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Crystal-Clearness: For the Second-Rates

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In one of his contributions to *The Nation*, Peirce claims that “Crystal clearness, such as we justly require in mathematics, in law, in economics, is in philosophy the characteristic of the second-rates.” The statement might seem paradoxical enough: isn’t Peirce the author of *How to Make our Ideas Clear* (hereafter: HMIC), the seminal paper for the pragmatist tradition, a paper that is sure to be included in each and every anthology of American thought? How can clearness then be “the characteristic of the second-rates”? I take it that these perplexities arise only in a superficial reading of HMIC and that the present quote tells quite a lot about Peirce’s doctrine and style. My first section concerns the method one should adopt in philosophy according to Peirce and explains in part why belief and doubt play such an important role in the *Illustrations* series. The second one concerns the kind of problems Peirce felt attracted to and how we can make sense of what he says about the “strongest” thinkers.

KEYWORDS: Clearness, Philosophy, Illustrations, Pragmatism, Style, Obscurity, Method, Doubt, Belief.

Word count: 3000 words

Crystal-Clearness: For the Second-Rates

In one of the numerous contributions by Peirce to *The Nation*, we find this gem:

“Crystal clearness, such as we justly require in mathematics, in law, in economics, is in philosophy the characteristic of the second-rates. The reason is that the strongest men are able to seize an all-important conception long before the progress of analysis has rendered it possible to free it from obscurities and difficulties.” (CN2, 84, 1894).

This is part of a review of Spinoza's *Ethics* written in 1894, when Peirce had already the benefit of hindsight concerning his early papers, when he had been in the process of revising the *Illustrations*, for his *Principles of Philosophy* or for *Search for a Method*. The statement might seem paradoxical enough:

isn't Peirce the author of *How to Make our Ideas Clear* (hereafter: HMIC), the seminal paper for the pragmatist tradition, a paper that is sure to be included in each and every anthology of American thought? How can clearness¹ then be “the characteristic of the second-rates”? I take it that these perplexities arise only in a superficial reading of HMIC and that the present quote tells quite a lot about Peirce's doctrine and style. The first section concerns the method one should adopt in philosophy and explains in part why belief and doubt play such an important role in the *Illustrations* series. The second one concerns the kind of problems Peirce felt attracted to and how we can make sense of what he says about the “strongest” thinkers.

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The Philosophic Difference

First, let's acknowledge that Peirce's claim certainly has a paradoxical sound to it. In HMIC, Peirce insists that we can obscure discussions by using words that are totally devoid of any meaning, by being led astray by mere homonymies and non-obvious synonymies. Peirce's idea, notoriously, is that the “logicians”, in the wake of Descartes and Leibniz, have often contented themselves with the two first grades of clearness: clearness as (perfect) familiarity with a notion and clearness as distinction —as in a good definition—when nothing remains that we do not understand. Peirce thinks that these two “grades” are not enough to dissolve the kind of obscurity in which metaphysicians keep the present state of the debate. He offers thus a third grade of clearness, the pragmatist one: one may make a notion clearer by paying attention to its use, to its role in theories: “Consider what effects, which 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.”(W3, 266) In which kind of practices, in which uses, is this conception actually involved? Answering these questions is often indispensable to fully develop the meaning of a conception. Peirce, by offering his “pragmatist” maxim and by highlighting the practical bearings of the object of our conception, wants to uproot the cardinal error of lazy thinkers, mistaking

¹ Any discussion on the topic of clearness in Peirce should now start with Colapietro 2009.

“the sensation produced by our own unclearness of thought for a character of the object we are thinking”(W3, 264). Making this subjective obscurity explicit and dismissing it is one of the first and main services of pragmatism, in view of putting a term to unending philosophical disputes, and also of opposing practical and political ways of taking advantage of obscurity². But isn't that kind of conceptual elucidation equivalent to “crystal-clearness”?

Firstly, a higher grade of clearness is not equivalent to perfect and total clearness. After all, what is needed is not a pragmatist equivalent of Cartesian intuitions or sensationalist impressions, as if we were to trade a kind of immediacy for another, but tools preventing us from falling in the grip of systematic fallacies. When James offered his 1898 gloss of *How to Make our ideas clear* in *Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results*, he also provided some details about his own understanding of the pragmatist maxim: “To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, then, we need only consider what effects of a conceivably practical kind the object may involve: what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare.” (James 1978, 124) This sentence involved —perhaps— a different account of practice, understood in terms of particulars, whether of “acts” or of “sensations”; but it also introduced a change in the description of the *effects* of the pragmatist maxim. James claimed that we could reach *perfect clearness* where Peirce used the comparative register rather than the superlative one: he provided a method for attaining to “a more perfect clearness of thought” or “a method of reaching a clearness of thought of a far higher grade than the ‘distinctness’ of the logicians.”(W3, 261) Our quote is thus paradoxical only in James's reading. There might be other grades of clearness (Kent 1987, 236), and grasping clearly a key notion does not mean that all the notions involved in the theory are themselves crystal-clear, even though they would certainly have to be so for a nominalist, prone to think of

² “Instead of perceiving that the obscurity is purely subjective, we fancy that we contemplate a quality of the object which is essentially mysterious; and if our conception be afterward presented to us in a clear form we do not recognize it as the same, owing to the absence of the feeling of unintelligibility. So long as this deception lasts, it obviously puts an impassable barrier in the way of perspicuous thinking; so that it equally interests the opponents of rational thought to perpetuate it, and its adherents to guard against it.” (W3, 261)

everything in terms of particulars.

