

Part I

**The Epistemological and Metaphysical
Background**

Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man

This lecture focuses on an essay by American scientist and philosopher Charles S. Peirce.¹

In 1868 “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” (QCFC) was published in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (JSP). This paper ultimately became a part of a series of three articles published in the JSP by Peirce. QCFC is organized a set of questions about various cognitive capacities (or powers) human beings claim to have.

While Peirce’s motivation for writing QCFC was to ultimately prove the objective validity of the laws of logic, we might see the results of QCFC in a different way. That is, people often claim to know various propositions but how do people come to know anything at all? What faculties, powers, abilities, or capacities do human beings have that allow them to have knowledge about the world, themselves, or their inner lives?

QCFC can be understood as an investigation into the cognitive powers we have as human beings.

¹Abbreviations for Peirce’s work follow these conventions: CP#.# = (Charles S. Peirce. *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Red. by Charles Hartshorne {and} Paul Weiss (vols. 1-6) {and} Arthur Burks (vols. 7-8). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); EP1:# = (Charles S. Peirce. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Ed. by Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel. Vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); EP2:# = (Charles S. Peirce. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*. Red. by The Peirce Edition Project. Vol. 2. 2 vols. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998); HL:#: (Charles S. Peirce. *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking: The 1903 Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism*. Ed. by Patricia Ann Turrisi. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997); HPS:#: (Charles S. Peirce. *Historical Perspectives on Peirce’s Logic of Science*. Ed. by Carolyn Eisele. 2 vols. Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1985); RLT:# = (Charles S. Peirce. *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: The Cambridge Conferences Lectures of 1898*. Ed. by Kenneth Laine Ketner. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); W#.# = (Charles S. Peirce. *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*. Edited by Peirce Edition Project. Ed. by Peirce Edition Project. 1-6, 8 vols. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1982); R#:# & L#:# = (Charles S. Peirce. *The Charles S. Peirce Papers. Microfilm Reels 1-30: Papers; Microfilm Reels 31-32: Supplement to the microfilm edition of the Charles S. Peirce Papers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Library, Microreproduction Service, 1963). For rejected manuscript pages, an ‘x’ is placed after the manuscript page number, e.g. R343:32x.

1.1 | Inference or intuition?

The first question Peirce considers is as follows:

Whether by the simple contemplation of a cognition, independently of any previous knowledge and without reasoning from signs, we are enabled rightly to judge whether that cognition has been determined by previous cognition or whether it refers immediately to its object. - EP1:11

Here Peirce is discussing the status of a cognition or an idea. Peirce assumes that ideas are always about something. That is, they are always about (or represent) an object.

Example 1.1

The object of my idea of a blue balloon is a *blue balloon*.

Ideas are classified in two different way, both corresponding to how the idea is determined.

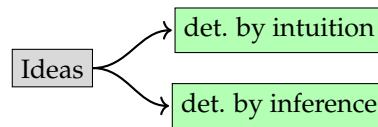
First, some ideas are the result of **inference**. An idea is determined by an inference if and only if it is determined by prior ideas. Many of our ideas are determined by inferences. Our ideas about global warming, about politics, about health, about science, and so on are often taught to us and so we reason from the testimony of others to conclusions about these topics. That is, they have the following structure:

- P1: Dr. Smith told me that my blood results indicate I have high cholesterol.
- P2: Dr. Smith is a doctor, who is trained, and the test is reliable for determining high cholesterol.
- C: Therefore, I have high cholesterol.

Many of our judgments about what we perceive with our senses are also determined by prior ideas and so the result of an inference. For example, suppose I have the idea that *there is blue balloon floating in the air*. Here I am reasoning from sensory ideas to the judgment that there is a blue balloon.

- P1: I see a blue thing in the sky
- P2: That blue thing is an oval and is moving upward.
- P3: The object I am viewing is consistent with being a blue balloon.
- C: Therefore, there is blue balloon floating in the air

Second, some ideas are said to be the result of an intuition. An idea is determined by an intuition if and only if it is determined directly by the something *outside of consciousness* (not a prior idea in the mind) or what Peirce calls a *transcendental object* (EP1:11). What exactly the object is that determines an idea in the case of an intuition is left open. Since the object is out of consciousness, it could be real objects completely independent of our mind determining these ideas or an all-knowing, all-powerful God.



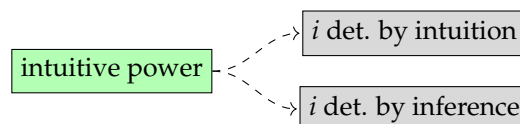
One way that Peirce characterizes intuitions is using the argumentative setting. He remarks that intuitions are *premises* that are not themselves a *conclusion*.

Example 1.2

Suppose there are only two possible arguments: A1 and A2. A1 and A2 only consists of three propositions. In the case of A1, its propositions are P1, P2, P3 where P3 is the conclusion. In the case of A2, its propositions are P1, P4, and P2 where P2 is the conclusion. Note that while P2 is a premise in A1, it is the *conclusion* in A2. And so it is a premise that is itself a conclusion, and so not an intuition. In contrast, P1 is a premise that is not itself a conclusion, and so it would be an intuition.

Now it is important to note that Peirce is not asking whether our ideas are determined by intuitions or inferences. His question is for any idea i , how do we know whether i is determined by an intuition or an inference. Do we know it intuitively or inferentially? In other words, his question about intuitions and inferences is whether or not we have an intuitive power that allows us to determine whether for any idea i that i is determined by an intuition or determined by an inference.

For example, suppose I have an idea i . That i may be determined by an intuition or it may be determined by an inference. How do I know how i was determined? Well, some may contend that we know *intuitively*. That is, we have an intuitive power that allows us to determine which ideas are determined by intuitions and which are determined by inferences. Others may contend that there is no reason to believe that we have such a power.



Peirce denies that we have an intuitive power to determine whether our ideas are intuitions or inferences. He writes:

There is no evidence that we have this faculty, except that we seem to *feel* that we have it. – EP1:12

Now before Peirce argues that we lack such an intuitive power, he offers a kind of abstract history of the debate over intuitions. He notes that historically, individuals have debated which cognitions are intuitive. In the middle ages, he contends that ideas that were two sources of knowledge: *reason* and *external authority* (e.g. the pope). In this time, ideas determined by the latter were taken to be intuitive.

the credibility of authority was regarded by men of that time simply as an ultimate premises, as a cognition not determined by a previous cognition of the same object, or, in our terms, as an intuition – EP1:13

In contrast to the middle ages, in our time the two sources of knowledge are *reason* and what Peirce refers to as an *internal authority*. This is the *feeling* that we have an intuitive power. And so, Peirce contemplates that just as we now doubt the legitimacy of *external authority* might we come to doubt the legitimacy of the *internal authority*.

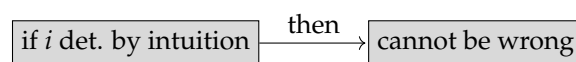
1.1.1 | The argument against a second-order power of intuition

Peirce rejects that we have a second-order intuitive power to determine whether an idea is determined by an intuition or determined by inference from observation.

Theorem 1 *No power of intuition We have no second-order intuitive power to determine if an idea i is determined by an intuition or by an inference.*

Peirce's proof of this claim will involve an assumption. Namely, that if we have this second-order intuitive power, then our knowledge from this faculty is *infallible*. That is, if I have an intuitive power to determine whether i is determined by an intuition or an inference, then it is impossible for me to be wrong. For example, suppose I have an idea that *there is a red balloon*. Assuming I have a second-order power of intuition and this idea to be determined by an intuition, then I cannot be wrong about this judgment.

This assumption gives us a way to test whether or not we have a power of intuition. Namely if a second-order power of intuition entails that we cannot be wrong about certain judgments, then Peirce can point to cases where (i) people claim to have such a power but (ii) the judgments that stem from this power are flawed.



Peirce provides a wide variety of cases to support the view that we have no second-order power of intuition. We will only consider some of these cases.

First, let's consider cases where people have judgments about **what they have seen** and **what they have inferred**. That is, suppose a subject S makes following judgment:

- S saw P

The question then is whether we have an intuitive power for determining whether *I saw P* is determined by an intuition or an inference. Now if we have such an intuitive power and this intuitive power is infallible (**A1**), then we should never confuse cases where S saw P with S *saw* P . In other words, if we intuit we saw P , then it is certain that we saw P rather than inferred P .

But Peirce contends that this is not the case since people commonly confuse what they've seen from what they've inferred. Peirce considers how witnesses to crimes often claim to have seen an event but actually only inferred it. And, he contends that this is most evident with respect to the testimony of individuals watching magic tricks.

Example 1.3: Chinese rings

Peirce refers to the case of the Chinese rings. Let's consider a variation of this trick here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paKDutWykiA>. In this case, an individual may claim to *intuitively know* (because they saw) that the magician took two unbroken metal rings and put these two rings together. But, according to Peirce, this judgment is actually a product of *inference* since they did not actually see that the rings were broken (they simply inferred this from looking at the rings or watching the magician move the rings around). Here is how the trick works: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J24UZg0rGBs> and here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5Gn9-abjqM>.

From these sorts of examples, Peirce draws the conclusion that evidence does not support the feeling that we have an intuitive power to distinguish *what we have seen* from *what we have inferred*:

This certainly seems to show that it is not always very easy to distinguish between a premise and a conclusion, that we have no infallible power of doing so, and that in fact our only security in difficult cases is in some signs from which we can infer that a given fact must have been seen or must have been inferred. – EP1:14

A **second** example concerns **dreams**. Peirce draws on dreams in two ways. First, our inability to distinguish what we dreamt from our interpretation of what we dreamt supports the idea that we have no intuitive power to determine whether some idea about our dream is the result of an intuition or the result of an inference. Second, Peirce notes that our ideas when we are dreaming are determined by “the laws of the association of ideas” and prior ideas (that is, it isn't we are encountering unicorns or are having the experience of flying when we are dreaming). But our ideas in our dreams are just like our ideas when we are awake. And so, if the ideas in our dreams are just like our ideas when we are awake, and the former are determined by inference, then there is reason to doubt that we know when our waking ideas are determined by intuition.

A **third** example involves **children**. Peirce contends that children pretty much have the same perceptive faculties as grown individuals (sight, taste, smell, consciousness). The implication then is that the second-order power of intuition should be present in them as well. But Peirce contends that when children are questioned about *how* they know something (e.g. the language they speak), they will sometimes contend that they did not learn it but *always knew it*. Of course, this is incorrect and so **A1** is falsified.

