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Peirce's Theory of Assent

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1. Introduction

What is assent? And what is its role in knowledge and in belief? In order to understand whether Peirce's semiotics can be useful in this field, we have to compare its approach with some of the more valuable theories proposed in the last two centuries.

Both John H. Newman and Ludwig Wittgenstein rejected the old psychological view of a power that presides over the task of assenting to propositions, a power whose different degrees would justify the common experience of having different degrees of belief.¹ Newman proposed a radical explanation of assent and belief in terms of apprehension of reality: the kind of reality we apprehend determines the degree of belief, so that belief cannot be a subjectively shaped mental state or action. The change was remarkable. If assent is not simply explainable in a psychological way, as will intervening on already settled propositions with different degrees of intensity, our beliefs, i.e. propositions we assent to when they are not completely evident, share criteria of validity with the general way in which evident conceptions are attained. Belief is the first stage of an evident or true knowledge, not a wrong interpretation that will be completely removed when true knowledge appears. This first result, already foreshadowed by Locke, is followed by a realist analysis of assent.

¹ As a clue of a common ground on which to compare the two great philosophers, Wittgenstein quotes Newman in the very first paragraph of *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein, 1969, 2e). The traditional settlement of the issue in Stoicism, in Saint Augustine, in Medieval philosophy, and in Descartes shares a psychologist ground that begins to find a more complicated treatment in Locke and, partly, in Hume.

In Newman's work assent depends on the kind of relationship we have with reality. When we know a singular concrete object, our assent and belief are real, but when we know an abstract (general) object, our assent and belief are formal. In the background of this theory is Locke's nominalist theory, which regards simple ideas as stemming from sensations and reflection, while complex ideas stem from the comparison of the first ideas. Accordingly, knowledge is certain when it is immediate perception of the agreement between two ideas, while it is only probable when it is a mediate perception of that agreement. In Newman's terms, real knowledge can only be immediate and about a singular, while generals permit only a mediate and formal knowledge. Certainly, Newman was concerned with the problem of real and formal assent in religious faith, which is a sort of belief. His view on assent allowed him to say that faith or belief are kinds of knowledge, and to maintain a difference between real faith, which stems from real assent and is real knowledge, and formal faith, which stems from formal assent and is fake knowledge. The difference is that in the second we have missed the real knowledge that comes from the experience of the singular concrete object, whether it be God or some other object (Newman, 1973). So, Newman's view applies to any sort of assent and belief, and his view, which is based on a direct relationship between reality, knowledge, and belief, is an important reference for our topic.

Paradoxically, Newman's theory is very close to the more modern views inspired by the "copy theory" of knowledge of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. According to these, among which it is worth quoting at least Ruth Marcus's, belief is always the correct representation of a state of things; there is a direct correspondence between the state of facts and our belief, understood once again as a form of evident knowledge. For Marcus, false beliefs are impossible, like formal faith or belief was simply not faith, and not knowledge, according to Newman. Belief is knowledge and knowledge is a reflection of reality as it is, something to which we cannot help giving our assent. In this sense it is impossible to have either false beliefs or true beliefs implying false ones (Marcus, 1993; 1995). Newman's option points toward one of the most important solutions to the riddle of assent: assent is a kind of knowledge and it is an immediate consequence of our acquaintance with reality.

The other option I want to consider in order to cast a light on the topic is the late Wittgenstein's. Quite naturally, Wittgenstein's harsh criticism on his earlier views involves also the problem of belief, including assent. If in the *Tractatus* belief is knowledge and knowledge is a copy of states of

things, then in his later books belief is part of the language game theory. In this late version, belief is understandable in terms of "certainty", assenting to propositions that we hold to be true. Using Kripke's (1982) reading of the late Wittgenstein, we could see this phase as Wittgenstein's answer to radical skepticism. In *On Certainty*, we can see an endless attempt to find a justification for our certainties or beliefs. Not finding any strong foundation for them, Wittgenstein stresses the role of rules and use as ways to keep beliefs in the usual contexts of our "language games" (Wittgenstein, 1969, 59e–62e). In this way, Wittgenstein's scheme of the problem of belief introduces the holistic view of language and context. In this sense, belief is a contextual convention.