Secondly, Peirce's point is not about such and such notion, but about *philosophy*. Well before 1894, Peirce thought that total clearness might be attained in economy and in law but was not reachable everywhere and certainly not in philosophy, for the time being, which does mean that he would have the slightest indulgence towards those who do not try to be as exact and clear as possible in that domain. In 1868-69, Peirce had drawn a difference between sciences where treatises could be made —Dynamics and Astronomy for example (W2, 188)— and other disciplines that had not reached (yet) that very stage. Treatises can be made in disciplines where a reasonable consensus about methods and results obtains, and where one does not meet the doubts of other competent inquirers at every corner. In most discussions however, metaphysicians, whether properly trained or not, do not agree³, and for this very reason, their main conclusions remain doubtful: “Whatever is doubted by men whom there is reason to think as competent judges, is so far doubtful; and, therefore, a certain shade of doubt will hang over almost all psychological or very general propositions.”(W2, 189) The first sentence is a permanent component of Peirce's theory of inquiry, the context confirms that the second part is a conclusion pertaining to philosophy, at least to philosophy when it does not stick to the style of the experimental and natural sciences before they are settled. Perfect clearness in that domain would be, for now and for that very reason, *specious, fake*, clearness. There are significant consequences to this, concerning both the method and the premisses adopted in philosophy.

— As regards its *premises*, philosophy, as the other sciences, must rest on “those ordinary facts of which (in a general way) we are actually assured and therefore *cannot*, if we would, mistrust.”(W2, 189) It is for this reason that cognition will be approached not by starting directly with the concept of truth, where we would be instantly lost in an “sea of metaphysics”, but with conceptions that we cannot doubt belong to inquiry, belief and doubt (W2, 357). There is a straightforward and often overlooked continuity between

³ “It is to no avail that philosophers adopt strictly demonstrative forms of argument as long as they cannot, after all, come to agreement upon certain conclusions. //What competent men disagree about is not certain.” (W2, 187; 1868)

the 1868 and the 1878 papers: the former ones provide the starting point of the latter. We have to focus and doubt because *in the present state of the debate*⁴, the concept of truth itself is rendered doubtful: “that which we seek in an investigation is called truth, but what distinct conception ought to be attached to this word is so difficult to say, that it seems better to describe the object of an investigation by a character which certainly belongs to it alone, and which has nothing mysterious or vague about it.”(W2, 355) This “character” consists in the fact that, when we inquire, we aim at resolving doubts, at switching from doubt to belief (See W3, 35, among many other instances). *So, the fact that the theory of inquiry starts with considerations on belief and doubt is itself the after-effect of a general doubt about truth.* Belief and doubt are deemed clearer and are used as means to approach the important and strategic concept, that of truth.

— As regards style and *method*, if philosophy has to mimic something in the sciences, it is not the demonstrative style, not the “rigidness of proof”, but “those less complicated reasonings upon which Galileo established the laws of motion and Copernicus the order of the solar system”(W2, 190), that is to say multilayered arguments, relying on sundry sorts of inductive support, looking like “cable[s]”(W2, 213) more than like “chains”. According to Peirce, the principle of inertia, was “more than a shrewd guess” when he was first enunciated by Galileo, but “was not supported on all sides”(W2, 188). Galileo too was able to seize an “all-important conception” in a clouded debate and long before other men could make use of it. Philosophy, Peirce ventures, might be in the same state now than dynamics just before Galileo, when no clear consensus was extent, but when indifference was not considered anymore as the last word of wisdom. We have to trace philosophical theories to their consequences and then, “see how many facts they serve to explain, and which are the ones which require to be retained”(W2, 188). Finding which conceptions can highlight others, still in the dark, is the flesh and bone of philosophical activity: our quote just drives this point home.

That was a general reason why there is something suspect about crystal-clearness in philosophy and it is

⁴See also “Mathematics does not *need* to take up any hypothesis that is not crystal-clear. Unfortunately, philosophy cannot choose its first principles at will, but has to accept them as they are.” (CP4.176)

an interesting question, not to be treated here, whether this is only a temporary predicament or whether this is a permanent feature.

A Sense of Legitimate Obscurity

Sometimes, too, obscurity is a price to pay to tell and to see something new.