A **fourth** example involves determining the texture of a fabric of cloth by *feeling* the fabric. Peirce contends that we might contend that a fabric is rough or soft or smooth simply by feeling the fabric. But again, Peirce remarks that the idea that a fabric is smooth is not necessarily known via intuition. Instead, we learn that a fabric is smooth through an act of inference, namely by moving our hand on the fabric, then drawing a conclusion based on a comparison of different sensations.

A **fifth** example involves space perception. Here Peirce considers three different related examples. The first involves our perception of depth. Originally, it was thought that our perception of the third dimension of space was intuited. However, this dimension is actually inferred (this is a complex point but the short of it is that depth perception requires synthesizing information

from both eyes, viz., binocular cues). The second involves our idea that what we immediately see with one eye closed is a continuous oval. This idea might be said to be the result of an intuition. But, Peirce contends that the discovery of the blind spot refutes this since the contents of our vision is inferred from the existence of the blind spot to be a ring. A third involves the idea that what we see is a two-dimensional continuous surface. While this might be assumed to be intuited, it is not since it is incompatible with the physiology of our eye. Namely, our eye is not composed of an unbroken continuous surface but instead of numerous, very small retinal nerve cells. So, Peirce contends we infer that what we actually see are innumerable small dots that we “fill in”. Thus, the idea that we see an unbroken continuous surface is the result of an inference rather than an intuition.

From the above examples (and others we did not consider), Peirce concludes that we have no intuitive power to determine whether an idea is intuited or inferred (determined by prior ideas).

Exercise 1

Peirce offers up several examples of how people commonly confuse what they perceive with what they infer (e.g. magic tricks, dreams, etc.). Can you think of some of your own examples where people think they *saw* X but they really *inferred* X?

Exercise 2

Suppose Peirce is right that we do often confuse *seeing* X with *inferring* X from some sensation? What does this imply about people’s claims to know X? How should we evaluate the testimony of people when they claim to have seen X?

1.2 | Intuitive self-consciousness

The next question that Peirce considers is whether we have an **intuitive self-consciousness**. Peirce asserts that we lack an intuitive self-consciousness.

Theorem 2 *There is no intuitive self-consciousness.*

Definition 1.1: consciousness

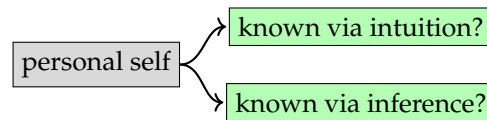
By “consciousness”, Peirce means simply an *awareness* of an object as represented.

Definition 1.2: self-consciousness

By “self-consciousness” Peirce means an *awareness* or *recognition* of our personal or private self.

And so, if we assume that we have a private self (that we as a personal self exists), the question becomes whether we know this by way of an intuitive power or through inference.

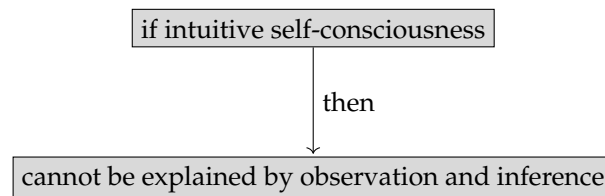
Peirce contends that it is **not** self-evident that the personal self is known by intuition. This is because (as he has argued) we lack any intuitive power to distinguish ideas determined by



intuition from those determined by inference. Thus, he contends, whether or not we have such a capacity is “to be determined upon evidence” (EP1:18). What then does the evidence suggest with respect to the whether our private selves are known via intuition?

In contrast to his denial of that we have a second-order power of intuition, Peirce’s argument here has a different structure. Namely, Peirce assumes that given two different powers (or faculties) P_1 and P_2 , if the existence of the first power P_1 is uncontroversial whereas the existence of second power P_2 is not, then we are only required to accept the existence of P_2 if it is necessary to explain facts that cannot be explained by P_1 . This gives us a way to test the claim that we have an a power of intuitive self-consciousness for such a power exists if it is *necessary* to explain certain facts.

In addition, we have a way of testing arguments as to whether we have a power of intuitive self-consciousness. Namely, we evaluate whether our knowledge of the personal self can be explained through a simpler, better-known power (e.g. observation and inference).



The structure of Peirce’s argument against an intuitive self-consciousness becomes straightforward.

1. he points out some conflicting evidence concerning whether children are self-conscious.
2. he provides an account of the origin of self-consciousness in children and how this origin is the result of faculties known to exist (observation and inference) rather than the dubitable faculty of intuition.
3. he considers and refutes an argument supporting the existence of the faculty of intuitive self-consciousness.

In what follows, each of these components of Peirce’s argument against the faculty of intuitive self-consciousness is considered.

First, Peirce points out that there is conflicting evidence about when children become self-conscious . On the one hand, children don’t tend to begin to use the first-person pronoun “I” until they have acquired a variety of other pieces of language. This suggests that they lack a self-consciousness or their awareness of their private self is imperfect. On the other hand, before children use the first-person pronoun, they are capable of a wide variety of intellectual tasks, e.g. movement, speech, the trigonometry of vision, etc. Given the breadth and sophistication of their intellectual powers, Peirce writes that “[t]here is no reason to question a similar degree of thought in reference to themselves” (EP1:19).

In short, the available evidence concerning children does not clearly point one way or another concerning whether they are intuitively aware of their private self.

Second, Peirce offers an account of the origin of self-consciousness in children that is the result of observation and inference process (A2). Peirce has much to say concerning the origin of the personal self, especially regarding the role the body plays in the process. However, we will focus on the latter part of his account. Once children are able to converse, Peirce notes that they begin to form a connection between what people say about things and the facts themselves. Sometimes, however, children will be told that a stove is hot, but say that it is not. After touching the stove, however, they find that the testimony was right all along and so become aware of ignorance or error. They then contend that there must be a thing in which this ignorance or error belongs and so posit the existence of their personal self in which the error exists. Peirce writes “[i]n short, *error* appears, and it can be explained only by supposing a *self* which is fallible” (EP1:20).

Peirce provides a rather nice summary of this second part of his argument when he writes the following:

Now, the theory which, for the sake of perspicuity, has thus been stated in a specific form, may be summed up as follows: At the age at which we know children to be self-conscious, we know that they have been made aware of ignorance and error; and we know them to possess at that age powers of understanding sufficient to enable them then to infer from ignorance and error their own existence. Thus we find that known faculties, acting under conditions known to exist, would rise to self-consciousness (EP1:20).

Third, the final part of Peirce’s argument involves considering a potential argument in support of intuitive self-consciousness. The argument, in short, is as follows:

- P1 We are more certain of our private self than any other fact
- P2 A conclusion can never be more certain than the premises it relies upon
- C Therefore, our knowledge of our private self cannot be inferred and must be known by an intuitive power.

Peirce accepts **P1** but denies **P2**, contending that it is “founded on an exploded theory of logic” (EP1:20). Peirce’s explanation of this is that while a conclusion can never be more certain than a *single* fact that supports it, when the conclusion is supported by a multitude of facts, it can be more certain than *any* single fact that supports it.

Example 1.4: testimony from witnesses

Consider a dozen individuals independently testify that Tek was at a certain location. Peirce contends that the conclusion that Tek was at a certain location is more likely than any single one of these individuals is to be believed.

Example 1.5: facts and self

Many facts seem to support that we have a private self. Thus, similar to the case of the witnesses, the fact that we have a private self is more certain than any of the facts that support it.

Peirce thus concludes that there is “no necessity” in supposing the existence of a power of intuitive self-consciousness. Our knowledge of our private self can, instead, be accounted for in a less controversial way, namely through a process of observation and inference.

Exercise 3

Peirce says that it isn't obvious that we have a direct perception of our personal selves (no intuitive self-consciousness). Instead, it is possible that we come to know that we exist by inferring that we exist. What does this imply about a baby's sense of self (very young children)?

1.3 | Subjective elements of ideas

The next question that Peirce considers is whether we have an intuitive power to distinguish various subjective elements of our ideas. Peirce is clear that we lack such a power.

Theorem 3 *We have no intuitive power to distinguish various subjective elements of our ideas*

To use more modern language (but also to narrow the discussion initially), Peirce is asking whether we have an intuitive power to determine our propositional attitudes.

Definition 1.3: propositional attitude

A propositional attitude is a mental state or disposition held by a subject toward a proposition.

Example 1.6

If **P** is a proposition, some propositional attitudes include *believing P*, *doubting P*, *imagining P*, *dreaming P*, *conceiving P*, and *knowing P*.

Peirce thus contends that we do not necessarily know our propositional attitudes intuitively. It may be the case that (i) I do not know whether I doubt a proposition **P** or (ii) I know that I doubt **P** but I know it through observation and inference rather than through an intuitive power.

However, with the above said, Peirce does not mean to restrict the discussion to propositional attitudes. Instead, his concern are with various “modes of consciousness” or the “subjective elements” of our ideas. That is, propositional attitudes involve a mental attitude to something that can be true or false (a proposition) whereas Peirce's concern refers to a mental attitude toward any idea.

Peirce begins his discussion of whether or not we have such an intuitive power by contending that, at first glance, it appears that there is a tremendous amount of evidence in support of such a power. The argument runs as follows:

- P1: There is a great difference between certain propositional attitudes, e.g. *believing P* and *doubting P* or *dreaming P* and *experiencing P*.
- P2: If there were no intuitive power to distinguish propositional attitudes, then there would be no way to recognize this difference.
- C: Therefore, an intuitive power to determine propositional attitudes must exist.

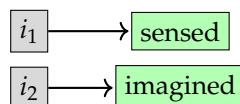
The crucial premise in this argument is P2. Peirce provides some support for P2 when he writes the following:

if we had no intuitive power of distinguishing between what we believe and what we merely conceive, we never, it would seem, could in any way distinguish them; since if we did so by reasoning, the question would arise whether the argument itself was believed or conceived, and this must be answered before the conclusion could have any force. And thus there would be a *regressus ad infinitum*. Besides, if we do not know that we believe, then, from the nature of the case, we do not believe.

In responding to this argument, Peirce points out that it is important to be clear on the type of argument that is being put forward. The argument is an inference to the best explanation. The argument is not contending that we intuitively know that we have an intuitive power for distinguishing propositional attitudes. Peirce has already argued against the idea that such a position is the case (A1). Instead, it is arguing that we must *suppose* we have an intuitive power in order to explain how we know the difference between *dreaming P* and *experiencing P*. With this in mind, the argument thus rests on whether or not it is possible to explain our capacity to recognize the difference between propositional attitudes without positing an intuitive power. Peirce thus aims to provide such an explanation.

Peirce rejects P2. He contends that the differences in the objects of our consciousness itself are sufficient for accounting for the difference between various subjective dispositions. In other words, Peirce contends that citing P1 (that there are differences in our propositional attitudes) does not in the least bit support the existence of an intuitive power.