These two answers represent two extreme solutions to the problem of assent and belief. In the first, assent is compelled by reality, and belief is "true knowledge" of reality. In the second, assent depends on the game we are playing, and there is no "true knowledge". Assent and belief are somehow dependent on the way we are played by the game or the way we play it, but in neither case is there a reality against which we can measure our beliefs. Eventually, there is a convention, through which we escape 'nonsense'.

In this paper, I will try to face the problems of assent by applying Peirce's semiotics. Peirce did not hold any specific and definite theory about assent. Nevertheless, in his writings, we can find scattered suggestions that can help us find the place of assent in the development of his epistemology. I will try to ascertain whether a Peircean way of looking at assent makes it possible to avoid the alternatives sketched above.

2. The threefold nature of assent

Peirce's scattered indications compel us to look at the many characteristics that a possible semiotic theory of assent could possess. The first clue that we have to take into account is exactly the lack of any definite theory about assent in Peirce's work. This is a surprising fact given that a considerable part of his corpus of manuscripts is dedicated to the normative sciences, a department distinguished by the presence of self-control, the characteristic that transforms a pure phenomenological view into a normative one. Why did Peirce not focus on the topic of assent, which intuitively is connected to self-control? Apparently, he denied this connection. So, what is assent according to Peirce? Assent is that element of knowledge which makes a simple proposition into a judgment. A judgment is a proposition to which we assent.

the problem of the day is needlessly complicated by the attention of most logicians, instead of extending to propositions in general, being confined to "judgments," or acts of mental acceptance of propositions, which not only involve characters, additional to those of propositions in general – characters required to differentiate them as propositions of a particular kind – but which further involve, beside the mental proposition itself, the peculiar act of assent. CP 2.309

But in itself assent is an act of the mind:

an act of assent is an act of the mind by which one endeavors to impress the meanings of the proposition upon his disposition, so that it shall govern his conduct, including thought under conduct, this habit being ready to be broken in case reasons should appear for breaking it. Now in performing either of these acts [the other is "assertion"], the proposition is recognized as being a proposition whether the act be performed or not. CP 2.315

Here is the dilemma: either Peirce was considering assent only as a psychological act - in which case we have a psychological item at the very heart of the formation of judgment - or he was pointing out some peculiar feature of it that makes assent unquestionable. The first solution would lead us to the old psychological view (of which he accuses Sigwart [EP2:166, 169, 255]). It would be really strange if Peirce would not have noticed such an important theme as the presence of a psychological tool in the formation of judgment. We know, for instance, his extreme care in distinguishing among perceptions, percepts, and perceptual judgments when he acknowledged the presence of perception in reasoning. He was equally careful when he sought to explain interpretants. Why would he have ignored the importance of a psychological tool at the heart of judgment? Moreover, we know how systematically he denied any psychological foundation of logic, which he considered one of two important laws (the other being metaphysical realism) he had to teach (MS 633:4). It would be strange if he had overlooked this possible defense of the basic role of psychology in knowledge.

A more plausible explanation is that he did not see any problem in assent because he considered it not only as a psychological tool, but also as a part of something that he really analyzed. Namely, he viewed assent as a psychological act with a different core. What, then, are the other possible characteristics, beside the psychological one?

Being "a way to impress meaning upon conduct", assent seems to be part of the self-control we need in order to formulate any logical reasoning. Even as self-control is an act of will, Peirce specifies that such an act can only be the act of inference itself. Drawing an inference, we show selfcontrol (EP 2:200). Any other explication involves a surrendering to a psychological view, namely a return to a static faculty of will that presides over reasoning. So, we should find assent within the actual functioning of reasoning. And we partially find it: when Peirce develops the theory of abductive reasoning, in which we have to assent to the working hypothesis that stems from the surprising phenomenon we are investigating in order to verify it, he attributes this acceptance or assent to the guiding principles stemming from esthetics and ethics.² When Kepler hypothesized the elliptic curve of the trajectory of planets, he first assented to his theory because it fitted an admirable order (esthetics) in a plausible way (ethics). This second ethical move is the one in which the hypothesis becomes actual, and in this sense assent is the moment in which ethics enters into our reasoning.³ So, a second basic characteristic of assent is its ethical function in forming self-controlled reasoning.

