

# POLANYI AND PEIRCE ON TRUTH AND COMMITMENT

## 1.

Peirce's doctrine of Critical common-sensism (henceforth CCS) has often been interpreted as a consequence of his separation (most forcefully asserted in the 1898 Cambridge Lectures) between practical (or vitally important) and theoretical (or purely heuristic) beliefs. CCS would thus afford due weight to those basic beliefs that guide us in our most primitive or "practical" matters of life, while at the same time (and that would be the critical side) claiming no genuine indubitability for them within the realm of scientific inquiry. In accordance with this interpretative tendency, either Peirce's appropriation of the Scottish tradition of common-sense philosophy might be disregarded as belonging to the "inconvenient" side of his philosophy (his so-called "sentimental conservatism"); or attempts should be made to reconcile it with his self-consciously fallible conception of scientific inquiry.

In this paper I object to both strategies: I do not think Peirce's late emphasis on the fundamental role of common-sense certainties can be disregarded as misguided or unimportant, nor I think there is a real need to *reconcile* it with his pragmatic conception of inquiry. On the contrary, Peirce goes so far as to say that Pragmatism is "only an endeavor to give the philosophy of common sense a more exact development" (CP 8.199), and that without CCS, "the doctrine of pragmatism amounts to very little" (EP 2:433). As I will argue, Peirce's CCS is not the result of his mixed feelings about the critical method of Descartes (or Kant, for that matter), but an attempt to envisage a completely different method. In this sense, the oxymoron<sup>1</sup> formulation "Critical Common-Sensism" might point, paradoxically, and thus in distinctively Peircean style, to a *post*-critical understanding of truth, such as the one developed by Michael Polanyi (especially in *Personal Knowledge* and *The Tacit Dimension*).

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<sup>1</sup> "Doctor Y: You speak of holding a *Critical Philosophy of Common-Sense*. What meaning would you have me attach to that phrase, seeing that Critical Philosophy and the Philosophy of Common-Sense, the two rival and opposed ways of answering Hume, are at internecine war, impacificable. [...] Criticism and Common-sense are so immiscible that to plunge into either is to lose all touch with the other. The Criticist believes in criticizing first principles, while the Common-sensist thinks such criticism is all nonsense. So I can find no meaning in your straddling phrase" (CP 5.504).

## 2.

The so-called “doctrine” of Critical Common-sensism consists in Peirce’s attempt to clarify and vindicate the claim that there are a-critical, instinctive beliefs and inferences which we are utterly incapable to doubt and which, at the same time, play a crucial role in all scientific inquiry and knowledge. The validity of such beliefs cannot be *proven*: as necessary presuppositions of all inquiry, they cannot be verified by scientific experiment. But if we cannot prove them, why should we accept them? Does Peirce’s argument solely rely on our *factual incapacity* to doubt certain beliefs? If so, how does he deal with the problem faced by any pre-critical philosophy, namely, that such incapacity might be merely due to ignorance or undetected prejudice? In what does the *critical* component of Peirce’s common-sensism precisely consist?<sup>2</sup>

There appears at first a deep inconsistency in Peirce’s CCS. In fact, on the one hand Peirce insists that a proposition should never be regarded as indubitable “without a systematic and arduous endeavour to attain to a doubt of it;” on the other hand, he hastens to add, we must always remember that “genuine doubt cannot be created by a mere effort of will, but must be compassed through experience,”<sup>3</sup> and “that while it is possible that propositions that really are indubitable, for the time being, should nevertheless be false, yet in so far as we do not doubt a proposition we cannot but regard it as perfectly true and perfectly certain” (CP 5.498). But how can we *endeavor* to doubt a proposition which we take to be perfectly certain? And if we really *believe* that experience could contradict our belief, how can we consider it indubitable?

