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The Function of Error in Knowledge and Meaning: Peirce, Apel, Davidson

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1. Introduction

What does it mean to recognize the possibility of error in one's beliefs? This question is central to epistemology from Descartes' skepticism to Peirce's fallibilism, and, more recently, Donald Davidson's holism. This paper considers the question of error in Peirce's fallibilism, in contrast to Karl-Otto Apel's transcendental semiotics, on the one hand, and Davidson's principle of charity and triangulation, on the other. Apel argues reasonably that Peirce's long run is a necessary condition for meaning. But his view is insufficiently open to error in the short run. Such openness to error, however, helps to make sense of our commitment to truth in the long run. Davidson's theory of meaning and knowledge, by contrast, seems to run more parallel to Peirce's since both maintain central roles for error in the short run. Yet, in contrast to Davidson's view, Peirce's account of error actually does more work because it maintains fallibilism as both a philosophical position and a second-order belief of the inquirer. Here, despite very different epistemological positions, Peirce actually shares something important with Descartes' method. Both Peirce and Descartes hold that individuals can and should reflect on their beliefs from several different points of view. Such points of view include the first person point of view (i.e., the point of view of the inquirer), and the detached, third person observer point of view. The dialectic between these two points of view leads Descartes to skepticism, and Peirce to fallibilism, and this dialectic in Peirce's fallibilism has significant advantages over Davidson's analysis of error in inquiry.

2. Apel

According to Apel, the long run functions as a necessary presupposition of meaningful discourse. This normative theory of meaning (which includes the long run theory of truth, the pragmatic maxim, triadic semiotics, and the unlimited communication community) serves as the infallible condition for the possibility of all further fallible science and metaphysics (Apel, 1995, p. 388). Apel seeks to make explicit those performative presuppositions of our speech acts (following Jaakko Hintikka). We necessarily presuppose that the truth of the claim we utter will be settled in the long run. And, as Apel explains, “we cannot in fact suppose, as many claim we can, that even these presuppositions are fallible metaphysical hypotheses, for that would mean that it would be possible to falsify them by simultaneously presupposing them” (Apel, 1995, p. 388).

Now, I think Apel is mistaken in insisting that necessary presuppositions must also be infallible, simply because we cannot falsify or revise them while simultaneously presupposing them. Peirce himself took mathematical claims to be both necessary and fallible, which suggests that the necessary claims we make still do not achieve epistemic certainty. But the problem with Apel’s view is not simply that he does not see how thoroughgoing Peirce’s fallibilism is (and that it would apply to necessary arguments as well). A further problem is that Apel’s infallibilism, when it comes to the conditions for meaning, actually makes other empirical and fallible claims impossible (from the point of view of the speaker). To remedy this, we should consider pushing Apel’s view to include fallibilism (see Cooke, 2006, p. 126).

Apel argues that we must presuppose consensus by the unlimited communication community in the long run regarding any truth claim we utter; but implicit in this presupposition is also the presupposition of fallibilism in the short run, i.e., that we could be wrong until the final state of inquiry is reached. While Apel may be correct that an assertion or belief presupposes my assenting to its truth, if that commitment to its truth is a *Peircean* truth, i.e., truth in the long run, then I must be open to its revision in the short run. On Apel’s reading, my assertion “I believe *p*” turns into “I believe *p* would be agreed upon in the long run.” I want to add to that truth claim the phrase “but I could be wrong,” or, “but I’m open to revision.” Without such a fallibilist presupposition, Apel’s claim is, at best, a form of tenacity, and, at worst, incoherent, since the long run, as a condition for truth and meaning, presupposes many trials and errors prior to any con-

vergence. The very notion of the long run presupposes the possibility of pervasive error in the present. Apel recognizes this connection between a commitment to truth and the possibility of error, but only from the third person/observer point of view. When Apel unpacks the necessary presuppositions of the actual speaker, he leaves out the Peircean speaker who must presuppose *both* a commitment to truth *and* a commitment to the possibility of error in every truth claim she makes.

Now the question arises. How is it possible to claim “I believe that *p*” which, according to our line of reasoning, now presupposes two implicit claims additionally, namely, “I believe that *p* will be agreed to in the long run,” and “but I could be wrong”? This will strike many as a logical contradiction. But here I think we can avoid this problem by seeing Peirce’s implicit view (evident in his fallibilism) that we should reflect on inquiry and communication from both third and first person points of view (Cooke, 2006, p. 125). From an unreflective first person point of view, I am committed to making this assertion, knowing or hoping or expecting that it will be agreed to in the long run. To believe something is to believe it to be true, and so it is a contradiction to say: “I believe *p*, but I could be wrong.” But given Peirce’s fallibilism, we must also consider a belief from a third person (observer’s) point of view. So, like Descartes, Peirce recognizes that many of our beliefs have been wrong, and the inquirer simply does not know that *now* is not one of those times. Fallibilism is precisely this second-order awareness of one’s first-order limitations, which informs our understanding of our own claims from a first person inquirer’s point of view. I’m aware on a meta-level that I may not have the full picture. But these third person reflections must make their way back to the first person participant point of view, though, this time, a more reflective one. So, I add, “but I could be wrong.” Thus, it is only by looking at our beliefs from one point of view, namely, the *unreflective* first person participant point of view, that fallibilism looks like a contradiction. Peirce, however, did not look at it that way (EP 2:353).