However, I do not think that we have explained everything by saying that assent is partly a psychological tool and partly an ethical decision. There is a third aspect of assent, well covered by Peirce's analyses: its semiotic structure. From this standpoint, assent is something in which Peirce was always interested: holding a belief as true. In this way the problem of assent can be located within the very Peircean question of fixing a belief.⁴

Peirce explains the difference between the psychological and the semiotic analysis of the phenomenon of assent also in the famous 1902 Carnegie Application, where he writes:

The German word *Urtheil* confounds the proposition itself with the psychological act of assenting to it. This confusion is a part of the general refusal of idealism, which still considerably affects almost all German thought, to acknowledge that is one thing to *be* and quite another to *be presented*. I use the word *belief* to express any kind of holding for true or acceptance of a representation. NEM 4:39

² For this reconstruction of the abductive pattern see Maddalena (2005, 2009, pp. 57–96).

³ I thank V. Colapietro, who pointed out this very important topic during the oral presentation of this paper in Helsinki on June 13, 2007. As for the impact of ethics in Peirce's account of reasoning, see EP 2:196–205, 253–5.

⁴ See the paper on "The fixation of belief" in *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (1877, pp. 1–15), CP 5.358–87 and W 3:242–56, which Peirce tried to re-publish with the Open Court in 1909–1911 (cf. MSS 618–40).

Here, Peirce cautiously distinguishes between what belongs to logic and what belongs to psychology. But this "holding for true or acceptance of a representation" also has a semiotic feature, since "all thinking is conducted in signs" (MS 200:43). Consequently, assent can be analyzed according to three main aspects: psychological, ethical, and semiotic. I will focus now on the third element, which will give us a sort of basic grammar for the syntax of assent that ethics and psychology will complete dynamically.

3. The semiotic grammar of assent

What is assent or acceptance from a purely semiotic point of view? In Peirce's work, semiotic assent is always connected to the study of "interpretants". For instance, let us take a definition from 1866:

Now that which, thus, appeals to an interpretant – that is so constructed and intended so as to develop a restatement on the part of another or assent – is an argument, a syllogism minus the conclusion, for the Conclusion of a syllogism is no part of the argument but is the assent to it, the interpretant. W 1:477

Other passages from different years (1891, 1907, 1908, 1911) show the consistency of Peirce's thought on this topic; he always pointed out that assent is connected to the final part of the development of signs and reasoning.⁵ If we look at our experience, we will see that assent is at play in that part of our reasoning that many years later Peirce will call "a sense of apprehending the meaning" (EP 2:430). Assent is the moment at which we start holding a belief or a representation as true, a moment at which ethical and psychological will are at stake too, even though they alone cannot account for our experience. When a hypothesis comes to our mind, we feel it is the right one; we see its plausibility in relation to everything else we know and do, and we start considering it as true. This third part is the

⁵ "[P]erception attains a virtual judgment, it subsumes something under a class, and not only so, but virtually attaches to the proposition the seal of assent – two strong resemblances to inference which are wanting in ordinary suggestions" (CP 8.66 [1891]). "I begin by arguing that a concept is a mental sign, that all our deliberations within ourselves take a dialogical form, the ego of one instant appealing to the ego of the next instant for reasonable assent" (April 10, 1907, Letter to Papini [Max Fisch's Folder on Papini at the Peirce Edition Project, Indiana and Purdue University at Indianapolis]). "The next point is that all thinking is a dialogue in form. Your self of one instant appeals to your deeper self for his assent. Consequently all thinking is conducted in signs" (MS 200:43 [1908]). "By Reasoning shall here be meant any change in thought that results in an appeal for some measure and kind of assent to the truth of a proposition called the Conclusion of the Reasoning" (EP 2:454 [1911]).

logical one; in Peirce's terms, assent is thus a semiotic problem tied to the interpretant.