To see this more clearly, suppose there are two ideas i_1 and i_2 . Further, suppose that i_1 has the qualities commonly associated with being sensed: vibrant, detailed, vivid, lively, etc., and i_2 has the qualities commonly associated with being imagined: dim, unclear, and weak in its details and force, etc. According to Peirce, the fact that we can reason from the *differences in these ideas* to a difference in whether we sensed or imagined them.



In other words, the mere fact that there are differences in the objective contents of the ideas is enough to suggest that there is a difference between sensing an object and imagining it. If some

content came to us in a particularly vibrant and lively way, we would contend that we sensed it rather than imagined it. Or, if it came to us in a dim and broken way, we would contend that we had imagined it rather than sensed it. Thus, the differences in the content of our ideas does not point toward an intuitive faculty.

Next, Peirce considers how we might account for the difference between *believing P* and *conceiving P* might be accounted for without positing an intuitive power. Peirce contends that there are two different ways of defining belief, and so at least two meanings of *believing P*. The first is the sensational sense of belief.

Definition 1.4: sensational belief

S believes P if and only if S judges P to be true and this judgment is accompanied by a feeling of conviction.

The second is the active sense of belief.

Definition 1.5: active belief

S believes P if and only if S judges P to be true and S is willing to act as though P is true.

Peirce contends that we can determine whether S believes P or merely conceives P simply by observation. If S believes P rather than merely conceives P, then S's judgment that P is accompanied by a feeling of conviction (if taken in the sensational sense) or the willingness to act as though P is the case (if taken in the active sense). In either case, it is not necessary to posit an intuitive power to account for the difference between *believing P* and *conceiving P*. Rather, we only need to reason from an observation of external facts.

Exercise 4

Peirce contends that we don't have an intuitive power to *distinguish* subjective elements of our cognition. This means that we don't directly know that we believe or dream or doubt some proposition P. Instead, we infer these subjective elements from outward facts, e.g. I know that I believe P from my behavior concerning P. We might reject this view as it seems to conflict with our private experience, e.g. I know that I believe P because I look into my inner self and see it is true. Is Peirce's view convincing? Also, what does Peirce's view imply? Let's say John says he *believes P* or **doubts P**, what would you need to know in order to determine if this is true? Let's say John says he knows P, what would this imply?

1.4 | Introspection

We commonly distinguish between internal and external facts. Internal facts are generally facts **about one's mind**, e.g. what one is experiencing, what one feels, emotions, etc. External facts are facts about objects in the world. With this distinction made, Peirce's next question is whether it is necessary to posit a faculty of introspection to account for our knowledge of the internal world. More plainly, how do we know the contents of our own minds, by introspection or through reasoning from external facts?

Peirce will reject that we have a faculty of introspection and instead our knowledge of internal facts is “derived from external observation” (EP1:22). However, to get clear on his argument, it is necessary to define what Peirce means by “introspection”.

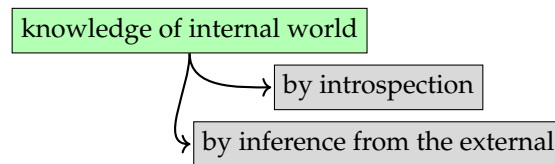
Definition 1.6: introspection

S has an introspection of S if and only if S has a direct perception of S’s internal world. It might be defined by an examination of own’s mental properties, states, features, or content without reliance on external observation

With respect to introspection:

- if S has a direct perception of S’s internal world that direct perception need not be recognized as internal
- introspection here is not the confined to intuitions of the internal world but instead *any knowledge* of the internal world that is not derived from observation of the external world.

The question then Peirce raises is whether we have a power to directing perceive (introspect) facts about our own mind *or* if the way we learn about our mind is by drawing inferences from observations about the external world.



Perhaps what we know best about our own minds (internal facts) are our **emotions**. We know when are angry, sad, happy, and so on. Let’s call these **emotional predicates**. The question then becomes how do we know that any of these emotional predicates apply to us at a given moment in time?

First, Peirce contends that it is not self-evident that we have the power of introspection. Peirce likely asserts this given that he has already shown that there is reason to doubt that we have a power of intuition to determine whether an idea is determined by an intuition or inference. This does not mean, however, that there we have no power of introspection because introspection need not be intuitive. Nevertheless, given that we cannot simply intuit this power of introspection, Peirce contends that the only argument for introspection would involve **A2**. He writes: “[t]he power, if it exists, must be known by the circumstance that the facts cannot be explained without it” (EP1:23).

Second, Peirce contends that we can explain our knowledge of internal facts without appealing to a faculty of introspection. He contends that when we are angry, sad, happy, and so on, we actually reason from prior ideas concerning external facts. The structure of the reasoning is as follows:

- P1: Object x is P
- P2: x makes me Y.

- C: Therefore, I am Y.

It should be noted that the conclusion “I am Y” is the result of an inference from an external fact P1 along with a claim about how x effects the agent. Let’s consider an example involving *anger*, although we might substitute a variety of different emotional predicates.

Example 1.7: I am angry

Suppose Tek says “I am angry”. Tek can be said to reason from “x is bad, vile, abominable” to “x makes me angry” to “I am angry”.

Note 1 Peirce further the sense of beauty, moral sense, the sense of willing, volition, and abstraction (see EP1:23).

Peirce thus concludes:

It appears, therefore, that there is no reason for supposing a power of introspection; and, consequently, the only way of investigating a psychological question is by inference from external facts.

Theorem 4 *We have no capacity of introspection.*

One consequence of there being no capacity of introspection is that all inner facts (including our own thoughts) are known through inference from external facts.

Corollary 1 *Thought can only be known by inference from external facts.*

Exercise 5

Peirce contends that we have no capacity of introspection. This means that no power that allows us to simply examine the contents of our minds. Instead, our knowledge about our minds comes from observation and inference of things in the external world. For example, John knows he is angry by observing some external fact (e.g. behavior) and then inferring that he is angry. How convincing is this view?

Exercise 6

T4: Let’s say Liz and Tek are in an argument. Liz tells Tek that he is angry and Tek says he is not. He utters “you don’t know how I feel”. If Peirce is correct, then Tek cannot know this by an inner examination of his mind. He instead knows it by way of inference from external facts. How might Liz argue that Tek is, in fact, angry? How can we, at the same time, preserve the common sense view that people know their mental states better than strangers?

1.5 | Thought without signs

The next question Peirce considers is whether we have the power to think without signs.

Definition 1.7: sign

A sign is something that stands for something (the sign's object) to someone (the sign's interpretation).

Example 1.8

The word "rabbit" stands for rabbits, smoke is a sign of fire, a person shouting at another is a sign that the person is angry, etc.

Peirce denies that we can think without signs.

Theorem 5 *There is no thought without signs.*

His argument in support of this is put forward in a few sentences:

If we seek the light of external facts, the only cases of thought which we can find are of thought in signs. Plainly, no other thought can be evidenced by external facts. But we have seen that only by external facts can thought be known at all. The only thought, then, which can possibly be cognized is thought in signs. But thought which cannot be cognized does not exist. All thought, therefore, must necessarily be in signs. – EP2:24

The idea here seems to be that since we lack any capacity of introspection, all knowledge of inner facts (which would include thought) is through inference from external facts ([Theorem 4](#), [Corollary 1](#)). Peirce contends that the only thought that can be evidenced from external facts then are thought in signs. That is, he rejects the idea that we could somehow directly perceive the internal thoughts of others. Since we can have no knowledge of thought-not-in-signs, Peirce asserts that thought-not-in-signs does not exist. That is, he rejects the idea of unknowable thoughts. Ultimately, then the only thought that can exist are thoughts in signs.

Proof 1 *All thought is in signs*

- P1: *We have no capacity of introspection ([Theorem 4](#)) and thus thought can only be known by inference from external facts ([Corollary 1](#)).*
- P2: *The only thought that is evidenced from external facts are thought-in-signs.*
- P3: *Thought, which cannot be cognized, does not exist.*
- C: *Therefore, all thought is in signs.*

Note 2 *This section involves a number of other complexities involving the relation of thought and signs to infinity as well as an objection involving unsignified thoughts. We will ignore these.*

Exercise 7

Peirce contends that there are no thoughts without signs. A kind of oversimplified view of this is to say that all thought is embodied in language and so if you cannot speak a language then you don't have any thoughts. Why would this interpretation of Peirce's position be too simplistic?

Exercise 8

T5: People sometimes say "I know X (or think X) but can't think of how to say it". For example, Tek may love Liz but not know how to express it. If all thought is in signs, what would this imply about cases where we feel or think something but cannot express it? What would it imply about *love* in particular?

1.6 | Signs of the incognizable

The sixth question that Peirce considers is whether a sign can have any meaning if it is a sign of something incognizable. Recall that every sign stands for some object. The question then is whether a sign can have an object that cannot itself be cognized.

On the one hand, there seem to be cases of meaningful signs of things that are incognizable. Peirce considers two examples.

- there are **universal propositions** like "All men are mortal". Intuitively, this sentence is meaningful. However, the meaning of this sign involves a reference to something potentially incognizable since it refers to an *infinity* of beings. But, we have no capacity to examine an infinity of beings and so there is a meaningful sign of something beyond our cognition.
- there are **hypothetical propositions** like "if HC won the election instead of DT, then there would be no wall". Intuitively this sentence is meaningful. However, the meaning of this sign involves a reference to something potentially incognizable since it refers to an "every possible state of things, all of which are not knowable". Thus, there is a meaningful sign of something beyond our cognition.

On the other hand, there is a case to be made that a sign does not have any meaning if it is a sign of something incognizable. The reasoning for this is that since all signs are abstractions and combinations of ideas that are originally derived from experience, "there can be no conception of the absolutely incognizable, since nothing of that sort occurs in experience" (EP1:24). The idea here is straightforward:

- P1: The meaning of a sign is the idea it conveys.
- P2: All ideas are derived from experience.
- P3: There is nothing in experience that is incognizable.
- C: Therefore, therefore a sign of something incognizable has no meaning.

Peirce is clear that a sign can have no meaning if it is of the incognizable.

Theorem 6 *A sign can have no meaning if, by definition, it is the sign of something absolutely incognizable.*

However, this section is a bit light on why this is the case, but Peirce does draw out a pretty significant philosophical conclusion from this claim. Namely, Peirce contends that *what is real* and *what is cognizable* (in the widest sense) are synonymous. In other words, we can have no conception of reality that is entirely independent of our ideas, viz., the idea that reality is totally independent of our ideas is self-contradictory. That is, *to be* is to be capable of being cognized or known.