Here I follow T. L. Short who has in “Fallibilism is Omega-inconsistent” argued that fallibilism is not the contradictory position it seems to be and that the apparent contradiction is due to looking at beliefs in too formal a way. It depends on an “artificial ideal of a ‘system of beliefs’ – one in which there is the same rigid exclusion of meta-theoretical reflections as there is in a formal system. But belief is not like that. A fallibilist’s meta-theoretical ruminations enter into his beliefs, producing an uncomfortable new one, that he is being inconsistent” (Short, 2006, p. 300). Short says that “what

counts as belief is relative to the circumstances in which we are called upon to act” (Short, 2006, p. 300).

Considering our claims from both first person and third person points of view will affect the way we come to see our beliefs. In fact, for pragmatists, perhaps it is best that we think of our beliefs more on the model of questions. Beliefs are like questions since to ask a question is to presuppose that there is an answer and that some future responder will contribute toward settling the final opinion on the matter. In fact, in some places Peirce suggests that a question is a judgment with a low modality.¹ A question is a commitment to the truth of the matter regarding that issue – but also openness to several possibilities. Similarly a meaningful belief presupposes (à la Apel) the possibility of a settled opinion, as well as openness to revision.

3. Davidson

In this respect, Peirce’s view of fallibilism in the short run resembles Davidson’s view of belief and meaning more than Apel’s view. Of course, for Davidson radical interpretation is the starting point, while for Peirce inquiry is the starting point. Yet, both seem to share common ground in their views of fallibilism, holding that although one can be wrong about *any of one’s beliefs*, one cannot doubt all of one’s beliefs at once, as the skeptic claims.

Despite this agreement, however, when it comes to fallibilism, Davidson and Peirce have quite different approaches to the skeptic. As L. S. Carrier argues, when Davidson rejects the possibility of massive error, he cannot mean that massive error is *logically* impossible, but only that it is *epistemologically* impossible, i.e., incompatible with what we already know (Carrier, 1993, p. 406). Carrier further points out that Davidson’s argument falls short of demonstrating anything more than that there is a performative necessity of accepting most of one’s beliefs as true. But the skeptic could accept that much, while still insisting that none of this proves we have knowledge (rather than mere belief) (Carrier, 1993, p. 407).

Similarly, Bruce Vermazen considers that Davidson may succeed in showing that one cannot interpret another’s beliefs as largely false. But then Vermazen further considers someone who simply reflects on past mistakes throughout history. For this person, says Vermazen, “massive error can be imagined without attributing to the speaker a preponderance of

¹ Peirce (CP 4.57 [1893]). Other passages suggest that Peirce thought of questions as rational contrivances expressing a need (CP 3.514 [1897]).

general beliefs the interpreter *holds* false; what is needed is a preponderance of general beliefs *actually* false, an independent quantity to be made up from those held false and those (necessarily unidentified) held true but actually false" (Vermazen, 1983, p. 72). Here Vermazen describes the difference between Davidson's radical interpreter, for whom massive error is impossible, and what we may take to be Peirce's fallibilist for whom massive error is imaginable from a certain detached point of view.

Drawing on Vermazen's point, what Peirce's fallibilism has, that Davidson's lacks, is a strong distinction between belief and reality. On the level of meaning, Peirce rejects the skeptic's position because it amounts to holding an incognizable – a known unknowable – which is self-referentially incoherent. But Peirce's fallibilism takes seriously the possibility of massive error from just this historical, third person (contextualized) point of view, which Vermazen describes. In fact, one of the reasons that Peirce rejects the possibility of a faculty of intuition is just this sort of reflection on the history of error, recognizing that often people have thought their views indubitable and then found them to be false (W 2:195), even within mathematics (EP 2:49). Peirce shares this much with Descartes' skepticism in the *Meditations*, and Peirce like Descartes holds that one can take a third person reflective perspective on one's beliefs, which can and should inform one's beliefs. This is not to say that Peirce's account of inquiry takes only first and third person points of view as relevant; there is an important role to play for both first person plural as well as second person points of view as well. These different points of view that an individual can take regarding her own beliefs are a result of interacting with and within a community.²

