

Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear"

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Belief and Truth

- Descartes and Hume both distinguished between beliefs that we form naturally and those which we form as a result of inquiry.
- For both of them, the aim of inquiry is to attain the truth.
- The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) investigated the role of inquiry in quieting our doubts by attaining a stable state of belief.
- Belief is valuable because it guides our desires and shapes our actions.
- The goal of the philosopher is to show which methods of inquiry are best for guiding our desires and shaping our actions.
- This orientation toward practice has come to be known as *pragmatism*.

Doubt and Belief

- There are some fundamental differences between doubt and belief.
- Doubt has these characteristics:
 - It is manifested when we ask a question,
 - It makes us feel uneasy and restless.
 - It has no effect on our behavior, other than to stimulate inquiry.
- Belief has these characteristics:
 - It is manifested when we make an assertion,
 - It makes us feel satisfied,
 - It is the basis of most of our behavior,
 - It is the basis of reasoning.
- Belief can be replaced by doubt, thereby stimulating new inquiry, when it leads to unfavorable practical results.

Avoiding Doubt

- One way to avoid the undesirable condition of doubt is to avoid all circumstances that would raise doubt.
- A second way would be to disregard any grounds for doubt and to cling tenaciously to what is already believed.
- It might be thought that avoiding doubt in one of these ways would lead to bad practical consequences.
- But it may be that the peace of mind conferred by immovable belief outweighs the inconveniences of its inaptness.
- A greater practical problem is the tendency of societies to try to impose beliefs on its members, often by cruel methods.

Belief and the Community

- Society acts as an authority in imposing beliefs on its members.
- This can have advantageous practical consequences for the masses.
- But enlightened individuals recognize the variability of beliefs from society to society.
- This can engender doubt, because there is no reason to think the authority of one's own community is superior to that of another.
- To overcome this doubt, a new basis for belief must be found.

The *A Priori* Method

- Philosophers have attempted to find facts that are indisputable, such as mathematical facts.
- The problem, as seen in Descartes, is that we take to be indisputable that which we are strongly inclined to believe.
- Different people have different inclinations, and so we have the kind of relativity that is found from society to society.
- What is thought to be indisputable is also subject to changing fashion.

Scientific Method

- We would like to have a method of fixing belief that is independent of how we, or society, are inclined to think.
- Such a method would then set a standard for all people's beliefs.
- Scientific method is the best candidate.
- In scientific inquiry, we investigate the world without regard for the effect of the outcome on our beliefs.
- Our inquiry may be complicated, it may throw us into doubt, but it is the only way to obtain beliefs that are objective.
- In choosing the scientific method of inquiry, one is making "one of the ruling decisions of one's life"—a decision that can bring hardships with it.
- But it is the only permissible choice for anyone who acknowledges that there is truth.

Truth and Practice

- If the goal of the scientific thinker is to obtain true belief, we must understand what truth is.
- Because scientific investigation is conducted objectively, we can understand reality in terms of scientific practice:
 - Reality is that which is destined to agreed upon by all who investigate.
- This way of understanding reality yields a conception of true belief as an ideal outcome of scientific practice.
- "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real."
- An abstract definition of reality might be this:
 - Reality is that whose characteristics are independent of what they are thought to be by any individual.
- This is compatible with the pragmatic account of reality, because the ultimate outcome of scientific investigation is independent of any individual opinion.