Corollary 2 *The only meaningful conception of reality is one that is cognizable.*

Exercise 9

Peirce contends that we can have no meaningful signs of the incognizable. This means that any sign about something that cannot be conceived by the mind has no meaning. Can you think of some examples of signs of things that are incognizable?

1.7 | Ideas not determined by ideas

The seventh and final question that Peirce considers is whether any idea is not determined by a prior idea. Peirce contends that every idea is determined by a prior idea.

Theorem 7 *Every idea (cognition) is determined by a prior idea (cognition).*

Note 3 *We won't consider this question in the same level of detail with which Peirce considers it.*

At first glance, [Theorem 7](#) seems false given the following argument:

- P1: If an idea is determined by a prior idea and since we have ideas now, these ideas must have been determined by prior ideas, and these ideas must have been determined by prior ideas, and so on.
- P2: But there cannot be an infinite number of prior ideas so there must be a first idea not determined by prior ideas.
- C: Therefore, there is an idea not determined by a prior idea.

Peirce rejects **P2**. His argument is as follows:

- P1: Since cannot intuitively know which of our ideas are not determined ([Theorem 1](#)), the only way we could know is by hypothetic inference from observed facts.
- P2: Knowing how an idea is determined is to explain what determines that idea.
- P3: Assume there is some idea not determined by a prior idea.
- P4: If P3 is the case, then that something would be entirely out of consciousness.
- P5: We can have no meaningful sign of the incognizable ([Theorem 6](#)).
- C: Therefore, there is no idea not determined by a prior idea.

1.8 | Summary

In this essay, Peirce has provided a picture of the cognitive powers of human beings. Negatively, Peirce has argued:

- lack a second-order power of intuition ([Theorem 1](#)),
- lack the power of intuitive self-consciousness ([Theorem 2](#))
- lack the power to intuitively distinguish subjective elements of ideas ([Theorem 3](#))
- lack the power of introspection ([Theorem 4](#))
- lack the power to think without signs ([Theorem 5](#))
- lack the power to use signs to meaningfully represent what is incognizable ([Theorem 6](#))
- lack the power to have thoughts not determined by prior thoughts ([Theorem 7](#))

In the next essay, Peirce aims to draw out several consequences of the above limitations of human beings.

Exercise 10

Peirce contends that all of our thoughts/ideas are determined by prior ideas. What does this imply about our ideas? What would we need to do to develop our ideas in the best possible way?

Note 4 (Peirce on vision) Peirce (W2:196, 1868) routinely credits Berkeley's *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1843) for popularizing the discovery that the third dimension of space is inferred rather than directly perceived. It should be noted that Berkeley was not the first to conjecture that visual depth is inferred as aspects of the discovery can be found in II.ix.8 of Locke's *Essay* (1975) where he writes "[w]hen we set before our Eyes a round Globe, of any uniform colour, v.g. Gold, Alabaster, or Jet, 'tis certain, that the Idea thereby imprinted in our Mind, is of a flat Circle variously shadow'd, with several degrees of Light and Brightness coming to our Eyes." In contrast to the optico-geometric view of vision offered by Descartes (CSM II, 169-172) and Malebranche (1980:9:40-47), where visual depth is deduced from facts concerning the shape of the body on the eye, the distance between our two eyes, and the resulting angle, on Locke's view, we directly acquire ideas of breadth, height, and depth through the sense of touch but ideas of breadth and height through the sense of vision. As vision also provides quasi-spatial features (e.g. hues, brightness, gradients of shading) found in two-dimensional visual arrays, we learn (through experience) that there is a correlation between these quasi-spatial ideas and the idea of depth acquired through touch, e.g. the shaded gradient edges of a globe are correlated with the parts of the globe that curve away from the viewer's hands. Berkeley's originality then is not found in his rejection that depth can be intuited or inferred by coordinating ideas of tactile depth to those of visual perception. Rather, as Rick Grush (2007:427) insists, Berkeley's genius is found in the fact that he was "the first philosopher to see that the status of even height and breadth content as a proper visual sensible can be challenged in the same way that Locke challenged the status of depth content as a proper sensible."

While Peirce typically emphasized Berkeley's arguments for spatial depth being the product of inference, Peirce was appreciative (both in Berkeley and in Helmholtz's physiological optics) of the more general claim that other spatial properties like breadth and height were also inferred. For instance, we might suppose that we intuit a continuous two-dimensional oval surface, but this supposition is refuted by the presence of the blind spot and the anatomy of the eye since they suggest that this idea is inferred from something more basic. Peirce himself made this point in QCFC and again three years after QCFC, noting that not only was depth the result of an inferential workup, but "not even two dimensions are

given in an immediate visual sensation; because the retina is not spread out like a sheet of paper; but consists of innumerable needle-points, which are directed towards the light, and the top of each of which is sensitive. No one of these, gives any sensation of extension, but only a flash of light without any reference to extension; therefore, all of them together give no sensation of extension, except so far as the mind is able to interpret the signs of extension which they present. It is well understood from the labors of those who have devoted themselves to the study of physiological optics, that these are but indirectly even signs of extension being primarily signs of the muscular motion which is necessary to pass from one point to another" (W3:33, 1872). And, ten years after his 1868 JSP piece, Peirce appears to have explicitly seen this point in Berkeley, writing that "[w]ith reference to space, Bishop Berkeley first showed, in a very conclusive manner, that it was not a thing seen, but a thing inferred. Berkeley chiefly insists on the impossibility of directly seeing the third dimension of space, since the retina of the eye is a surface" (W3:317, 1878; see also Peirce 1894:252).

But what does all of this mean for Peirce, who was a deep admirer of Berkeley? Peirce's philosophical point is that if there were a second-order power of intuition, then we should be able to distinguish those perceptual ideas (like depth) that are immediately apprehended (intuited) from those that are the result of discursive processes. But, the history of science and philosophy reveal case after case where we misidentify perceptual ideas as being the result of an intuition when they are really the product of inference. Peirce contends that this counts as evidence against a second-order faculty that can intuit those cognitions that are immediately supplied by perception from those that are the result of inference.

Some Consequences of Four Incapacities

In 1868 “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” (SCFI) was published in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (JSP). This paper is the second essay in a set of three articles published in the JSP by Peirce. The first being “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” (QCFC). In QCFC, Peirce raised several questions concerning various cognitive powers of human beings. SCFI summarizes Peirce’s answers from that essay into four incapacities and then draws out the consequences of these incapacities.

2.1 | Cartesianism and the new platform for philosophy

Peirce begins SCFI with a characterization of a philosophy he calls **Cartesianism**. In characterizing Cartesianism, Peirce contrasts it with an earlier philosophical tradition he refers to as **scholasticism**.

1. Method: scholastics thought we should not question fundamentals, while Cartesians thought philosophy should begin with universal doubt
2. Test of certainty: scholastics took the test of certainty to rest on the testimony of sages and the Catholic Church, while Cartesians took the test of certainty to be found in one’s individual consciousness
3. Type of argumentation: scholastics made use of “multiform argumentation” while Cartesians contend that argumentation should take the form of a single thread of inference starting with clear and distinct premises
4. Scope of explanation: scholastics had mysteries of faith but attempted to explain everything while for Cartesians some facts are beyond explanation (absolutely inexplicable)

In contrast to these four tenets, Peirce contends that modern science and modern logic require a new platform for philosophy. There are four elements to this new platform

1. **Method:** We ought not to begin our philosophical inquiry with the beliefs that we have and not doubt our beliefs unless we have a positive reason for doubting them. Peirce contrasts this principle with that of the Cartesian maxim: the principle that we should begin our

philosophical inquiry by doubting everything. He contends that (i) we cannot genuinely doubt a proposition P that we believe simply because a maxim tells us to doubt P and (ii) those that say they doubt a proposition P for this reason are pretending or engaging in fake doubt.

2. **Test of truth:** Truth can only be sought for the community of inquirers. Peirce contends that rather than making single individuals the absolute judges of truth (it is only true if it is something I am clearly convinced of), obtaining the truth of a proposition is social endeavor. And, he notes that if the community believes P, then this is reason for me to doubt not-P.
3. **Proof:** We ought to adopt the method of reasoning from tangible premises along with a multitude and a variety of arguments to a conclusion *rather than* the method of reasoning from abstract premises and a single line of argumentation to a conclusion.
4. **Idealism:** We ought not to adopt the position that something is incognizable or totally independent of our ideas. That is, we cannot suppose that there is anything that is real that is completely unrelated to our ideas.

Exercise 11

In characterizing Cartesianism, Peirce contends that Cartesians thought philosophy should begin with universal doubt. And, in characterizing his new platform for philosophy, Peirce contends that philosophy ought to begin with the beliefs we have and only doubt something when we have a positive reason for doubting. What is wrong with starting an inquiry by first doubting everything, then identifying those propositions that cannot be doubted, and then only accepting those propositions that can be proven from those indubitable beliefs?

2.2 | The four incapacities

Peirce says that QCFC involves four denials. These four denials are the four of the theorems that Peirce argued for in QCFC and they reflect the four incapacities that Peirce intends to draw out the consequences of. They are as follows:

1. We have no power of introspection ([Theorem 4](#)).
2. We have no power of intuition ([Theorem 1](#))
3. We have no power of thinking without signs ([Theorem 5](#))
4. We have no conception of the absolutely incognizable ([Theorem 6](#))

Peirce says that (1)-(4) are not certain. Even though he has argued for them in QCFC, he suggests that (1)-(4) require further testing by tracing out their consequences. The manner in which he does this is by first tracing out the consequences of (1), then tracing out the consequences of (1) and (2) together, then (1), (2), and (3) together, and finally the consequences of (1)-(4).

2.3 | Consequence of incapacity 1

Let's begin with the consequence of there being no power of introspection ([Theorem 4](#)).

If we have no power of introspection, then we have no power to directly perceive the inner facts of our minds. And, further, if we have no power of introspection, then any philosophy that derives facts about the external world using introspection is also flawed. If not by introspection, then our knowledge of our minds must come by way of *hypothetical reasoning* from external facts. For Peirce the nature of this hypothetical reasoning is that claims about how our mind works are hypotheses that we use to explain certain facts that occur in the external world. That is, I come up with a *hypothesis* about what happens in mind (or how it works) to make sense of facts outside of my mind.

In short, the **consequence** of their being no introspection is, as mentioned, that all of our knowledge about the external world and the internal world are by hypothetical reasoning from external facts.

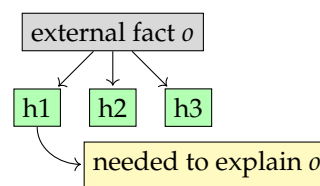


Figure 2.1: We are justified in positing a hypothesis about the mind in order to explain certain facts about the external world.

