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Module Title:	Topics in Non-Analytic Philosophy
Module Code: (e.g. 5AABC123)	6AANB056
Assignment: (may be abbreviated)	Summative Essay
Assignment tutor/group:	Prof Daniel Herbert
Deadline:	19.05.2021
Date Submitted:	19.05.2021
Word Count:	2381

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On How to Make Our Ideas Clear

Charles Sanders Peirce is widely regarded as the founding father of the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. Especially important were his essays “The Fixation of Belief” (1877) and “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878) which William James viewed as the foundational documents of the movement¹. The general ideas of pragmatism developed by Peirce, in which knowing the world is understood as inseparable from agency within it and in which all things should be thought of in terms of their practical implications, has attracted many to join its cause. Bertrand Russell wrote of Peirce that “Beyond doubt [...] he was one of the most original minds of the later nineteenth century and certainly the greatest American thinker ever”² and Karl Popper viewed him as “one of the greatest philosophers of all times”³. However, for whatever reason, these general ideas have notoriously been interpreted in a number of different, and often contrary, ways both by philosophers within the movement and from the outside. This essay will therefore focus on Peirce’s second foundational document, “How to Make our Ideas Clear”, and attempt to outline and assess the pragmatism presented in order to get a clearer idea of how Peirce wants to make our ideas clearer.

To start off his text, Peirce describes how logicians of his time make distinctions between *clear* and *obscure* concepts, and between *distinct* and *confused* concepts. He says of these definitions that “They have lain in the books now for nigh two centuries, unimproved and unmodified, and are generally reckoned by logicians as among the gems of their doctrine.”⁴ It is perhaps not surprising that Peirce believes these definitions have significant room for improvement. So, what does he think is wrong with these definitions and what do they mean in the first place?

Peirce describes the definition of a clear idea as one that is “so apprehended that it will be recognized wherever it is met with, and so that no other will be mistaken for it”⁵. If it fails to be clear, it is obscure. However, he has a couple of problems with this definition. The first is that it seems to be too strong of a requirement of a clear idea to be recognized wherever it is met with. In his words, this would require “such prodigious force and clearness of intellect as is

¹ William James (1897), *The Will to Believe*, p. 124.

² Bertrand Russell (1959), *Wisdom of the West*, p. 276

³ Karl Popper (1972), *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, p. 212

⁴ Charles Sanders Peirce, *How To Make Our Ideas Clear*, *Popular Science Monthly* (January 1878), p. 286.

⁵ Ibid.

seldom met with in this world.”⁶ In other words, an idea can be clear even though it is confused by some. He assumes then that what logicians really mean when they talk of a clear idea is that it is familiar – it is easily recognizable to the point that one can lose “all hesitancy in recognizing it in ordinary cases”⁷. However, the problem with this is that then clearness only “amounts to a subjective feeling of mastery which may be entirely mistaken”⁸. Clearness has therefore been poorly defined as it on the one hand seems to require an unrealistically prodigious intellect to universally recognize the right idea, and on the other relies on the subjective feeling that one has actually recognized the right idea. The definition seems to be made for a world full of geniuses or a world full of delusional people.

Second is the definition of a distinct idea. This is one that “contains nothing which is not clear”⁹. An idea which is not distinct is confused. Peirce then goes on to describe how distinctness was an important part of Descartes’ method of fixing his beliefs. When Descartes set about reconstructing philosophy, his aim was to discard the practice of looking to authority for truth and instead find the real truths by a process of purely examining ideas in his own mind. Upon this process of introspection, he found that the ideas that were true were those that contained nothing which was not clear – those that were distinct. However, for Peirce, Descartes’ major failing was that “The distinction between an idea seeming clear and really being so, never occurred to him”¹⁰. For Peirce, relying on ideas seeming clear is not a good enough method of fixing beliefs.

Next, Peirce goes after Leibniz. Again, he criticizes Leibniz for adopting the notions of clear and distinct ideas. In particular, he criticizes Leibniz for trying to reduce all beliefs to abstract definitions in order to a priori find those which contain nothing which is not clear. For Peirce, this is not an optimal way for the human mind to fix beliefs because “the machinery of the mind can only transform knowledge, but never originate it, unless it be fed with facts of observation”¹¹ and since “Nothing new can ever be learned by analyzing definitions”¹². By criticizing Leibniz and Descartes and the previously accepted definitions in this way, Peirce sets himself up to introduce a better way for us to use our logic to fix our beliefs and make our ideas clear. In his words:

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 287.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, p. 288