It would seem that we are forced to take a stand *within* the traditional alternative: either we concede that Descartes was after all on the right track when he suggested that philosophical investigation should begin from suspending *all* beliefs (no matter how psychologically compelling) in order to inquire into their validity (because, as Peirce insists, “the danger ... does

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<sup>2</sup>“Doctor Y: You speak of holding a *Critical Philosophy of Common-Sense*. What meaning would you have me attach to that phrase, seeing that Critical Philosophy and the Philosophy of Common-Sense, the two rival and opposed ways of answering Hume, are at internecine war, impacificable. [...] Criticism and Common-sense are so immiscible that to plunge into either is to lose all touch with the other. The Criticist believes in criticizing first principles, while the Common-sensist thinks such criticism is all nonsense. So I can find no meaning in your straddling phrase” (CP 5.504).

<sup>3</sup> A proposition that could be doubted at will is certainly not believed. For belief, while it lasts, is a strong habit, and as such, forces the man to believe until some surprise breaks up the habit. The breaking of a belief can only be due to some novel experience, whether external or internal. Now experience which could be summoned up at pleasure would not be experience” (CP 5.524).

not lie in believing too little but in believing too much” [CP 5.517]), or we reject *all* attempts to criticize or suspend what we cannot doubt as mere farces (because, as Peirce also insists, we should not “pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts” [CP 5.265]). No matter how unsatisfactory these positions might appear, one could argue that Descartes and Reid were at least explicit about, and consistent with, their respective philosophical programs. Peirce’s attempt to serve both masters, on the other hand, is likely to appear as the last resort of desperation.

But in fact, I believe, Peirce was not so much trying to serve both masters as to find a third one. It is at this juncture that Polanyi’s reflections on the “objectivist” faith of modern critical philosophy might help us to shed light on Peirce’s intellectual predicament. The latter, as we have just seen, consists in the apparent contradiction between Peirce’s insistence that we should not pretend to doubt what we cannot help believing, and his conviction that *nothing* should be considered indubitable without a systematic attempt to doubt it. This predicament might be redescribed as an expression of what Polanyi calls the “objectivist dilemma,” namely, the conflict between the inescapability of commitment and a “demand for an impersonality which would discredit all commitment” (PK 320). According to the latter demand, all our beliefs should relinquish their “personal” or “voluntary” character for the sake of approximating a completely objective, depersonalized ideal of knowledge. But as Polanyi repeatedly insists, this is far from an innocent move.

Objectivism has totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all that we know and *cannot* prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we *can* prove. In trying to restrict our minds to the few things that are demonstrable, and therefore explicitly dubitable, it has overlooked the a-critical choices which determine the whole being of our minds and has rendered us incapable of acknowledging these vital choices (PK 302).

I see Peirce’s CCS as an attempt to develop the epistemological implications of his pragmatism by giving due weight in his philosophy to those “a-critical choices which determine the whole being of our minds.” Undoubtedly, Peirce’s interpretation of his own philosophical project is apparently fraught with assumptions and aspirations that Polanyi would not have hesitated labeling objectivist. But in this paper I am only concerned with the general thrust of Peirce’s

reflections on CCS, which I believe can be best understood as leaning toward a something like Polanyi's anti-objectivist vision.