But Peirce does not suggest that we can posit *any* hypothesis about the mind to explain external facts.

First, he contends that once we make a hypothesis *h1* to explain some fact, we ought not to posit another hypothesis *h2* to explain that same fact. Instead, Peirce contends that we must carry the first hypothesis as far as it will go, only positing additional hypotheses when the first cannot explain certain facts. With respect to our minds, Peirce contends that this implies we ought to “reduce all kinds of mental action to one general type” (EP1:30). Namely, Peirce contends that if we ought not to explain what goes on in our minds with two faculties when it can be explained with one.

Second, Peirce contends that whatever hypothesis we make concerning our own minds, we ought to begin with positing a power whose “existence is indubitable”, “whose laws are best known”, and whose operations follow “external facts” (see [Figure 2.2](#)).

2.3.1 | Consequence of incapacities 1 and 2

At this point, Peirce now introduces the second incapacity that we have no power of intuition ([Theorem 1](#)). Since we have no power of intuition, it would follow that there is no way for us to determine which of our ideas are determined by object rather than determined by inference. Given [Theorem 1](#) along with [Theorem 7](#), which asserted that all of our ideas are determined by prior ideas, Peirce notes that (i) we have no absolutely first cognition of any object and (ii) and so our cognition arises by a *continuous process*.

In other words, if we are to propose a hypothesis to explain external facts, our hypothesis should be about a *process* or *action* or *operation* of the mind. We will simply refer to this process as **mental action**. See [subsection 2.3.1](#).

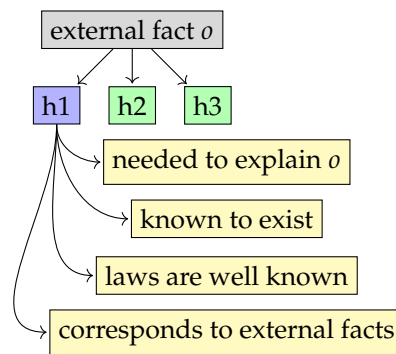
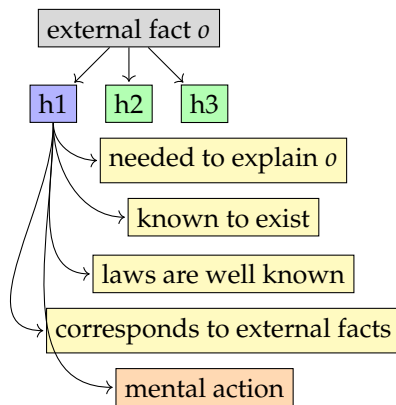


Figure 2.2: First, $h1$ explains o , then we ought not posit $h2$ or $h2$ and $h3$ in addition if they explain the same facts. Furthermore, if we know $h1$ exists, and the operations of $h1$ are well-known, and $h3$ follows external facts, then we ought to posit $h1$ over $h2$ or $h3$.

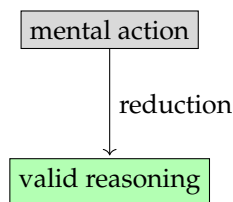


But what *single* power that is a process of the mind do we have that is not doubted and that closely follows external facts? Peirce's answer is *valid inference*. That is, Peirce contends that mind works by moving from premises $P1, P2, P3, \dots$ to a conclusion C only when C is true when $P1, P2, P3, \dots$ are true. As Peirce puts it:

We must begin, then, with a *process* of cognition, and with that process whose laws are best understood and most closely follow external facts. This is no other than the process of valid inference, which proceeds from its premise, A , to its conclusion, B , only if, as a matter of fact, such a proposition as B is always or usually true when such a proposition as A is true.

The consequence then of the first two incapacities is the following:

It is a consequence, then, of the first two principles whose results we are to trace out, that we must, as far as we can, without any other supposition than that the mind reasons, reduce all mental action to the formula of valid reasoning (EP1:30)



To be clear, Peirce is not saying that whenever mental action (reasoning, thinking, making decisions) occurs our minds go through the step-by-step process of a formal proof. That is, suppose Tek believes that he will one day die based on the fact that (i) all humans are mortal and (ii) that he is human. Peirce says it is “very doubtful” that Tek’s mind operates as follows:

- P1: I have an image or idea in my mind that all humans are mortal.
- P2: Now I have an idea in my mind that I am human.
- C: These prior ideas are pushed aside for the idea that I am mortal.

Rather, he contends that there is something going on in “within the organism which is equivalent to the syllogistic process” (EP1:31). And, this is confirmed by experience. As Peirce writes:

it is a matter of constant experience, that if a man is made to believe in the premises, in the sense that he will act from them and will say that they are true, under favorable conditions he will also be ready to act from the conclusion and to say that it is true.

In other words, if we have an individual who believes P1 and P2, we will find that the individual will also believe in C.

In EP1:31-37, Peirce articulates the three main types of valid logical reasoning. These are deductive, inductive, and hypothetical (or abductive) reasoning. We won’t discuss these in detail but a quick overview will be helpful to understand what Peirce means when he says that we ought to reduce *mental action* to the formula of valid reasoning.

Definition 2.1: deductive argument

An argument is a deductive argument if and only if it is logically impossible for the premises to be true and the conclusion is false.

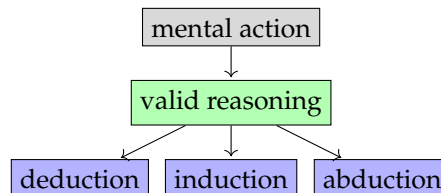
Definition 2.2: inductive argument

An argument is an inductive argument if and only if it reasons from the assumption that *all* members of a set A are assumed to have a characteristic P which are known to be found in a set B, where B is a subset of A.

Another way that Peirce defines an inductive argument is an argument “which assumes that that is true of a whole collection which is true of a number of instances taken from it at random” (EP1:33).

Definition 2.3: abductive argument

An argument is an abductive argument if and only if it involves reasoning that an object o has a property P from the premise that the property P is known to always accompany other properties A, B, C ,



One problem with Peirce's suggestion that our minds work according to the process of valid inference is the existence of fallacious reasoning (EP1:37). That is, individuals routinely reason from premises to conclusions that are not warranted by those premises. Peirce's response is rather detailed so we won't consider it either.

Exercise 12

One consequence of not having a power of introspection along with not having a power of intuition is that our understanding of the external world and our own minds is that working of our own mind is reducible to the process of valid inference (proof). This seems to suggest that our minds are nothing more than powerful logical engines, viz., their main and perhaps only operation is to draw conclusions from prior ideas (premises). Does this square with the common sense view of how people understand how their minds operate?

2.3.2 | Consequence of incapacities 1, 2, and 3

Peirce begins his discussion of the third incapacity on EP1:38. Recall that Peirce contends that have no power of thinking without signs ([Theorem 5](#)). He restates this denial more positively as follows:

whenever we think, we have present to the consciousness some feeling, image, conception, or other representation, which serves as a sign (EP1:38).

Note that when Peirce says that whenever we think, we always think in signs, his conception of a sign is extremely broad as it can be a feeling, an image, or a number of other representations, e.g. words, diagrams, etc. But what is the consequence of all thought being through signs? Peirce answers this question by giving a more detailed account of the nature of signs. The field of study (largely pioneered by Peirce) of studying signs in general is called semiotics.

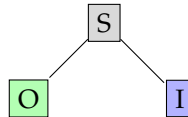
Definition 2.4: semiotics

emiotics (also referred to as semiology and semiotic studies) is the study of the nature of signs, their relations, and impact on thought.

First, we need a definition of a sign.

Definition 2.5: sign

A sign S is something that stands for something (and object, O) to some thought (interpretation, I).



A sign is said to have three elements to it:

- its material quality
- its denotative character
- its representational function

The **material quality** of a sign are the characters of the sign itself independent of its capacity to represent anything to anyone. For example, the sign “man” has three letters on a page, a pointing finger has a particular shape and direction, a photograph is flat with colors, and so forth.

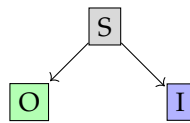
The **denotative application** of a sign is the character of a sign that allows it to stand for an object. For example, a weathervane has particular features that allow it to denote (refer to) the direction of the wind in that the weathervane is in physical relation to the wind itself. A drawing of a person has features that allow it to refer to that person in virtue of the fact that the drawing resembles that person.

Finally, the **representative function** is perhaps the most difficult to understand. This feature of a sign is neither its material quality nor its denotative application. Instead, Peirce takes this aspect of a sign to be found in how the sign is interpreted or thought of. One way of understanding this idea is through conventional signs. The sign “man” only stands for its object in virtue of the fact that individuals interpret the sign man in this way. The same is true for the weathervane and its physical connection to the wind. The sign has meaning only insofar as the direction of the weathervane is interpreted as being in a physical connection with the direction of the wind.

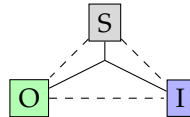
While Peirce’s analysis is rather detailed, we can distill some of the general consequences of all thought being in signs.

First, if we think of something, then that thought has some material quality to it, is about something, and is capable of being interpreted by someone else or ourselves. Putting this negatively, there are no invisible uninstantiated thoughts, there are not thoughts that don’t stand for something, and there are no meaningful thoughts that are incapable of being interpreted.

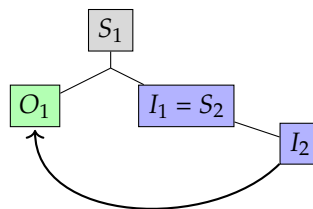
One way of thinking about this implication is through the claim that *all thought is triadic in nature*. The sign (and thought) is said to have a **triadic** relation (three-place relation) in that the **sign** can only *stand for* its **object** in virtue of *standing to* some **interpretation**. Thus, rather than thought proceeding by an object causing a sign which then causes an interpretation. Two two-place relations:



The sign is triadic in that the sign cannot be what it is without being interpreted as standing for an object to an interpretation.



Second, thought has a forward-looking direction. Consider that all thought is in signs ([Theorem 5](#)) and that one element of a sign is that it stands to some interpretation (I). But if an interpretation is nothing more than a thought, and all thoughts are in signs, then the meaning of a sign is found in its future interpretation.



More concretely, the consequence then is that ideas or thoughts you have at a given moment are not totally encapsulated. The meaning of any idea of you have is not totally found in the moment you have it. Instead, the *ultimate* meaning of various signs, e.g. emotions, scientific concepts like *electricity*, or political terms are ultimately found in some future interpretation.

Third, all new thought is thought that emerges out of prior thoughts. This is because all thoughts are in signs ([Theorem 5](#)) and we lack the power to have thoughts not determined by prior signs ([Theorem 7](#)). This implies that new, creative thinking does not emerge out of nothing. Instead, it emerges out of a prior chain or process of thought.