That much-admired "ornament of logic" -- the doctrine of clearness and distinctness -- may be pretty enough, but it is high time to relegate to our cabinet of curiosities the antique bijou, and to wear about us something better adapted to modern uses [...] The principles set forth in the first part of this essay lead, at once, to a method of reaching a clearness of thought of higher grade than the "distinctness" of the logicians.¹³

So, what method does Peirce propose to reach a higher grade of clearness of thought? This is the most complicated part of the text. To start to get an idea of what Peirce wants to convey, it is worth examining how Peirce thinks thought “works” in practice. He has already written about this in “The Fixation of Belief” but reminds us in section II of the current text that “the action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained; so that the production of belief is the sole function of thought.”¹⁴ So, doubt prompts us to think about something until that doubt is appeased and a belief forms in its place. Further, Peirce claims that the production of belief is the sole function of thought. This claim might seem very strong – why should this be its only function? Cannot thought simply serve to entertain us as well? Whether Peirce considered this but thought it was trivial is hard to say – in any case it will not affect his main arguments much, however it is interesting to notice the strict way in which Peirce characterizes thought as simply being instrumental to belief.

Given this characterization of thought, it will be beneficial also to hear his characterization of belief. On this, he says belief has three properties: “First, it is something that we are aware of; second, it appeases the irritation of doubt; and, third, it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit.”¹⁵ Further, “the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act”¹⁶. The full picture is then that doubt causes a process of thought which results in belief taking its place. This belief establishes in our nature a rule of action for how we are going to act when certain circumstances arise. Importantly then, “the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action”¹⁷ and therefore “we come down to what is tangible and conceivably practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought”¹⁸. In other words, since the whole function of thought is to instill in us certain behaviours (or habits of actions), two ideas can only be different if they instill in us

¹³ Ibid. p. 288 & p. 289.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 289.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 291.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 292.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

different behaviours/practices. As Peirce says “there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice”¹⁹.

To further illustrate this, he uses as an example the transubstantiation debate between Protestants and Catholics. Whereas Catholics believe the bread and wine are literally the body and blood of Jesus, Protestants believe the bread and wine have the same spiritual effect on us as the Catholics believe but they do not believe the bread and wine are literally made of body and blood. However, Peirce’s point is that since Protestants and Catholics do agree on the tangible effects of bread and wine, the rest of the debate is foolish:

*It is foolish for Catholics and Protestants to fancy themselves in disagreement about the elements of the sacrament, if they agree in regard to all their sensible effects, here and hereafter.*²⁰

Again, this is a strong statement from Peirce. How can he claim that there is no disagreement when both parties so clearly feel that they disagree? His answer to this is that the disagreement is only “felt” by both parties, but really there is no disagreement in ideas, as “Our idea of anything is our idea of its sensible effects; and if we fancy that we have any other we deceive ourselves and mistake a mere sensation accompanying the thought for a part of the thought itself”²¹. In order to reach a higher grade of clearness of thought, Peirce wants us to realize this and stop deceiving ourselves by accompanying our conception of an object anything other than our conception of the effects of this object. This is the method Peirce want us to adopt:

*Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.*²²

This is the core of Peirce’s pragmatism presented in “How to Make our Ideas Clear”. To properly conceptualize an object, all we must rely on are our conception of the effects of this object. Continuing this line of thought, he goes on to say “The only effect which real things have is to cause belief [...] The question therefore is, how is true belief (or belief in the real) distinguished

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 293.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

from false belief (or belief in fiction)”²³. On this point, he refers back to his text on “The Fixation of Belief” in which he concluded the method of science is best for distinguishing true beliefs from false beliefs. With that, the main points of “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” have been outlined.

It is clear that the pragmatism Peirce presents here is entirely focused human agency. He characterizes the only effects that real things have, as the effects they have on us in causing beliefs. This is the sort of statement that shows up in many pragmatist interpretations, where a key idea is that the world for us cannot be understood as separate from our agency within it. I argue it is unclear whether Peirce truly believes the only effects real things have are the effects they have on us, or whether those are the only effects it makes sense for us to talk about. I believe his philosophy is much easier to swallow if the latter is the case.