Peirce's "Ethics of Terminology"(CP2.222), claiming that a new scientific conception needs a new word or a family of "cognate words" but that one must be careful not to use a new word if this conception is another former one in disguise, certainly led his contemporaries to charge him with a certain amount of philosophical obscurity. "Thirdness", "Cenopythagorean", "Praescisive", not to mention "Papyrobite"(CP2.763), might cause such an impression, while they are in fact introduced to make it clear that they embody new conceptions, with a distinctive conceptual function, and the temporary bewilderment in front of them will always be better than a spurious and unfounded feeling of familiarity⁵. This is why Peirce turned so angry at James when the latter used the term "pragmatism" to refer to his own philosophy, "transmogrifying" it by the same effect. This terminological creativity can be found in the many lexicographic contributions by Peirce: dozens of entries in Baldwin's *Dictionary*, *thousands* of entries for the *Century Dictionary*, from cocktail names to the most abstract notions of mathematics, which makes this last dictionary seems quite special, since some of the words, we suspect, find in this dictionary their one and only occurrence, which certainly has a Borgesian charm to it.

But this is only the tip of the iceberg. In *The Basis of Pragmatism in the Normative Sciences*, Peirce urges that mastering the normative sciences would be tremendously important to understand the "rationale of Pragmaticism", and he adds that instead of providing a full survey, "the reader [will] instead have to traverse this space, so full of marvels and beauties, as in a night train, pent up in this cramped section, obscure and airless"(EP2, 376). Traveling in the amazing landscapes of metaphysics as in a night train

⁵ "It is good economy for philosophy to provide itself with a vocabulary so outlandish that loose thinkers shall not be tempted to borrow its words." (CP2.223)

launched at full speed is certainly something that more than one has felt reading Peirce. There is a kind of vital urgency in that, which has nothing to do with the “vitally important problems” required by James for the 1898 Cambridge Lectures, but everything to do with the fact the fundamental problems are raised, that the most likely ways to attack them are clearly seen, but with little hope that enough time is left to provide a full treatment of all of them. Confining oneself to the most important questions is often a way to leave deliberately all the minor questions in the shadow. There is a strategic choice to make when approaching a new field of inquiry and sometimes obscurity is a price to pay for strategic clearness: “I am, as far as I know, Peirce remarks, a pioneer, or rather a backwoodsman, in the work of clearing and opening up what I call semiotic, that is, the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis; and I find the field too vast, the labor too great, for a first-comer. I am, accordingly, obliged to confine myself to the most important questions.”(EP2, 413) For these all-important questions, clarification is performed *local* first. The temporary obscurity, in the remote parts of the “too vast” field then opened, is the direct effect of these radical breakthroughs, in the same way that knowledge, by opening new fields of inquiries, fresh “knowledge-to-be”, creates its own kind of ignorance.

James, at the beginning of *Pragmatism*, credits Peirce with the method of pragmatism, but insists at once on Peirce's “flashes of brilliant light relieved against Cimmerian darkness”(James 1985, 10). To his credit, James does not claim that everything is obscure in Peirce; just after, he seems to understand that in addition to the subjective obscurity that might be dispelled, there might be a kind of “objective” obscurity, of the sort that one feels in front of the immensity of a problem: “There is, it must be confessed, a curious fascination in hearing deep things talked about, even though neither we nor the disputants understand them. We get the problematic thrill, we feel the presence of the vastness.” There is a name for that feeling in philosophy, even though it might give a pause to strict Kantians: it is an *analogon* of the sentiment of the sublime, a sublime that would occur not only in front of mathematical and dynamical immensity, as Kant has it, or in front of political power, as Burke has it sometimes, but in front of thought, in front of the monuments we have that give a sense of the immensity of what would remain to be thought and of the immensity of the task. Peirce himself has compared architectural monuments, and in particular

monuments associated with the sublime, to those of thought. To get an idea of what a scholastic reasoning consists in, he suggests, look at a cathedral: “there is nothing in which the scholastic philosophy and the Gothic architecture resemble one another more than in the gradually increasing sense of immensity which impresses the mind of the student as he learns to appreciate the real dimensions and cost of each.” (W2, 466) This is no passing reference and is not a mere historical remark, since, concerning his own philosophical bent, Peirce confessed later in strikingly similar terms: “There is [...] nothing more wholesome for us than to find problems that quite transcend our powers, and I must say, too, that it imparts a delicious sense of being cradled in the waters of the deep, – a feeling I always have at sea.”(CP 8.263) This “oceanic feeling”, depicted here well before Romain Rolland and Sigmund Freud used the phrase, is something Peirce voiced several times. For example, when he understood that the fundamental question in philosophy was not “How is a priori synthetic judgment possible?” but “How is synthetic judgment possible?”, which led him to find, under the apparent simplicity of Kant's table of judgments, the unbound ocean of semiotic relations, he commented upon this discovery in terms that perfectly express the temporary lucid disorientation that is at the core of most important philosophical breakthroughs: “Suffice it to say that I seemed to myself to be blindly groping among a deranged system of conceptions.”(CP5.163) Understanding a philosopher better than he would have understood himself, feeling that something is wrong at the fundamental level, when the means to explain how and why have to be devised for that purpose, is just another way to “seize an all-important conception long before the progress of analysis has rendered it possible to free it from obscurities and difficulties”. The “strongest men” are not the ones for which everything is clear, but those who can see clearly *in* the twilight.

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