What does it mean to be an interpretant? Peirce gave many definitions of it. I will pick up one of them from a 1908 letter to Lady Welby:

I define a Sign as anything which on the one hand is so determined by an Object and on the other hand so determines an idea in a person's mind, that this latter determination, which I term the Interpretant of the Sign is thereby mediately determined by that Object. EP 2:484

The interpretant is the outcome of the sign in a determination of the interpreter's mind (including all non-human minds). But Peirce was not satisfied with a simple definition, and between 1904 and 1906 he struggled to find a subdivision capable of explaining any possible kind of interpretant (see MS 339 c–d; MS 499). He proposed many trichotomies in order to understand the problem better. Peirce scholars have argued about the number and the names of interpretants, but I will not enter this discussion.⁶ Here, I will assume that there are only three interpretants, so that there is a substantial agreement (even though there is a difference of perspective not relevant for our topic) between immediate, dynamic, and final interpretant on the one hand, and emotional, energetic, and logical interpretant on the other. For our aim, let us recall here one of the definitions, taken from "Pragmatism" (1907), which gives the horizon of the interpretant's functions:

In all cases, it [the interpretant] includes feelings; for there must, at least, be a sense of comprehending the meaning of a sign. If it includes more than mere feeling, it must evoke some kind of effort. It may include something besides, which, for the present, may be vaguely called "thought". I term these three kinds of interpretant the "emotional", the "energetic", and the "logical" interpretants. EP 2:409

Setting aside any discussion on the third interpretant, which Peirce identifies in the same paper as a habit of action, I will focus on the first two, because there we can find that apprehension of signs that we pinned down as the characteristic, semiotic experience of assent. When Peirce compares kinds of objects with kinds of interpretants, he finds in the immediate interpretant exactly what we are looking for:

⁶ This interesting debate can be followed through the *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* in articles by T. L. Short (1981; 1982; 1996) and J. J. Liszka (1990). See also Short (2007, pp. 180–190).

In point of fact, we do find that the immediate object and the emotional interpretant correspond, both being apprehensions, or are "subjective"; both, too, appertain to all signs without exception.

EP 2:410

But this explanation would work for assent only partially because it does not leave room for dissent, a necessary alternative implied in any "hold-ing for true" from a logical point of view.⁷ An immediate interpretant is unavoidable; it is the interpretability that any sign has.

My Immediate Interpretant is implied in the fact that each sign must have its peculiar Interpretability before it gets any Interpreter.

The Immediate Interpretant is an abstraction, consisting in a Possibility. The Dynamical Interpretant is a single actual event. The Final Interpretant is that toward which the actual tends. SS 111

Even in the Immediate Interpretant, there is some possibility of denial, as Peirce seems to indicate when he says:

I might describe my Immediate Interpretation, as so much of the effect of the Sign would enable a person to say whether or not the Sign was applicable to anything concerning which that person had sufficient acquaintance. SS 110

But this possibility of denial is limited, since it is overwhelmed by the fact that any sign has "its peculiar Interpretability" that is undeniable. If we want to find the possibility of dissent, of not accepting a representation and going beyond the application of representation to something we are acquainted with, we have to turn our attention to the dynamical interpretant which warrants the reference to the world of facts exterior to the sign itself.⁸

The Immediate Interpretant is the Interpretant as Represented in the sign as a determination of the sign to what the sign appeals. The dynamic interpretant is the determination of a field of representation exterior to the sign (such a field is an interpreter's consciousness) which determination is affected by the sign. MS 339c:504

⁷ I thank A. De Tienne for this important remark.

⁸ According to Peirce, propositions can only express "facts" while a wider knowledge of reality is bound to what he calls "occurrences" or "slices" of reality in its infinite richness of objects and events. Facts are the part of occurrences that has been codified in a system of signs. For the distinction between occurrences and facts, and the connection between facts and propositions, see MSS 647–8.