As a result of these multiple points of view, Peirce's fallibilism functions differently from Davidson's. Fallibilism, for Peirce, is a philosophical position about the conditions of inquiry, but it can also be a second-order belief of an inquirer. And in this latter respect fallibilism has its normative function, as Mark Owen Webb has argued (see Webb, 1999, pp. 86–97). In his discussion of the many attempts and difficulties of articulating fallibilism as a descriptive thesis, Webb argues that fallibilism is best understood, as all epistemic principles should be, as normative, and as "strategies for acquiring information" (Webb, 1999, p. 96). And this function can be found in Peirce's "First Rule of Logic" where he argues that considering the possibility of error from a more third person point of view and remaining open to error can be good for inquiry from a (more reflective) first person point

² I am grateful to Vincent Colapietro for discussion on this point.

of view. There Peirce argues that in order to learn we must be dissatisfied with what we already know (EP 2:47–48). In several places, Peirce takes both the reflective third person, as well as the first person point of view of the inquirer. Now, Akeel Bilgrami claims that the first person participant point of view of *actual* inquiry is the only one really available to pragmatists (Bilgrami, 2000). But, for Peirce, the inquirer can also be informed by this third person, more theoretical view of inquiry. And in further contrast to Davidson, Peirce holds that it is not a mere logical possibility that I could be wrong about many of my beliefs; rather it is a real possibility. And reflecting on this point has real pragmatic value, from the perspective of the inquirer, in that it can inform how she conducts inquiry. Knowing she lacks certainty for any of her beliefs, and knowing the history of error in seemingly certain beliefs, both serve important, practical lessons for the inquirer. Indeed, inquiry makes progress especially when we are open to these kinds of mistakes.

Returning now to Davidson, his view is considerably more problematic as a response to skepticism when we consider how this might be reconciled with his triangulation and his account of how the individual forms beliefs. In this latter discussion, Davidson insists that one must have a concept of a belief in order to have a belief, because one must be able to make sense of “getting it wrong” (Davidson, 2001, p. 104). And to do this one must have a sense that his belief is distinct from the way things are (*ibid.*). As Deborah Soles explains, when a sunflower turns its bloom toward an artificial light source, rather than the sun, it is not proper to call this a mistake. But a child, referring to a cow as a “dog” has made a mistake (Soles, 2004, p. 15). According to Soles, Davidson follows Wittgenstein in holding that one cannot say he knows something if there is no way to go wrong (Soles, 2004, pp. 4–7). *An understanding of the distinction between believing and reality* is a necessary condition for making mistakes. And since belief requires the possibility of error, Davidson turns to triangulation, which, as Kirk Ludwig explains, is used to describe the conditions for the possibility of error (Ludwig, 2003, p. 11). Triangulation refers to the conditions under which most of us learn to communicate about the world, and consequently achieve the normative network required for belief and error. An individual believer speaks with another person, whom she recognizes to be caused by similar stimuli.³ This form of ostensive learning allows for error when the individual recognizes a disparity between her belief and the belief of an-

³ See Hans-Johann Glock on Davidson’s view of how we learn to distinguish between our beliefs and reality through linguistic interaction (Glock, 2003, pp. 289–90).

other, despite the fact that the other person appears to be caused by common stimuli. These three things – an apparent common causal influence (the world), another person (who helps the individual interpret the cause), and the individual who recognizes the shared causality – are required for the normativity essential to beliefs.

Peirce would, of course, agree with much in Davidson's view of triangulation: especially meaning as social and triadic, and even the view that beliefs require second-order beliefs. This last point is seen in Peirce's account of how a child learns the mind/world distinction through error. Once a child realizes he has made a mistake – i.e., that there is an appearance/reality distinction, the child must suppose a self to which he can attribute the error. Vincent M. Colapietro describes this account in Peirce: "... with the recognition of something private, the awareness of error appears, and error can be explained only by supposing a self that is fallible ..." (Colapietro, 1989, p. 73). The child's experience of the world, as resistant, enables her to have a view of herself *as a self* (or, in Davidson's language, a view of herself as a "believer") – *as distinct from the world* (the object of her beliefs).

But a problem arises for Davidson when it comes to the issue of the normativity of second-order beliefs. For, if beliefs are normative in the way described above, then one would presume that beliefs about beliefs would be normative as well. That is, if there is a way to make a mistake regarding any of my other beliefs, then there must be a way for me to make a mistake regarding my belief about my beliefs. But, at least within the context of triangulation, Davidson does not seem to offer a sufficient discussion of which kind of second-order belief the individual should have, or how one would go about forming a belief about which kind of second-order belief is the best to have. After all, there are many alternative views on just what kind of distinction the belief/reality one is.