According to the latter, the ideal of achieving a completely depersonalized system of knowledge by a gradual elimination of the element of personal commitment betrays a naiveté that is much deeper than the one it sets out to remove. This becomes particularly evident when we consider the general method or principle by which we are invited to engage in such an activity of gradual purification, namely, the method of doubt. The latter is often considered as the scientific instrument par excellence, as it seems to achieve a separation of a person's belief from her own commitment to that belief, a separation without which, it is assumed, she could not pursue a purely theoretical inquiry into its truth value. It is thus concluded that there is no place in science for belief and commitment, but only for doubt and proof. But what this general view tends to conceal, if not to deny altogether, is the "fiduciary" character of doubt, that is, the fact that doubt always presupposes belief.<sup>4</sup> In fact, not only a "contradictory" doubt is "of the same character as the affirmation ... which it calls in question," but also the "agnostic suspension of belief ... has a fiduciary content." For example, "it implies the acceptance of certain beliefs concerning the possibility of proof" (PK 288). In short, everywhere "the admission of doubt proves ... to be as clearly an act of belief as does the non-admission of doubt" (PK 310). If we now consider the principle of comprehensive or hyperbolic doubt whose enthusiastic endorsement inaugurated modern philosophy, we can see that no consistent (non-self-contradictory) meaning can be attached to it other than that of a progressive relinquishment "of all existing means of articulation. ... If we cannot accept the justification of holding beliefs uncritically, then our only logical alternative is to wipe out all such preconceived beliefs" (PK 311). But the breeding of such a "virgin mind" would amount to leading a person to a "state of imbecility." Now even assuming we could set (or reset) a person's mind thusly, "any given range of awareness [including sense perception] seems to involve a correspondingly extensive set of uncritically accepted beliefs. Thus the programme of comprehensive doubt collapses and reveals by its failure the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality" (PK 313). As Polanyi conveniently puts it, "to avoid believing one must stop thinking" (PK 331).

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<sup>4</sup> "The doubting of any explicit statement merely implies an attempt to deny the belief expressed by the statement, in favour of other beliefs which are not doubted for the time being" (PK 286).

Accordingly, Polanyi proposes that we replace the framework of objectivism with that of commitment. “This then is our liberation from objectivism: to realize that we can voice our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions—from within the whole system of acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own, prior to the holding of any particular piece of knowledge. If an ultimate logical level is to be attained and made explicit, this must be a declaration of my personal beliefs” (PK 281). Now Polanyi is well aware of the threats of subjectivism to which his thorough rejection of objectivism exposes him. On the one hand, he doesn’t underplay the radicalism of his suggestion, but emphasizes the fact that “any enquiry into our ultimate beliefs can be consistent only if it presupposes its own conclusions,” and that the whole of his argument is but “an elaboration of this circle” (PK 315). On the other hand, he claims that subjectivism can be avoided by placing our conception of “belief” in the framework of commitment. As it turns out, in fact, the latter is not to be understood (as in the contemporary existentialist tradition) in terms of radical choice, but (as in the Augustinian tradition) in the terms of a response to the “intimations” of reality<sup>5</sup> (which is why the structure of commitment “is most clearly exemplified by the act of consciously solving a problem” [PK 316]).

“The framework of commitments is “the *only* situation in which *sincere* affirmations can be made.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, it is by one and the same move that dogmatic objectivism and subjectivist existentialism can be overcome. This move consists in the acknowledgment of the *personal* nature of commitment, namely, as involving an action or “affirmation” that is beyond the purely passive endurance of feelings which characterizes our merely *subjective* states. That is to say, “in so far as the personal submits to requirements acknowledged by itself as independent of itself, it is not subjective; but in so far as it is an action guided by individual passions, it is not objective either. It transcends the disjunction between subjective and objective” (PK 316). Commitment is thus a “personal choice” about “something believed ... to be impersonally given” (PK 318). By *committing myself to* something that *I believe* to be *independent* of me, I submit “to the universal

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<sup>5</sup> As he puts it in the final statement of his introduction to his later work, *The Tacit Dimension*, while “any attempt to avoid the responsibility for shaping the beliefs which we accept as true is absurd ... the existentialist claim of choosing our beliefs from zero is now proved absurd too” (TD xi).

<sup>6</sup> Emphases added. Recall here Sartre’s argument about the impossibility of sincerity.

status of the hidden reality which I am trying to approach” (PK 327). In the framework of commitment the personal and the universal (or impersonal) are reciprocally constituted: “the personal comes into existence by asserting universal intent, and the universal is constituted by being accepted as the impersonal term of this personal commitment” (PK 324). And “commitment is in this sense the only path for approaching the universally valid” (PK 319).<sup>7</sup> Now, if we replace the words “personal commitment” with “human purpose,” the following passage by Peirce can be read as an endorsement of the foregoing framework of commitment:

The pragmatist maintains that there is no other conception of reality to be by any means had than the conception of what must ultimately appear to answer human purposes, where ‘human’ means belonging to the communion of mankind. He holds that one who thinks he believes that anything is real for something more than human purposes, in reality merely believes that it is true for human purposes that something is real for more than human purpose (CP 8.186).