Another problem that comes up in the end of the text is the way Peirce characterizes “truth” and how science will find the true beliefs. He says “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real”²⁴ and of science “the results are found to move steadily together toward a destined centre”²⁵. A problem that can be raised against this is that it makes reality depend on what is thought about it. So if one changes one’s mind about reality, reality will change too? To this Peirce replies:

*Reality is independent, not
necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may
think about it; and that, on the other hand, though the object of the final opinion depends on what
that opinion is, yet what that opinion is does not depend on what you or I or any man thinks.*²⁶

In other words, reality does not depend on what any single man or group of people would think of it. However, it does depend on what the result of scientific investigation of it would be. This is because scientific investigation will always eventually settle on the true effects of whatever object it is examining, and the conception of the object is purely based on the conception of its effects. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between reality and what scientific investigation of reality would yield. Two things are striking about this characterization. The first is the commitment to the

²³ Ibid. p. 298.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 300

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

scientific method always being able to settle on the true effects of any thing. The second is that this way of thinking seems to involve the realization that for us, the only way it makes sense to talk about objects, is through the effects those objects have on us. These objects may have other effects, but if those are not tangible to us, it makes no sense for us to talk of them. The world (for us) is only what we can see. Therefore, it only makes sense to talk about the world in terms of what effects we observe in the world. This is the final lesson Peirce wants us to learn in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”.

Bibliography:

Peirce, S. Charles. *How To Make Our Ideas Clear*, Popular Science Monthly (January 1878), pp. 286-302.

James, William (1897). *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, New York etc. Longmans, Green, and Co., 1897. <https://lccn.loc.gov/04003036>. Retrieved 19th May 2021.

Popper, Karl (1972). *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, Oxford University Press.

Bertrand Russel (1959), *Wisdom of the West*, Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday.

FINAL GRADE

62/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

This is a clearly-written essay which shows a good understanding of Peirce's position in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear". The author presents a clear survey of Peirce's paper and engages with its criticisms of Descartes and Leibniz. The essay is somewhat derivative however - focussing mainly on providing a description of Peirce's position rather than subjecting it to critical evaluation - and could benefit from being more clearly structured around a thesis explicitly stated in the introduction. The essay might also be improved by greater engagement with relevant secondary literature.

PAGE 1

PAGE 2

PAGE 3

PAGE 4

PAGE 5

PAGE 6

PAGE 7

UNDERSTANDING

POOR	Poor understanding: some knowledge, but contains inaccuracies, the argument is sketchy and, in part, faulty.
BASIC	Basic understanding: the philosophical problems/views are only described in outline and the description is partly inaccurate.
SOUND	Fair understanding of the philosophical problems/views under discussion that describes main points correctly. The main points of the argument are provided.
GOOD	Good understanding of the philosophical problems/views under discussion that explains main points well. The argument is clear and good to follow.
EXCELLENT	Excellent: in-depth understanding of the philosophical problems/views under discussion that brings independent thought to bear. The argument is clear and logical.

KNOWLEDGE

POOR	Where applicable: The essay is based only on limited knowledge of primary and secondary texts and contains some misunderstandings.
BASIC	Where applicable: The essay takes only a limited number of primary and secondary texts into account without using them in a fruitful way.
SOUND	Where relevant: The essay takes some primary and secondary sources into account and makes use of them.
GOOD	Where relevant: The essay takes the main primary and secondary sources into account and makes good use of them.
EXCELLENT	Where relevant: The essay takes primary and relevant secondary sources into account and uses them to support the argument. The sources used go beyond the texts discussed in the module.

STRUCTURE

POOR	The essay is not organised in a clear and logical way, there is no sign posting; the essay is too brief.
BASIC	The essay is organised, but the structure is not always logical and clearly sign posted.
SOUND	The essay is logically organised, but not always clearly sign posted.
GOOD	The essay has a clear, logical and coherent structure that is clear to the reader.
EXCELLENT	The essay has a clear, logical and coherent structure that is clear to the reader. The main argument is highlighted and clearly worked out.

PRESENTATION

POOR	Grammar, spelling and punctuation are largely incorrect, the text is hard to follow, references and bibliography are inadequate.
BASIC	The text is in parts grammatical and some parts of it are easy understand; spelling and punctuation are correct, references and bibliography are adequate, but there are inconsistencies and omissions.
SOUND	The text is largely grammatical and mostly easy to understand; spelling and punctuation are mainly correct, references and bibliography are adequate.
GOOD	Most of the following applies: the text is grammatical and easy to understand; spelling and punctuation are correct, references and bibliography are adequate.
EXCELLENT	All of the following applies: the text is grammatical and easy to understand; spelling and punctuation are correct, references and bibliography are adequate.

OVERALL

POOR	An answer that shows limited understanding, it is incomplete or based on poor knowledge. The presentation is not adequate.
BASIC	An answer that shows basic understanding adequately presented.
SOUND	An answer that shows sound understanding clearly presented.
GOOD	A thoughtful answer that is, in general, presented in a clear and convincing way.
EXCELLENT	An original answer, well argued for and, in general, presented in a clear and convincing way.