Chapter 9

American Pragmatists’ Response to Skepticism

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Abstract

The author claims that the fathers of pragmatism, Peirce and James, definitely changed the meaning of the word knowledge and this change was the core of the pragmatic response to skepticism. Peirce argued that the concept of fallible knowledge was suitable for scientific inquiry, and coined the term fallibilism as a name for his view that human knowledge is never absolutely certain, but always fallible. His analysis of the pair of concepts: belief and doubt, suggested the duty to have reason for doubt. It was inconvenient for skeptics. James changed the meaning of the term truth and revealed that traditional skeptical arguments are based on dubious emotional presupposition (the exaggerated fear of error). American pragmatists focusing on practical consequences of ideas challenged the most important skeptical assumptions concerning knowledge, truth, belief and doubt. Their fallibilism was not a moderate form of skepticism but was clearly anti-skeptical.

There are many works on pragmatism and on skepticism but the connection between them is not well analyzed in philosophical literature. There are studies on pragmatists’ response to skepticism (Hookway 2008; Olsson 2005) but this response is not listed as an important anti-skeptical strategy in contemporary epistemology (Pritchard 2002). It seems, however, that Peirce and James, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, definitely changed the meaning of the word knowledge and this conceptual change undermined the skeptical thesis (if knowledge is fallible there is no reason to claim that no knowledge exists). This was an important and influential conceptual change that deserves to be appreciated in epistemology and the history of skepticism.

1 Charles S. Peirce: The New Concept of Knowledge and the Reasons to Doubt

C.S. Peirce introduced a package of concepts important for the problem of skepticism: the concept of fallibilism, the concept of knowledge as a fixed belief, and the concept of reason for doubt. There are many places in Collected Papers where there is a declaration that fallibilism is at the heart of Peirce’s
pragmatic philosophy. “I used for myself to collect my ideas under the designation fallibilism” (CP 1.13).  

Peirce probably coined the new term “fallibilism” or at least made it popular. He criticizes “infallible knowledge,” “infallibility” and after that he presented his opposite view called “fallibilism.” Fallibilism is the idea that any of our beliefs might be mistaken. “Fallibilism is the doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and indeterminacy” (CP 1.171). Evolution and continuity in nature is Peirce’s base for the thesis that perfect exactness and perfect certitude are unattainable. “For where there is continuity, the exact ascertainment of real quantities is too obviously impossible” (CP 1.172). In 1910 he writes “I will not, therefore, admit that we know anything whatever with absolute certainty” (CP 7.108). He accepts practical certainty (in beliefs) but not theoretical or absolute certainty. 

Even mathematics, the axioms of geometry, the principles of logic are not an exception from the lack of absolute certainty (CP 1.144). “People cannot attain absolute certainty concerning questions of fact. Numbers are merely a system of names devised by men for the purpose of counting” (CP 1.149). So, mathematical truth does not question global fallibilism because fallibilism concerns existing things and a priori truths are not (Cooke 2006, p. 61). Additionally, even simple mathematical judgments are prone to mistakes and are not absolutely infallible in the sense of belonging to a class that guarantees the truth (Hookway 2008, p. 314).

This applies also to the beliefs about the data of consciousness. “Direct experience is neither certain nor uncertain, because it affirms nothing—it just is. There are delusions, hallucinations, dreams” (CP 1.145). There is no introspection independent from observation of external facts, no intuition independent from previous knowledge, thinking is always indirect, mediated by signs (CP 1.265). So, this is not the domain of knowledge where we have absolute certainty.

According to Peirce, the idea of fallibilism will gain acceptance among people working in empirical science. “It is precisely among men animated by the spirit of science that the doctrine of fallibilism will find supporters” (CP 1.148). Fallibilism presupposes the existence of knowledge and inspires the intense inquiry of truth. It is “combined with a high faith in the reality of knowledge” (CP 1.14). The idea of infallible knowledge with absolute exactitude and certitude “seriously blocks the road of inquiry” (CP 1.153). Genuine uncertainty is the stimulus for inquiry, it powers the production of knowledge.

Peirce is in clear opposition to traditional skeptics. In the paper “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” published in 1868, he writes against the

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1 CP refers to Collected Papers (Peirce 1931–58) by volume and paragraph number.