We do not assent to a representation when it is a call for acknowledgment, but when it fixes the reference to the context within which the sign is meaningful. So, Peirce could say that the conclusion of a proposition requires assent because we can affirm or deny something as a conclusion of previous facts only if we understand the field of representation the conclusion will refer to.

The dynamic interpretant is an evolution of the immediate interpretant understood as interpretability (MS 339c:510; SS 108–19), but it has a specific nature which better corresponds to the characteristics we are looking for. The reference to "consciousness" confirms the peculiar assenting/dissenting function of the dynamic interpretant: only in consciousness can we find the dichotomic possibility of "true" and "false".⁹

If the dynamic interpretant constitutes the semiotic, fundamental characteristic of assent, let us also consider the classification of signs that it implies. In Peirce's late classification of signs, there are two trichotomies related to the dynamic interpretant. In 1908, he classifies the sign according to the "nature of the dynamic interpretant" as "sympathetic, shocking, usual", and according to the "appeal to the dynamic interpretant" as "suggestive, imperative, indicative" (EP 2:483–91). It is worth noting that this second triad was used in some of Peirce's previous classifications to indicate the immediate interpretant" included "feeling, conduct, thought" (Ms 339c:504). My assumption is that this change occurred because Peirce acknowledged our possible refusal of a representation, so that the suggestive power had to be used in reference to the dynamic interpretant rather than to the immediate one.

In any representation, there is a level at which we can either accept ("hold it for true") or refuse the representation itself. In a figurative way, any representation is an answer to a suggestion that comes from reality. More precisely, assent is the level at which we confirm a selection of something within the infinite richness of occurrences, reading it as "fact" – namely, accepting to hold it as true.¹⁰ In any representation, this answer is a semiotic element, which warrants the unity of a proposition, and which precedes the ethical and psychological stages. Confirming this interpretation, Peirce says that the unity of judgment does not depend on the "Ich denke" as Kant maintained, but on an answer to a question that reality is always asking us: "don't you think so?" (MS 636:24–26).

⁹ Peirce often describes consciousness as a dialogue between ego and non-ego (EP 2:154).

¹⁰ See footnote 7 above.

4. Assent and belief: an answer to Newman and Wittgenstein

Two questions remain: What is the role of assent in belief? And what is the alternative this kind of reading of assent provides to those proposed by Newman and Wittgenstein? I pointed out that assent has a semiotic heart that accounts for that "holding for true" that is the gnoseological aspect of any belief. Semiotically speaking, this aspect is analyzable in terms of interpretants, in particular in terms of dynamic interpretants. Therefore, the role of assent in belief is the acceptance of a representation as part of a determined context. Any sign or representation appeals¹¹ to our acknowledgment, and we are called to accept it or refuse it when it determines a field of interpretation, not when it is an undetermined possibility.

An experiential reading of this interpretation is provided by Peirce's late attempts to show that interpretants, basic elements of our semiotic grammar of assent, correspond to the degrees of clearness of an idea as described in the 1878 paper "How to Make our Ideas Clear" and in the 1897 paper "The Logic of Relatives": the degrees of familiarity, logical definition, and pragmatic rule (EP 1:124–36; CP 3.457). These attempts are not always consistent, but they show the direction of Peirce's work. In some letters to James written in 1909, Peirce maps interpretants on Lady Welby's trichotomy of "sense, meaning and significance", and the latter on the degrees of clearness. The mapping of immediate and dynamic interpretant varies.¹² However, it is worth noting that Peirce wants to foster this comparison:

In the second part of my Essay on Pragmatism, in the Popular Science of November 1877 and January 1878, I made three degrees of Clearness of Interpretation. The First was such a Familiarity as gave a person familiarity with a sign and readiness in using it or interpreting it. In his consciousness he seemed to himself quite at home with the sign. In short, it is Interpretation in Feeling. The second was Logical Analysis = Lady Welby's Sense. The third was Pragmaticistic Analysis [and] would seem to be a Dynamical Analysis but is identified with the Final Interpretant. EP 2:496–7

If Peirce was right in attempting to map interpretants on degrees of clearness of ideas, the result is that assent, whose semiotic key element is

¹¹ The topic of "appeal" should be studied in another paper.