Of course, the second-order belief which seems to be at work within triangulation entails the view of a real world as causing believers to have beliefs, and determining their truth or falsity. But the second order belief, which Davidson himself defends, does not seem to favor a strong belief/reality distinction. Consider what might happen if the believer in Davidson's triangulation, accepts as his second-order belief, Davidson's own principle of charity and the rejection of the possibility of massive error. Davidson's own view of the belief/reality distinction, his own second-order belief about beliefs, is that we cannot make sense of such a massive disparity between our beliefs and reality. But if the individual be-

liever were to accept this philosophical view in the context of triangulation, it is not clear that this second-order belief could do the normative work (as a condition for the possibility of error in one's other beliefs) it is supposed to do.

Davidson recognizes the need for a stronger mind/world split from the point of view of the individual believer in his discussion of triangulation, but does not incorporate that into his philosophical position. The question here is whether Davidson's principle of charity is workable at the level of the individual in triangulation. If the individual adopts the view that there cannot be a huge disparity between reality and belief, can she also make sense of the fact that any of her beliefs (by necessity) can be wrong?

Davidson's point about the need for a second-order belief to make sense of error is an important one. And, in fact, we can consider this point to be Peirce's very reason for endorsing the scientific method over the other three methods of fixing belief, namely, its hypothesis of an external permanence that can do the normative work of separating true from false beliefs. Davidson recognizes the indispensable role a second-order belief has for normativity in our other beliefs, but he does not follow through on this idea as Peirce does by articulating and defending the kind of belief/reality distinction we need in the context of triangulation.

4. Conclusion

For both Peirce and Davidson, I realize the possibility of my own error in a community with others. But Peirce's view of second-order beliefs has several advantages. Peirce argues for one second-order belief over and above others, namely, the scientific method which posits an external permanence. In addition to allowing for error, and its ability to explain why doubt irritates, it can also reconcile our understanding of beliefs on both a first person inquirer point of view as well as a philosophical observer point of view. As David Wiggins argues, in Peirce's fixation model, reflecting on the conditions under which I fix belief can bring me to the scientific method and its commitment to truth. Wiggins argues that in Peirce's fixation model, with the move from the *a priori* to the scientific method comes a change in motivation and "the need for this transition incorporates a real elucidatory insight about *truth as a property forced upon us by reflection upon the state of belief*" (Wiggins, 1998, pp. 14–15). Wiggins makes the case that reflecting on one's conditions *as an inquirer* can bring one to *these beliefs about one's beliefs*. The scientific method can attain true beliefs, which are

most efficient at satisfying doubt. Wiggins reads Peirce as saying “once you follow through upon the simple object of fixing belief, you will be forced to see yourself as finally committed to the ideas of fact, reality, and truth” (Wiggins, 1998, p. 14).

Reading Peirce this way, we see that what he endorses on a third person philosophical level can and should be adopted by the actual inquirer. Davidson, in contrast, does not seem to give us a way to go from “doing philosophy,” taking a third person point of view of our epistemic situation, to this first person point of view of regular belief formation (this, despite the fact that he emphasizes the perspective of the radical interpreter). Ernest Sosa has pointed out a similar disparity between justification for the individual believer and justification for the philosopher in Davidson’s view (Sosa, 2003). The problem for our discussion is that Davidson’s philosophical positions on our beliefs (that there cannot be a significant disparity between our beliefs and reality) do not do much work when adopted by the individual believer. Davidson does not seem to offer his believer multiple viewpoints of his beliefs. And as a result, Davidson does not seem to handle different contexts of inquiry, different purposes of inquiry, or the possibility of explaining conceptual change.

Of course, Peirce’s belief/reality distinction might look like metaphysical Cartesianism to someone like Davidson. And part of the point of Davidson’s principle of charity is to reject the value of metaphysical Cartesianism – an irresolvable mind/world gap.⁴ But Peirce’s view of reality provides more of a middle ground. And Peirce’s stronger belief/reality distinction does more epistemic work in inquiry. Peirce would agree that there is no value or meaning to holding such a severe Cartesian mind/world split such that they cannot be reconciled. But there is value, for Peirce, in maintaining a mind/world split in which they are *not yet reconciled*, but are reconcilable in the future. The idea that our beliefs can meet with reality in the future has pragmatic value, since it makes sense of our everyday error in the short run. Peirce’s view of the belief/reality distinction admits of fallible beliefs about a reality which is necessarily knowable. In this way, a stronger metaphysical notion of reality serves a key normative function in its role as a regulative idea.⁵

⁴ I am grateful to Chris Pliatska for a discussion on this point.

⁵ For comments and conversations, I am grateful to Jerold J. Abrams, Vincent M. Colapietro, Chris Pliatska, Sami Pihlström, Jukka Nikulainen, Henrik Rydenfelt, an anonymous referee and the participants of the *Applying Peirce* conference, where an earlier version of this paper was presented.

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