proposed that belief in God might arise naturally in the course of life. Even though Peirce strongly objected to the idea that we have a right to deliberately adopt a belief without evidence, blocking the road of inquiry, he later advocated self-improvement through the deliberate adoption of goals and ideals, along with a corresponding effort to imagine ourselves behaving accordingly, as a way to establish new cerebral habits or, in other words, practical beliefs. And with regard to Clifford’s rather extreme view of the ethics of belief, though Peirce did not think we should, or even could, justify all of our beliefs, he did begin to think more deeply about normativity and soon concluded that logic should be based on ethics. “The whole operation of logical self-control,” he wrote, “takes precisely the same quite complicated course which everybody ought to acknowledge is that of effective ethical self-control” (CP 5.533).²⁴ But similarities, notwithstanding, I think two concerns rose to the top as Peirce reflected on James’s argument in “The Will to Believe”: one, that James’s nominalism was showing in his concentrated focus on action as the ultimate end of belief and, two, that James had not adequately distinguished between theory and practice. As I draw to a close, I will review a few of the distinctive points Peirce made about belief in ordinary life and in science that, ever since, some have found disconcerting.

Peirce opened his first lecture by recounting how the Greek philosophers of antiquity had “expected philosophy to affect life,—not by any slow process of percolation of forms, [...] but forthwith in the person and soul of the philosopher himself rendering him different from ordinary men in his views of right conduct” (EP 2:28). Aristotle, though, who Peirce supposed was “not much of a Greek,” had “set the matter right” (EP 2:28). Peirce announced that he stood before his auditors as an “Aristotelian and a scientific man, condemning with the whole strength of conviction the Hellenic tendency to mingle Philosophy and Practice” (EP 2:29). He went on to contend that philosophy was still in an infantile state due in large part to the fact that too many philosophers had come from theological seminaries rather than from “dissecting-rooms and other laboratories,” and that explained, at least partly, why he was unsettled by James’s curious defense of religion (EP 2:29). Even though James had come to philosophy from science, and had established the first psychological laboratory in America, Peirce aligned him with the Hellenic tradition. Peirce argued that, although philosophy might rightly over the course of time “influence religion and morality,” it should only be allowed to do so “with secular slowness and the most conservative caution” (EP 2:29).

24 See Douglas Anderson’s commentary on “The Fixation of Belief” in ANDERSON, 1995, p. 82 ff., for a good discussion of similarities and differences in the conceptions of belief held by Clifford, James, and Peirce.

As Peirce continued, he discussed the limitations of reasoning in the conduct of life. “In everyday business, reasoning is tolerably successful,” though the logic we use is a *Logica Utens*, “like the analytical mechanics resident in the billiard player’s nerves,” not theoretical logic. But when we face great decisions, matters of vital importance, Peirce thought it unwise to “trust to individual reason” (EP 2:30). He reminded his auditors that the “lower animals,” acting on instinct, and reasoning very little, rarely make mistakes, while we humans, after considering all the facts in a case brought before a court of law, and deliberating with care, often draw a conclusion that might as well have been made with the toss of a coin (EP 2:31). On a later occasion, Peirce gave the example of a ship’s captain who, “in a terrific storm finds himself in a critical position in which he must instantly either put his wheel to port acting on one hypothesis, or put his wheel to starboard acting on the contrary hypothesis, and his vessel will infallibly be dashed to pieces if he decides the question wrongly” (EP 2:156). On the spot action is essential; reasoning is not an option. If anything will save the ship it will be something like instinct, a disposition to act immediately and effectively in circumstances like this. Such dispositions that can be confidently activated at a moment’s notice, without any deliberation, are what Peirce had come to conceive of as beliefs (EP 2:33).

As I remarked on earlier, Peirce did not suppose that a belief is an attitude toward a proposition, nor did he think that the cognitive dispositions undergirding beliefs are necessarily propositional—I assume this is evident if, in the case of “lower animals,” we regard their instinctive dispositions as inchoate belief states. In later years, after Peirce developed more fully his theory of signs, he analyzed possible semiosis, or sign action, into sixty-six distinct semiotic states.²⁵ These classes of signs amount to sixty-six different kinds of possible mental contents—a sort of mapping of the mind. Depending on one’s general theory of mind, this might be regarded as a classification of representational states, or perhaps inferential or intentional states. By my count, only four of these sixty-six kinds of signs are proposition types, but there are non-propositional semiotic states that can also serve as the content of practical beliefs. For example, there are many kinds of non-propositional abducent states which might account for instinctive or habitual reactive behaviors.²⁶

But, in his Cambridge Conferences Lectures, Peirce was not concerned with the fine distinctions that might be drawn in imagining all possible varieties of belief contents. Carrying forward with his objection to “mingling philosophy and practice” or, in other words, the theoretical with the practical, he wanted to make it clear that belief was a kind of cerebral state, or state of mind, that naturally develops in the course of practical life, in the give and take of experience, as nature’s way of preparing us to survive the tumult to come. “We believe a proposition we are ready to act upon,” Peirce told his auditors. “Full belief is willingness to act upon the proposition in vital crises.” But the aim of science, according to Peirce, pure theoretical science, is not action at all, not in any vital sense, but only to find things out—“to learn the lesson that the universe has to teach” (EP 2:54). Whatever propositions are accepted in science are held provisionally and “the scientific man,” Peirce said, “stands ready to abandon one or all as soon as

25 See HOUSER, 2016a for some further commentary on Peirce’s sixty-six signs.

26 See HOUSER, 2005 for a brief discussion of the classification of abducent signs types.

experience opposes them.” Even in the case of so-called “established truths,” which are readily embraced and expected to endure—should they be refuted, the scientific man will gladly abandon them as errors. Not to do so would block the road of inquiry. Consequently, Peirce maintained that there is “no proposition at all in science which answers to the conception of belief.”²⁷

It is easy to imagine some of Peirce’s auditors feeling a bit confused over Peirce’s dual claims that the aim of science is to find things out, which must mean to advance knowledge, but that belief is out of place in science. Peirce was perhaps being a little rigid in his refusal to admit belief in any form, save possibly for opinion, into the realm of science proper, probably because he wanted to emphasize the distinction between theory and practice. “It is notoriously true,” Peirce said, “that into whatever you do not put your whole heart and soul in that you will not have much success. Now, the two masters, *theory* and *practice*, you cannot serve. That perfect balance of attention which is requisite for observing the system of things is utterly lost if human desires intervene, and all the more so the higher and holier those desires may be” (EP 2:34). This sounds like a mini-negative review of “The Will to Believe.”