Granted, Peirce points out, the real is “that which is such as it is regardless of what you or I or any of our folks may think it to be” (CP 8.191); on the other hand, our understanding of reality as transcending our contingent beliefs and commitments, when pragmatically clarified, turns out to consist in the ideal fulfillment of the ultimate purpose of inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the modern skeptic’s *complacent* rejection of a-critical beliefs, which keeps doubt “on the leash and” prevent it “from calling in question anything [he] believes in, or from approving of any doubt that he does not share” (PK 313),<sup>9</sup> the framework of commitment entails that “we may firmly believe what we might conceivably doubt; and may hold to be true what might conceivably be false” (PK 329). Indeed, “the possibility of error is a necessary element of any belief bearing on reality” (PK 333), whence the need to uphold a sort of “fallibilism” that Peirce did not hesitate to call *contrite*.

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<sup>7</sup> In other words, “according to the logic of commitment, *truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it*” (PK 322).

<sup>8</sup> In another passage Peirce is even more explicit in connecting pragmatism with this post-critical conception of reality. After explaining that “the word pragmatism was invented to express a certain maxim of logic” (which “involves a whole system of philosophy”), he writes that the “general leaning” of the results that follow from accepting the pragmatic maxim “is toward what the idealists call the naïve, toward common sense, toward anthropomorphism” (CP 8.191).

<sup>9</sup> “To claim that you strictly refrain from believing anything that could be disproved is merely to cloak your own will to believe your beliefs behind a false pretence of self-critical severity” (PK 285).

The first step toward finding out is to acknowledge you do not satisfactorily know already; so that no blight can so surely arrest all intellectual growth as the blight of cocksureness [...]. Indeed, out of a contrite fallibilism, combined with a high faith in the reality of knowledge, and an intense desire to find things out, all my philosophy has always seemed to me to grow (CP 1.13-14).

If our fallibilism is not combined with “an intense desire to find things out,” it can only be a strategic disguise of “cocksureness.” As my determination to find out requires contrition, my hesitation requires an intense desire to find out, and neither my contrition nor my desire can be sincere unless they are combined with “a high faith in the reality of knowledge.” In other words, as Polanyi would put it, acknowledging and affirming our dissatisfaction (contrition and desire) amounts to committing ourselves to something we believe to be universally valid (faith).

At one point Peirce went so far as to express this intimate relationship between contrition and commitment, desire and faith, hope and certainty, in terms of a relationship between the intrinsic fallibility of our current beliefs and the *infallibility* of science. As he writes, granting “that it is of the nature of experience ... to make the mind unceasingly agitate doubt until it finally comes to repose in the true belief, – *which is only a more developed way of formulating our belief in the infallibility of science*, it is entirely uncertain *when* the truth will be reached. It *will* be reached; but only after ...” (CP 7.78). A superficial reading of this passage could easily baffle habitual readers of Peirce, given his persistent criticism of the modern ideal of infallible knowledge. But on a more careful reading it becomes clear that Peirce is simply articulating what, from the perspective of his CCS, is to be classified as an *indubitable*, a-critical (that is instinctive or non-deliberate) belief. The belief is a-critical precisely because it is “forced” upon us by the “course of experience,” whose nature is “to make the mind unceasingly agitate doubt until it finally comes to repose in the true belief.” What is impossible for us to doubt, according to Peirce, is precisely the belief or *commitment* which is presupposed by our acknowledgement of being assailed by doubt, namely, a commitment to the (universal) truth conceived as the resolution of our *agitation*. As Polanyi puts it, “these emotions [agitation, dissatisfaction, uneasiness, etc.] express a belief: to be tormented by a problem is to believe that it has a solution and to rejoice at discovery is to accept it as true” (PK 316).