More concretely, individuals often like to claim they were divinely inspired or that they themselves were the sole creators of an idea or thought. But, while we might be able to contend that individuals are creative and responsible for new ideas, these ideas (i) do not come out of nowhere since they are determined by prior ideas and (ii) no individual is completely responsible for their ideas since we are social beings and our ideas are influenced by others.

Exercise 13

There are three main consequences drawn from the fact that there is no power to think without signs. First, our thought has a triadic character (it always stands for something to someone through something). Second, the meaning of our thought is not found in the moment in which we think it but is instead found in its future development. Third, our ideas are historical in that they always are determined by prior ideas. What do you think of each of these consequences?

1. With respect to the second consequence, what would this imply for ideas like *the meaning of my life, the meaning of the country, scientific ideas*?
2. With respect to the third consequence, how ought we to understand any individual accomplishment?

2.4 | Consequence of incapacities (1)-(4)

The fourth incapacity is that we have no conception of the absolutely incognizable ([Theorem 6](#)). In other words, we cannot conceive what cannot be conceived. We will focus on two consequences of this incapacity.

1. what it implies about the meaning and nature of reality
2. what it implies about the human being

2.4.1 | What is real

In this section, we consider two points about reality. First, Peirce's argument for metaphysical idealism. Second, his account of what it means for something to be real.

Peirce claims that we have no conception of the incognizable. His argument is relatively terse:

- P1: The meaning of the word is the conception it conveys (the meaning of a sign is its interpretation)
- P2: To say something is "absolutely incognizable" has no meaning since it conveys no conception (it conveys no interpretation).
- P3: Therefore, "absolutely incognizable" is meaningless.

On the one hand, it seems obvious that we have no conception of the absolutely incognizable, but people often talk as though they do have such a conception. In fact, they make use of various signs whose meaning is beyond any idea or comprehension. Consider the following definition of what it means for something to be real.

Definition 2.6: metaphysical realism

To be real is *that which is entirely independent of all thought* such that if i is an idea and o is an object, then any change in i has any no effect on o and any change in o has no effect on i .

Metaphysical realism takes *real objects* to be things that are absolutely beyond our ideas and so our ideas have no relation to these objects. On this approach, real things are things in themselves without any relation to our ideas. Metaphorically, this view takes reality to be *wholly beyond* our ideas.

But, if we have no conception of the incognizable and metaphysical realism makes reality incognizable, then we have no meaningful conception of metaphysical realism. It follows then that reality must be cognizable or relative to the mind. As Peirce puts it:

there is no thing which is in-itself in the sense of not being relative to the mind (EP1:52).

This is the position of **metaphysical idealism**.

Definition 2.7: metaphysical idealism

Metaphysical idealism is the position that *reality* is capable of being known or that which exists must exist relative to the mind.

Note 5 *It is important, however, to note that this does not imply that just because I don't have a conception of something it follows that thing does not exist. It would imply, however, that if no one could ever have a conception of something, then that thing would not exist.*

The second point that Peirce considers is what it **means** for something to be real. Peirce notes that our *idea of reality* likely emerged when we encountered that there was something unreal, an illusion, or our own ignorance. This encounter prompted the distinction between something that is relative to our own minds and something that would stand *in the long run for any mind*. Peirce thus contends that our idea of reality implies:

the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge (EP1:52).

To put this simply, the meaning of *reality* is the object of an opinion held by some future collection of individuals who have extended their knowledge to such a significant degree that they hold constantly reaffirm the opinion and will never deny it. In short, the real is what is represented by the belief of a future group of individuals.

Exercise 14

People commonly hold that reality is "out there" or "independent of our thoughts", but Peirce contends that reality is cognizable (must stand in relation to the mind and knowledge) and is what would be represented by a future community of individuals. How would you go about trying to convince someone of Peirce's position? Are you, yourself, convinced of it?

2.4.2 | The nature of human beings

The last consequence that we will consider concerns what the four incapacities imply about the nature of human beings. Peirce's general point is to insist that besides (i) the material properties that distinguish us and (ii) the differences in complexity, human beings are nothing more than signs. And so, Peirce will sometimes refer to human beings as man-signs.

There are a number of steps to Peirce's argument, but we will focus on the simple argument he makes halfway through this discussion.

- P1: Every thought is a sign ([Theorem 5](#))
- P2: Human life is a train of thought.
- C: Therefore, human life is a train of signs.

Peirce makes several points about this argument but we'll focus on two.

The first is that just as we grow as human beings so do signs. Peirce writes:

The man-sign acquires information, and comes to mean more than he did before. But so do words. Does not electricity mean more now than it did in the days of Franklin?

The second is that while we think that we are the master of meaning and signs have no meaning without us, Peirce notes that this isn't entirely true for if there were no signs, we would have no thoughts, and without any thoughts we wouldn't be who we are. Peirce writes:

Man makes the word, and the word meaning nothing which the man has not made it mean, and that only to some man. But since man can think only by means of words or other external symbols, these might turn round and say: "You mean nothing which we have not taught you, and then only so far as you address some word as the interpretant of your thought." (EP1:54).

In other words, human beings as signs exist with non-human signs in a reciprocal relation.

In fact, therefore, men and words reciprocally educate each other; each increase of a man's information involves and is involved by, a corresponding increase of a word's information (EP1:54).

Exercise 15

What is there to be learned by thinking of ourselves as signs? That is, what is there to be learned by thinking of who we are as a train or chain of signs?

The Will to Believe

3.1 | Summary

The picture we've developed thus far of the human person is of an individual that has the following traits:

1. fallible - since all knowledge is based on observation and inference rather than intuition, it is always possible to be wrong about any given proposition
2. committed to the cognizability of reality (idealism) - since we have no conception of the incognizable, the only meaningful conception of reality is one that can be cognized
3. understanding the private self and the mind through inference from external facts (e.g. behaviors, emotions, ignorance, etc.) - since we lack a power of introspection, our knowledge about the mind is based upon hypothetical reasoning from observation
4. a product of a natural (biological) and intellectual history - since we lack a power of intuition, all thought is determined by prior thought, and since all thought is in signs, any sign is the result of the development of prior signs
5. forward-looking in that meaning is understood in terms of the development of signs - since the meaning of any sign is found in its interpretant, and interpretants can be understood as thoughts, and all thoughts are in signs, the ultimate meaning of any sign is found in its future interpretation.

Next, we will consider what if, anything, American philosophers have to say about the nature of faith. In particular, we will look at a defense of the rationality of faith by the American philosopher William James.

3.2 | Introduction

"The Will to Believe" was an address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. It was later published with changes in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1897.¹ The essay is a classic in the field of epistemology and as a defense

¹johanson'will'1975; Jennifer Welchman. "William James's "The Will to Believe" and the Ethics of Self-experimentation". In: 42.2 (2006), pp. 229–241; G. L. Doore. "William James and the Ethics of Belief". In: *Philosophy*

of religious faith. It argues against the principle of evidentialism put forward most explicitly by English philosopher and mathematician William Kingdon Clifford (4 May 1845 – 3 March 1879). The title of the essay underwent multiple changes: “duty to believe”, “the right to believe”, etc.

James’s essay can be seen in contrast to the view that one ought to only believe a proposition P if one has sufficient evidence for P. This position was famously espoused by William Clifford who wrote that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”² It has also been put forward by Bertrand Russell who wrote that “it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true.”^{3,4}

Example 3.1

Beliefs that were instilled in our childhood, beliefs we ignore exploring the validity of despite the implications of authorities, beliefs that we have our own doubts concerning, and beliefs that that simply lack the time to explore, all serve as examples where sufficient evidence is lacking for justifiably holding that a given situation is how we think it to be.

For both Clifford and Russell, the determination of whether a given position counts as sufficiently probable depends on its proportional relation to evidence, and in cases where there lack no sufficient grounds for positive (or negative) opinion, “the ordinary man would do well to suspend his judgment” (Russell 1958:39; see Clifford 1877:295). In short, in the fact of a lack of evidence, Clifford and Russell contend that one ought to be **agnostic**.

In “The Will to Believe”, William James argues that the Clifford-Russell thesis errs in its universality. For while in matters that lack vital importance (such as the majority of scientific investigations) belief has no role, **situations where we are faced with a genuine option**—one that is forced, momentous, and living (or of significant meaningfulness to us)—our passional nature serves as the lawful determinant of our choice (1956:11,19).⁵

58.225 (1983), pp. 353–364; Patrick K Dooley. “The Nature of Belief: The Proper Context for James’ ‘The Will to Believe’”. In: *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 8 (1972), pp. 141–151.

²William Clifford. “The Ethics of Belief”. In: *Contemporary Review* 29 (1877), pp. 289–309, p. 295.

³Bertrand Russell. *The Will to Doubt*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1958, p. 38.

⁴see also Bertrand Russell. *Free Thought and Official Propaganda*. New York: B. W. Huebsch, INC., 1922; Alfred Lloyd. *The Will to Doubt: An Essay in Philosophy for the General Thinker*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1907.

⁵Russell’s position is not entirely equivalent with Clifford’s. With respect to “[h]ow far could or should men’s actions be rational?”, Russell writes that “some of the most important departments of life are ruined by the invasion of reason” (1958:48). Such departments include the romantic, filial, or friendly relationships, the creative products of the arts, and non-conventional morality. The application of rationality has the potentiality of distorting such departments. Russell writes “[c]ontrol has been applied to the very things which should be free, while envy, cruelty, and hate sprawl at large with the blessing of nearly the whole bench of Bishops” (1958:50). Russell’s appeal is that we ought to try to parse out, if possible, the conflation that regularly occurs among the beliefs of the lunatic, the lover, and the poet. For Russell, this requires that we be attentive to two sides of our instinctive apparatus: “one tending to further our own life and that of our descendents, the other tending to thwart the lives of supposed rivals” (1958:50). Russell is thus much closer to James than Clifford insofar as both James and Russell argue that rationality and its lawful insistence on that belief be proportional to the evidence fails to apply in certain circumstances. While Russell fails to count religious faith as falling into this sphere, he and James both earmark the departments of friendship, romantic relations, and morality as among those where belief is valid despite it not being guided by conventionally rational principles. But while James would contend that all positions are valid within this sphere, Russell refuses to countenance the ravings of the lunatic and instinctive malice as being justifiable.

3.3 | Introductory Section: Sermon on Justification by Faith

In the introductory section, James asserts that his lecture is an “essay in justification of faith, a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced” (WB1-2). In short, he aims to argue that it is rational/defensible to believe in some proposition P without sufficient evidence for P.