¹² On February 26, he indicates that "significance" is comparable to "final interpretant", "meaning" to "immediate interpretant" and "sense" to "logical analysis" or "dynamic interpretant". On March 14, he compares "sense" to "impression" and "meaning" to "purpose" (EP 2:496–500).

the dynamic interpretant, is part of the second degree: the degree of logical analysis or definition. Again, the stage of definition is the one in which occurrences that are undetermined become determinate as facts; it is the stage in which we are free to answer "yes" or "no" to reality, accepting or refusing its transformation in definite propositions.

If I am right, we have to understand assent as part of a development, in which there would be a third and a fourth degree corresponding to the "pragmaticistic analysis" in which belief is a habit completely formed – or, as Peirce sometimes puts it, an experiment (MS 318:172) – and to "concrete reasonableness" that Peirce considered to be the "admirable ideal" to which our knowledge tends (CP 5.3–4).

Now, we can try to read Newman's and Wittgenstein's proposals about assent, certainty, and belief in the light of Peirce's insight. Newman stresses the distinction between real and formal assent, focusing on the difference between real and formal apprehension of reality. Peirce's understanding agrees as far as understanding assent as a form of apprehension, at least in one of its main characteristics, the one I described as semiotic or logical. But his semiotic analysis allows him to overcome the Lockean ground of Newman's theory. There is no real apprehension of the singular or formal apprehension of the general. Peirce shows that our commonsensical perception of degrees of belief is related to evolving degrees of representation, analyzable as different kinds of interpretants. Peirce's semiotic view covers the difference between real and formal assent that Newman identified, but it explains it better as degrees of semiotic response to reality and, accordingly, as degrees of clearness of ideas. Formal assent and apprehension can be interpreted as second degrees of clearness of ideas, namely, from the semiotic grammar standpoint, as a dynamic interpretant that has not yet been transformed into a third, "pragmaticistic" kind of representation. In other words, when we assent we begin to know, but we do not know completely. We know, because we answered "yes" to the question that reality asked us, but our knowledge is still partial, because we have not yet tested the proposition that we accepted. So, we can say we have a certain kind of knowledge because we know a definition, but we do not know as well as those who have already tested that definition. If knowledge stopped at the definition, it would be a formal apprehension, that is, a knowledge in which we stop the development of signs and, consequently, of belief. So, formal assent is not due to the generality of apprehension, but to an insufficient understanding of the infinity of inquiry. According to Newman, knowledge fails when it is pushed beyond the singular object, and according to Peirce, knowledge fails when it is not general enough, namely when it does not reach the true object we will have at the end of inquiry.

In the same way, a Peirce-driven theory of assent can answer Wittgenstein's concern about the justification of beliefs. "Use" and "rules" are not the only possible justifications. According to my interpretation, "rules" are dynamic interpretants, and "use" is close to the immediate interpretant and to the degree of familiarity of ideas. "Use", understood as familiarity, is the weakest degree of clearness of ideas and belief; here, our meanings and our beliefs are vague or undetermined even when they are strong. As for "rules", if they are the way in which we grant meaning, as in Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein, then they can only permit a formal assent or a standard belief not verified by further tests. Peirce's understanding of assent and belief tells us that the second stage, the one in which we find the dynamic interpretant, definition, and rules, is a necessary step in a broader development of representation. If we do not stop there, we will test our beliefs until the point at which they will turn out to be "true". The real justification of our beliefs is not their familiar use or their being structured by rules, but the possibility to verify them.

The semiotic view encompasses the insights of the two approaches we identified as accounts of assent based on apprehension of reality and conventional agreement. In a Peirce-driven explanation, we can embrace both the need for the relationship with reality, expressed by Newman's view, and the nuanced, not self-evident justification of beliefs, stated by Wittgenstein. At the same time, the semiotic explanation proposes a view of the relationship with reality that permits logical degrees as well as a two-valued logic. It justifies beliefs, not by turning to an *a priori* reality or truth, but by appeal to an *a posteriori* foundation of reality through tests. This is one of the richest heritages that pragmatism has left in our culture.

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