But how did Peirce conceive of the advancement of knowledge if not as success in justifying beliefs about how things are? Science works with conjectures and hypotheses, and these, Peirce strictly maintained, are not matters for belief. “In all its progress,” Peirce wrote, “science vaguely feels that it is only learning a lesson.” Science “regards facts as merely the vehicle of eternal truth, while for Practice they remain the obstacles which it has to turn, the enemy of which it is determined to get the better.”²⁸ Of course Peirce, a career scientist himself, understood scientific procedure involving observation, conjecture, experimentation, reasoning in its different forms, and so on, and he recognized that science progresses and that its body of so-called “established truths” grows.²⁹ But he did not identify these “established truths” with justified beliefs. As I have already remarked, even an established truth is only held provisionally and will never be embraced unyieldingly by any true man or woman of science. Science is never in a hurry and its only rigid commitment is to fallibility. As noted above, the payoff James hoped to win from “betting on God” was the satisfaction of living one’s Earthly life in harmony with eternal values. Peirce’s view of science as a pursuit that stakes nothing on any temporal venture, bears some resemblance to James’s view of religion. But the eternal value Peirce prized was truth, and that is the aspiration of science, not of religion.

In conclusion I want to make a speculative conjecture based on Peirce’s idea that thought can be an external process and that mind is a relational network of signs that we participate in and operate within but which is not really *ours*. Peirce did not believe that thought is necessarily connected with brains, but is operative in

27 This quotation and all the preceding quotations in this paragraph are from EP 2:33.

28 This and the preceding quotation from CP 5.589.

29 In his oral commentary on this paper, Ivo Ibrí emphasized, quite correctly, that Peirce’s scientific theories were greatly influenced by his scientific practice and that, generally speaking, science as we know it is a complex mix of theory and practice.

semiotic processes at work within groups and in the external physical world.³⁰ As Lucia Santaella has emphatically maintained, “Peirce’s concept of mind is very broad and liberal,” not only admitting unconscious mind but extending the scope of mind to include any process governed by purpose or final causation—in other words, mind is the ground of all semiosis (SANTAELLA, 1994).³¹ This broad conception of mind can be, and has been, extended to encompass the whole cosmos—but my focus now is more modest. We know that Peirce attributed minds to corporations and social groups, even sometimes suggesting that there is something like “personal consciousness” in groups of persons who “are in intimate and intensely sympathetic communion” (EP 1:350). Peirce called these kinds of social groups “greater persons.” So, according to that way of thinking, our social communities and cultural associations of whatever sort, would be minded institutions, reservoirs of *social habits*—cultural traditions and practices which are, in effect, rules of behavior, or, in other words, social beliefs.³²

My conjecture is that social minds are subject to the fixation of belief just as individual minds are, and that the distinction Peirce made between concerns of vital importance and theoretical concerns applies to social groups and cultural institutions just as it applies to we lesser persons. Social beliefs proper would address matters of vital importance. They would develop in response to the successful alleviation or eradication of doubts; the irritation of doubt being whatever disrupts or destabilizes the social order—anything that might weaken the social fabric or unsettle social mores. Social beliefs that address theoretical, not vital, concerns we might very cautiously call *theoretical beliefs*.

If my conjecture bears consideration, if Peirce’s ideas about the fixation of belief can be applied to cultures and societies at large, we should expect to find within human cultural, bastions of what I’ve called “social beliefs proper,” institutions that support the system of natural beliefs and inculcate attitudes, values, and ideas that strengthen the social order. The natural function of these belief-based institutions is to program us for behaviors that give our species an evolutionary advantage. Though many established institutions might contribute toward this end, I believe it is religion, first and foremost that fulfils this function. We should also expect to find cultural institutions that abjure fixed beliefs that promote beneficial behavior, and, instead, embrace conjecture and experiment to, over time, deliver a body of “established truths”—while always keeping in mind that nothing is certain. Science is of course the supporting social institution for promoting our aspirations to find out the truth about things.

30 See CP 4.551, where the word “organic” should be replaced with “inorganic” which Peirce wrote in the manuscript he submitted to the printer. Apparently “organic” was substituted by the typesetter.

31 Also see Santaella’s 2007 Presidential Address to the Charles S. Peirce Society (SANTAELLA, 2009).

32 The idea of social beliefs has been discussed and defended by Émile Durkheim, Margaret Gilbert, among others. Related research in cognitive science and social psychology focusing on distributed cognition and extended mind has begun to attract considerable though cautious interest (see ADAMS and AIZAWA, 2010).

I conclude that these minded social institutions, these “greater persons,” probably acquire habits of action and mind just as we “lesser persons” do. Some, religion first and foremost, under the sway of *practice*, and some, science first and foremost, under the sway of *theory*. But in both cases, we, as mere individuals, are left to do their bidding and Peirce says we must choose between them for we cannot serve two masters.³³

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33 For development of this conjecture see Houser 2016b.

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