Exercise 16

Before we begin analyzing James’s position, it is worthwhile to think of what reasons there might be for the position James rejects. Take a moment to consider any argument you can create in support of the claim that you ought only to believe what you have sufficient evidence for.

3.4 | First Section: Preliminary Distinctions

In this section, James makes a number of distinctions.

Definition 3.1: hypothesis

Anything that may be proposed to our belief

Hypotheses can be **live** or **dead**

- live: a hypothesis that is a real possibility to the person to whom it is proposed, e.g. that Liverpool FC will win the Premier league
- dead: a hypothesis that is not a real possibility to the person to whom it is proposed, e.g. that Donald Trump is a martian (logically possibility but extremely unlikely).

James notes that the property of being *living or dead* is *relative to the thinker* and is measured by that individual’s *willingness to act*. And so, a maximally live hypothesis is one that the individual would always act upon (belief).

Next, James defines an option.

Definition 3.2: option

Decision between at least two hypotheses

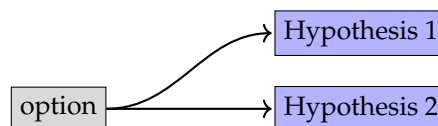


Figure 3.1: An option is a decision between at least two hypotheses.

James notes that there are of several kinds of options:

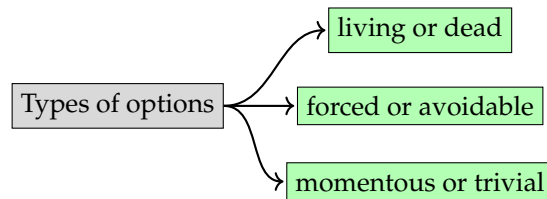


Figure 3.2: James contends that options may be (i) living or dead, (ii) forced or avoidable, and (iii) momentous or trivial.

- a **living option** is a decision between two live hypotheses. A dead option would thus be a decision between two dead hypotheses or one dead and one living hypothesis.
- a **forced option** requires you to choose one of the two hypotheses. A non-forced option is an option where you could pursue some other hypothesis
- a **momentous option** is a decision between hypotheses that involves some level of uniqueness or significance such that failing to choose would mean losing out on something significant. A trivial option is a decision between hypotheses that does not involve anything unique such that one could fail to choose and nothing of significance would be lost

Example 3.2: live option

Some potentially live options include:

1. Be a Christian or be an agnostic.
2. You should vote for Trump or vote for Hillary
3. You should read "The Will to Believe" or do something else

Example 3.3: forced option

Some forced options include:

1. Do something or do nothing
2. Either vote or don't vote
3. You should believe in God or not believe in God

Example 3.4: momentous option

James notes that most scientific hypotheses are trivial in that we don't miss out on anything if our hypothesis fails (and that we could always run other tests). Some momentous options include:

1. The decision to go to the moon/mars or not
2. The decision to go see some famous musician's final show or not
3. The decision to go to the North Pole or not.

James defines a **genuine option** as an option that is (i) forced, (ii) living, and (iii) momentous

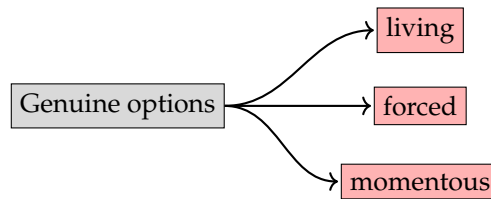


Figure 3.3: A genuine option is an option that is a decision between hypotheses that is (i) forced, (ii) living, and (iii) momentous

Example 3.5: Soul mate

There is a beautiful person is quickly walking past you that you think you have a chance with and think maybe he/she will be the one that you will ultimately marry (live and momentous). You can either go up and talk to her/him or you can do nothing (forced).

Example 3.6: Drowning child

There is a child drowning in a lake and you think you might be able to swim out there and save him yourself (live). This is a momentous occasion, if you save him, you might be doing something great (or you could be heralded as a hero). There is no one else around, so you have the option to swim and save him or let him drown

Exercise 17

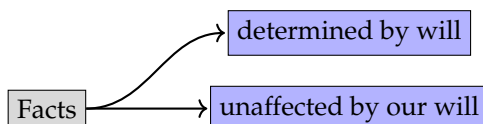
Try to devise two genuine options.

3.5 | Second Section: the root of conviction

James begins the second section by noting that

1. some facts might be determined by our will (our passional/volitional nature)
2. some facts are completed unaffected by our will

In short, James distinguishes between reality and our will.



But the question is which (if any) facts are potentially determined by our will. There are a number of possible options:

1. all facts are determined by our passional nature

2. no facts are determined by our passional nature
3. some facts are determined by our passional nature and some facts are not determined by our passional nature

James begins his analysis by considering two sorts of cases where we ought not simply believe whatever we want. That is, two types of facts that **not** determined by our passional nature

The **first case** involves beliefs that are **matters of fact** or established **relations between ideas** (analytic truths). His examples illustrate this case well.

Can we, by just willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth, and that the portraits of him in McClure's Magazine are all of some one else? Can we, by any effort of our-will, or by any strength of wish that it were true, believe ourselves well and about when we are roaring with rheumatism in bed, or feel certain that the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars? We can *say* any of these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them;

In short, certain facts seem to be dead hypotheses upon which our wills can have no influence. They are settled matters of fact or analytic truths.

The **second case** involves *dead hypotheses* won't be settled by experience. Our will or passional nature plays no role in determining the truth or falsity of the hypothesis because we have no volitional attitude toward that hypothesis.

James considers Pascal's wager but the wager has no effect if the hypothesis is dead. First, consider Pascal's wager (see [Table 3.1](#)).

	God exists	God does not exist
Belief in God	gain everything	lose nothing
Non-belief in God	lose everything	gain little

Table 3.1: Pascal's wager

However, consider the same line of reasoning for attending mass.

	God exists	God does not exist
Attend mass	gain everything	lose nothing
Not attend mass	lose everything	gain little

Table 3.2: Pascal's wager for attending mass

And, again, consider the same argument uttered by the Mahdi (the redeemer of Islam who will appear some number of years before judgment day):

As well might he Mahdi write to us, saying, "I am the expected One who God has created in his effulgence. You shall be infinitely happy if you confess me; otherwise you shall be cut off from the light of the sun. Weigh, then, your infinite gain if I am

genuine against your finite sacrifice if I am not!" His logic would be that of Pascal; but he would vainly use it on us, for the hypothesis he offers us is dead (WB:6).

Depending upon the individual, the passional nature (or will) plays no role in determining the truth or falsity of the proposition nor does it compel an individual to believe or not believe. The individual simply has no opinion on the matter.

At this point, we might consider the possibility that the will (passional / volitional nature) **should not play any role** in determining what we believe. We might contend that belief by volition/passion is silly, vile, and sinful. That free-will and simple wishing have no bearing upon what belief should be.

Let's call this view **evidentialism**.

Definition 3.3: evidentialism

The intellect should always determine what one believes and not the passional or volitional nature.

3.6 | Third Section: The Role of Non-Intellectual Nature on our Convictions

We will skip this section.

3.7 | Fourth Section: The Thesis

James asserts his thesis in this fourth section:

The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: *Our passional nature 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; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision, — just like deciding yes or no, — and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth* (WB:11).

Let's summarize this thesis:

- there are cases that our passional / volitional must decide
- these cases involve genuine options that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds
- the claim that we should be agnostic about the question is itself a passional decision
- that passional decision has no more worth than another passional decision

3.8 | Fifth Section: Two Dogmatism: Empiricism and Absolutism

James contends that he is ignoring the systematic skeptic because he postulates that "there is truth, and that it is the destiny of our minds to attain it" and that he adopts "the faith that truth

exists" (WB:12). However, he holds there are two different ways this non-skeptical view might be taken:

1. the empiricist way
2. the absolutist way

Definition 3.4: absolutism

Absolutists contend that not only can we know the truth but we "can *known when* we have attained to knowing it" (WB:12)

Definition 3.5: empiricism

Empiricists contend that we can know the truth but we "cannot infallibly know when" (WB:12)

James here is making a distinction between first-order and second-order knowledge. Let's suppose that there is a proposition P where P is "snow is white". Now let's consider three different propositions:

1. P
2. I know P
3. I know that I know P

Both absolutists and empiricists agree that it is possible to know P (first-order knowledge) but they disagree about whether they know that they know P (second-order knowledge). Empiricists contend that there is no infallible second-order knowledge while absolutists contend that second-order knowledge is possible.

James contends that we are **naturally absolutists**. This is because we have a belief in **objective evidence**. That is, we have beliefs like "we exist here and now" or "two plus two equals four" that (i) we take ourselves to be unable to doubt and (ii) because these "things illumine my intellect irresistibly" (WB:13).

Those that take themselves to be empiricists are *empiricists in reflection or in speech* although not in *practice*. James's target here is William Clifford arguing that Clifford claim that we ought not to believe in God is not reflective of the empiricist mindset but instead reflective of the absolutist mindset in the other direction. As James puts it:

When the Cliffords tell us how sinful it is to be Christians on such 'insufficient evidence,' insufficiency is really the last thing they have in mind. For them the evidence is absolutely sufficient, only it makes the other way. They believe so completely in an anti-christian order of the universe that there is no living option: Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start (WB:14)

3.9 | Sixth Section: Abandonment of Objective Certitude

James takes himself to be a complete empiricist. He believes he has knowledge and lives as such, but also accepts that any one of his beliefs may be wrong

I am, therefore, myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live, to be sure, by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true; but to hold any one of them — I absolutely do not care which — as if it never could be reinterpretable or corrigible, I believe to be a tremendously mistaken attitude, and I think that the whole history of philosophy will bear me out (WB:14)

Despite claiming to be a complete empiricist, James contends that there are a number of certain truths that resist even the most sceptical of philosophers. He points to two such truths:

1. “the truth that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists” (WB:15)
2. “abstract propositions of comparison (such as two and two are the same as four)” (WB:15)

James offers a number of reasons for adopting empiricism over absolutism.

1. no concrete test of absolute truths, e.g. divine revelation, *consensus gentium* (agreement of the people), natural instincts, clear and distinct ideas guaranteed by God, common-sense, the inconceivability of the opposite, verification by sense experience, etc.
2. a wide number of contradictory opinions have claimed to be supported by objective evidence, e.g. God exists vs. God doesn't exist, the physical world can be immediately known vs. the physical world is only known via ideas, etc. (see WB:16)

However, while James contends that the empiricist gives up on the doctrine of objective certitude, s/he does not give up on the “quest or hope of truth itself” (WB:17). For James then there is a difference in the way that empiricists and absolutists approach truth. For the absolutist, we start with some propositions that we have absolute certainty concerning and then work our way toward other truths. For the empiricist, we start with whatever hypotheses that are available and then work our way toward truth.