### 3.

In accordance with the foregoing, I propose that what makes Peirce's critical common-sensism truly *critical* is not the application of a quasi-Cartesian method to a loosely sketched common-sensical framework, nor a transcendental justification of our ultimate commitments or indubitable beliefs, but the formulation of a reliable method for their *identification* and acknowledgment. On this reading, CCS can be interpreted as an exercise in the kind of post-critical philosophical reflection endorsed by Polanyi:

I believe that the function of philosophic reflection consists in bringing to light, and affirming as my own, the beliefs implied in such of my thoughts and practices as I believe to be valid; that I must aim at discovering what I truly believe in and at formulating the convictions which I find myself holding; that I must conquer my self-doubt, so as to retain a firm hold on this programme of self-identification.

The plausibility of this hypothesis can be shown by considering what Peirce regards as “the most distinctive character” of CCS, namely, that our indubitable beliefs and inferences are invariably *vague*. As Peirce writes, “*veritably* indubitable beliefs are especially vague.” That this is so can be concluded from the fact that “a suitable line of [reflection], accompanied by imaginary experimentation, always excites doubt of any very broad proposition if it be defined with precision. Yet there are beliefs of which such a critical sifting invariably leaves a certain vague residuum unaffected” (CP 5.507). This passage suggests the following critical approach to our indubitable beliefs: first we should try to give a more precise rendering of our belief, which will allow us to *accept*<sup>10</sup> it deliberately in the form of a new, more determinate proposition. Hence, by applying the pragmatic maxim to that proposition (namely, by envisioning the conceivable habits of conduct that would ensue from its being true), we can check whether in imagined circumstances our belief in this proposition would be hindered or interrupted. Now, a veritably indubitable proposition is one which, even after all its conceivable determinations have been tested and criticized by all sort of experiments, still leaves a certain “vague residuum” unaffected by doubt. In this case, Peirce insists, “it is not because insufficient pains have been taken to precide the residuum, that it is vague: [...] it is vague intrinsically” (CP 5.508). The

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. 5.516



outcome of this process consists in the critically ascertained acknowledgment of our a-critical commitment to the vague residuum of our indubitable belief.

This brief description of the central feature of CCS offers a plausible interpretation of the above seen paradoxical passage about the role of doubt with respect to our indubitable, a-critical beliefs. While we should not pretend to doubt our indubitable beliefs, we can criticize the more precise renderings of it. As Peirce writes, in fact, “criticism can only attack a proposition after it has given it some precise sense” (CP 5.523). Similarly, Polanyi claims that “where there is criticism, what is being criticized is, every time, *the assertion of an articulate form*. It is our personal acceptance of an articulate form that is judged to have been critical or uncritical” (PK 278). As to our vague instinctive beliefs, they remain indubitable insofar as it is impossible for us to doubt them. In other words, as Polanyi writes, “our basic beliefs are indubitable only in the sense that we believe them to be so. Otherwise they are not even beliefs, but merely somebody’s states of mind” (PK 281).

In contrast to a (subjective) *state* of mind, a (personal) belief is an *action*. To believe something is to be disposed to act on the assumption that the object of the belief is true. Consequently, an indubitable belief is the expression of an instinctive commitment to the truth of a vague proposition. But the truth of a vague proposition, as we have seen, can only be assessed by a critical examination of its more precise determinations or articulate forms; and doubts about the latter can only be formulated once we have already committed ourselves to the former.<sup>11</sup> As Polanyi simply puts it, “a fiduciary philosophy [and we might add, a critical philosophy of common-sense] does not eliminate doubt, but ... says that we should hold on to what we truly believe” (PK 335).

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<sup>11</sup> We might indeed eventually and conceivably reject one or more of our indubitable beliefs; not, however, by any effort of the will, but only in virtue of an inarticulate sense that those beliefs should indeed be set aside or modified; namely, only in virtue of the emergence of a new a-critical commitment.