Practically, this difference in approach also comes with a difference concerning how we evaluate hypotheses. For James the empiricist is much more open to the origin of the hypothesis while the absolutist will only accept hypotheses that emerge from the system itself.

It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true

Exercise 18

3.10 | Seventh Section: Two Distinct Ways of Opinion: The Practical Argument

James contends that this seventh section is the last **introductory section**. He introduces a distinction between two attitudes (or duties) toward belief. That is, if we think that there is a kind of **ethics of belief**, he considers two different rules.

The **first attitude is the avoidance of error attitude**. This is the attitude most aligned with the evidentialist. This approach places certain restrictions on what one should believe for it contends that one should only believe what one has sufficient evidence to support.

The **second attitude is the chase-for-truth attitude**. This approach is more permissive in that it allows, in certain circumstances, for the possibility of believing without sufficient evidence.

James makes a number of additional points once this distinction is drawn:

- James contends that while the choice between the attitudes is not mutually exclusive; however, we treat one as more primary than the other.
- One might contend that the risk of being wrong is great when compared with the benefit of being right
- One might contend that the risk of being wrong is small when compared with the benefit of being right

James contends that he adopts the **chase-for-truth attitude**.

1. there is no objective way to decide which attitude is better: the difference is practical
2. The avoidance of error attitude is reflective of someone who fears becoming a dupe, but James contends that there are worse things in life than being a dupe: "It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound" (WB:19)
3. the chase-for-truth attitude is more practical on the basis that it is healthier because the chase-for-truth attitude comes with a kind of "lightness of heart" rather than an "excessive nervousness" (WB:19)

3.11 | Eighth Section: The judicial intellect

James begins section 8 by reiterating his thesis from section 4:

not only as a matter of fact do we find our passional nature influencing us in our opinions, but that there are some options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded both as an inevitable and as a lawful determinant of our choice (WB:19).

James's main goal in this section is to restrict the scope of his thesis. That is, he contends that there are some matters where we ought not let our passional nature decide our beliefs. These are matters where the option is not momentous, or not forced, or the choice between hypotheses is not living.

1. In the majority of scientific matters, the decision between hypotheses is not momentous and it is not forced and so we can simply continue to investigate the matter without deciding before all of the evidence is available.
2. In a lot of legal matters, there is no real consequence (not momentous); case can be decided on any acceptable principle.

Note 6 While James notes that we can adopt a wait-and-see approach to the majority of scientific matters, he notes that with respect to scientific discovery this is not the case. That is, he suggests that scientific discovery is often fueled by individuals pursuing their pet hypotheses even when those hypotheses are not supported by evidence.

In short, when there is no forced option “the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis, saving us, as it does, from dupery at any rate, ought to be our ideal” (WB:21–22).

3.12 | Section Nine: Moral Questions and Personal Relations

Despite the above caveat, James raises the following: are there not some speculative questions where we cannot dispassionately wait for an answer? That is, there are some forced options in our speculative questions that we must decide before all of the evidence is available.

3.12.1 | Moral questions

One type of question of this sort are **moral questions**. Not a question of existence, but value of existence (an x’s goodness)

Definition 3.6: moral question

A question not about what exists (which is the task of science) but what would be good if it did exist.

James asserts that (i) moral beliefs are determined by our will / passional nature and that (ii) even the decision to have moral beliefs at all is determined by our will / passional nature.

He contends that just as intellectual skepticism cannot be refuted, neither can moral skepticism be refuted. But, at the same time, neither can the skeptic refute moral belief.

For James, the decision to believe or not believe in morals comes down to whether one wishes to adopt the **doubting attitude** or **believing attitude**

3.12.2 | Questions about personal relations

Another example involves questions of fact relating to personal relations. Here James notes that the belief in some fact can play a role in bringing that fact about (self-fulfilling prophecy).

For consider Tek and Liz. Suppose Tek asks “does Liz like me”. According to James, whether you like me or not sometimes may depend on whether I adopt a preliminary faith that you like me. Suppose the two different attitudes:

- Suppose Tek takes the attitude that he will believe Liz likes him. He adopts this attitude without any evidence. Because of this, he invites her out, is friendly to her, etc. This belief leads to actions that makes Liz like him.
- Suppose Tek takes the attitude that he will wait and see if Liz like him. He adopts the attitude that he needs sufficient evidence to believe she likes him. According to James, “if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt, [...], ten to one your liking never comes” (WB:24).

In short, according to James, “the desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth’s existence; [...] [h]is faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification” (WB:24).

3.12.3 | Social organism

A third case that James considers involve communities or various forms of collective action, e.g. governments, armies, sports teams, colleges, political organizations, gangs.

According to James, these organizations are capable of existing because “each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs” (WB:24). In short, the cooperative behavior of groups depends upon our initial choice to believe in one other. That is, we do not simply wait and see if our neighbors will do their part and then realize we can trust them. Rather, we have faith in them and that makes various forms of collective action possible. James gives two related examples.

Example 3.7: thieves

Consider a group of highway robbers. They are capable of robbing a large group of people because each believes the other will due what needs to be done to make the robbery successful. If the robbers didn’t trust each other, then the collective robbery wouldn’t work. However, the fact that each believes the other is committed to pulling off the crime makes it possible for the crime to occur.

Example 3.8: the victims

Consider the passengers on a train that are to be robbed by highway robbers. According to James, no single passenger can stop the group of highway robbers but the group of passengers could stop the robbers. If each passenger waited to have sufficient evidence for the belief that the other passengers will stop the robbery, then no one will stop the robbers. However, if every passenger believed (even without evidence) that the other passengers will come to their aid, then each passenger would rise and stop the train robbing.

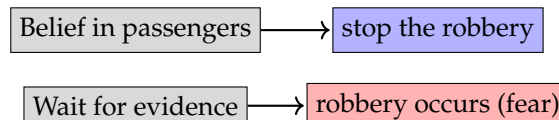


Figure 3.4: Results given the different attitudes that might be taken concerning a robbery

James thus reiterates his point that “[t]here are, then cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming” (WB:25).

Exercise 19

James gives three examples involving personal relations where

1. it is permissible to let our passional nature decide over our intellectual nature, viz., to risk truth rather than shun error
2. where our antecedent faith that P is true plays a role in making P is true.

According to James, the absolutist would argue that faith in a fact cannot create a fact.

1. do you agree with James or the absolutist?
2. can you think of other examples that James might point to where faith that P is true plays a role in making P true.

3.13 | Section Ten: Religious Faith

In the final section, James begins by noting that perhaps his earlier examples are “childish human cases” and do not have anything to do with things of importance. James then proceeds to consider religious hypotheses.

Consider that there are three different religious hypotheses:

1. theist: that God exists
2. atheist: that God does not exist
3. agnostic: that we ought to wait and see whether or not God exists

We might imagine a number of other variations and additions to these hypotheses, e.g. the belief in Christ, or religious experience, or redemption, or ultimate salvation. And, we might believe them, deny them, or abstain from belief concerning them.

The **agnostic** may argue that their position is preferable. They are “scientific” about the religious hypothesis. They contend that we ought to wait-and-see, gather evidence, consider the weight of evidence, and only after we have sufficient evidence should we either adopt the theist or atheist position.

In this section, James denies that the agnostic position is anything more than a passional decision and there is no objective justification for it over the theistic or atheistic alternatives.

3.13.1 | Religious hypotheses are genuine options

First, James notes that religion says two things:

1. “the best things are the most eternal things” (WB:25).

2. “we are better off *even now* if we believe her first affirmation [the first thing] to be true” (WB:26, my emphasis)⁶

Second, James argues that provided that the religious option is a live option, then it will be a **genuine option**.⁷ He argues that it is a **momentous option** in that we “are supposed to gain, **even now**, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief, a certain vital good” (WB:26, my emphasis). He argues that it is a **forced option** because the abstaining from belief has the same consequence as disbelief. That is, he contends that since the good potentially comes from belief, the agnostic (wait-and-see) solution is the same as disbelief.

	hypothesis is true	hypothesis is false
belief	benefit	error
disbelief	error	benefit
agnostic	error	benefit

Table 3.3: Outcomes if the religious hypothesis is true vs. false

James illustrates how the agnostic runs the same risk as the non-believer.

Example 3.9

Suppose Tek wants to marry Liz but is not sure if he should ask her because he isn’t “sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home” (WB:26). He doesn’t disbelieve she will be an angel but nor does he believe. Instead, he adopts the agnostic (wait-and-see) approach. Because of this, he waits indefinitely to ask her. In engaging in this agnosticism, Tek cuts himself out from the “angel-possibility” just as much as if he believed she would not be an angel, e.g. if he went out and married someone else.

3.13.2 | Agnosticism as a passional decision

If the religious option is a genuine option, then James contends that the debate between the agnostic and the theist boil down to a difference in passional attitudes:

1. Better to risk loss of truth than chance of error
2. Better to chance error than risk loss of truth

In other words, the skeptic (agnostic) isn’t avoiding the hypothesis, but instead engages in a different kind of risk, namely the skeptic’s attitude is that it is better to risk a loss of truth than to chance error. Or, as James puts it, the agnostic contends “to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true” (WB:27).

⁶“faith is “more precious than gold that perishes” (1 Peter 1:7), faith brings salvation and eternal life (Ephesians 2:8,9; John 3:16), it is said to give your life meaning, peace, confidence, the capacity to endure certain hardships, security in mind, and so on.

⁷James notes that his following argument will have no weight if the religious option is not a **live option** for you. If it is not, then his example/argument will be somewhat pointless.

The debate then between the theist and the agnostic is not a debate between those who are letting their beliefs be determined by the intellect (on the one hand) and the passions/will (on the other). Rather, it is simply a difference in two different passions.⁸

3.13.3 | Agnostic Rule a Roadblock to Truth

James levels a second argument against the agnostic. Namely, that if the religious hypothesis is true and there are benefits to be gained from accepting it, the charge that one ought not undertake it until one has sufficient evidence would amount to blocking an individual off from the benefits/truths potentially associated with believing in that hypothesis. As James puts it:

“a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule” (WB:28).

The idea here is that by treating the agnostic/skeptic approach as though it were the only rational approach, one would be (to use Peirce’s terms) blocking the road of inquiry.

3.14 | Some Concluding Remarks and Objections

⁸To put this another way, if the choice of believing or not believing a truth-statement is a “genuine option” (i.e. one that is living, forced, and momentous), and the truth of the statement cannot be established on intellectual grounds, then one has an intellectual right to believe.

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