

Peirce and Wittgenstein on Doubt: A Comparison

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1. Introduction

There are many areas of Peirce and Wittgenstein's thought which have great affinity for one another such as: the impossibility of a private language, the distinction between believing and knowing, and the role of doubt and certainty in our epistemic practices. I shall focus on the affinity between Peirce and Wittgenstein's thought on the role of doubt in our epistemic practices. I will argue that Peirce and Wittgenstein give us a 'broadly' pragmatic account of the role of doubt and by this I mean, they are interested in the difference doubt makes to our epistemic practices (I do not mean by this that Wittgenstein is part of a philosophical movement called pragmatism). Specifically, Peirce and Wittgenstein argue against the skeptical, or Cartesian, form of doubt that has dominated epistemological discussion. They deny that universal doubt is a genuine doubt; such a 'doubt' is idle, because it does not have any practical consequences for us. Genuine doubt must have a ground and of course there is no rule that can determine whether a ground for doubt is genuine in all circumstances. Doubts occur in a context, with all our prejudices and beliefs in place.

2. Universal Doubt Is Not A Genuine Doubt

One aspect of Peirce's conception of doubt is his persistent rejection of Descartes' universal doubt and his use of universal doubt to further his epistemological ends. Peirce's famous statement of his rejection of universal doubt and the Cartesian method of doubting occurs in his 1868 paper *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities*.

"We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned. Hence this initial skepticism will be a mere self-deception, and not real doubt; and no one who follows the Cartesian method will ever be satisfied until he has formally recovered all those beliefs which in form he has given up. It is, therefore, as useless a preliminary as going to the North Pole would be in order to get to Constantinople by coming down regularly upon a meridian. A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim. Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts." (CP: 5.265)¹

And again in his 1878 paper *The Fixation of Belief*:

"Some philosophers have imagined that to start an inquiry it was only necessary to utter a question whether orally or by setting it down upon paper, and have even recommended us to begin our studies with questioning everything! But the mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any

struggle after belief. There must be a real and living doubt, and without this all discussion is idle." (CP: 2.376)

The mere utterance of a doubt is not sufficient for there to be a real doubt. Descartes claims to doubt all his beliefs, but it does not follow that he really does doubt them. This is a doubt that makes no difference to our practices and beliefs. Wittgenstein concurs:

"115. If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty."

"450. A doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt."²

These statements also indicate that Peirce and Wittgenstein share the claim that our ability to doubt rests upon beliefs and practices which are themselves not open to doubt. Furthermore, such attempts to doubt "what it does not occur to us can be doubted," are merely idle:

"119. But can it also be said: Everything speaks for, and nothing against the table's still being there when no one sees it? For what does speak for it?"

120. But if anyone were to doubt it, how would his doubt come out in practice? And couldn't we peacefully leave him to doubt it, since it makes no difference at all?"

Here again we can see that Peirce and Wittgenstein share the claim that, a genuine doubt must have consequences for our actions and beliefs, it is not sufficient to merely announce a doubt, as if doing so gave it authority over all our beliefs and practices. A genuine doubt must have practical consequences, it must, for example, stimulate us to inquiry. But now we need to see how Peirce and Wittgenstein think that we can identify a genuine doubt.

3. Genuine Doubt Must Have A Ground

The general doubt of Cartesianism cannot be the basis for inquiry, if I doubt that there is such a place as Cumberland Lodge, because of the possible existence of an evil Demon, I am not giving a specific reason for doubting the existence of the place - such as the Lodge burned down last year. If I doubt that Cumberland Lodge exists because of the possibility of an evil demon, then how can I show you that the Lodge does exist, how can inquiry proceed? Alternatively, if I doubt that there is such a place as Cumberland Lodge because it burned down, then I can proceed with an inquiry to determine whether or not the reason for my doubt is a good one. With the general doubt we have no way of determining whether the reason for doubt is a good one by a process of inquiry, and this is because we have no way to proceed in our inquiry from the starting point of general doubt. Peirce is here claiming that a possible doubt is not a real one; Descartes supposes that he can doubt that he is sitting next to the fire, or Cumberland Lodge does not exist, but it does not mean that he does.

¹ All references to Peirce are taken from *The Collected Papers*. The standard reference format is CP: followed by volume number 5. followed by paragraph number 265.

² All references to Wittgenstein are from *On Certainty*. I provide the paragraph number at the start of the quotation, rather than page numbers.

In genuine inquiry we reject a belief, not because it is possible to doubt a belief, but because we genuinely do doubt it and have reasons to doubt it relevant to our inquiry. Let us say that you and I are waiting at Victoria station for Fred. The train he is supposed to be arriving on comes in, we see a figure getting off the train at the far end of the platform, from a distance it looks like Fred - same general height and build, trademark trenchcoat, dark hair, walks like Fred, etc. You point him out and say, "that looks like Fred, but I can't be sure," I reply "yes, at this distance it's difficult to be sure." The reasons for doubt are that sight cannot accurately determine, at long distances, whether the fast approaching figure is or is not Fred. Once the figure is a few feet away from us, the doubt is dispelled. At this point I turn to you and say - "Oh, look it is Fred," but you reply, "I still can't be sure." "Why not" I ask with a certain amount of incredulity, now if your answer were to be - "because my senses have deceived me in the past and it is possible that they are deceiving me now"; then this is a very different answer from - "because I forgot my glasses and without them I can't see anything beyond my own nose."

The reasons for the second doubt depend upon the context in which you are currently located; the reasons for the first do not. Descartes concedes that his form of doubt should not be carried over into practical life. Peirce's point is that it is difficult to see what kind of motivation we have for an inquiry based on Descartes' method of doubt.

Wittgenstein agrees with Peirce that there must be grounds for doubt:

"322. What if the pupil refused to believe that this mountain had been there beyond human memory?

We should say that he had no *grounds* for this suspicion.

323. So rational suspicion must have grounds?

We might also say: 'the reasonable man believes this'."

Peirce tells us that a doubt is something that stimulates an inquiry, by unsettling a stable belief; therefore we should look for the grounds for doubt in the context of an inquiry. Wittgenstein, as we saw in the previous section, tells us that the grounds for doubt can be found in that doubt's practical consequences; what difference will the doubt make to the way we go on? In 120 Wittgenstein shows the idleness of the doubt that a table is still there when nobody sees it. He asks us to consider the difference that such a doubt would make to our beliefs and practices concerning tables. Similarly, Peirce denies that a doubt that has as its ground - an evil demon could be deceiving me - makes any difference at all to how I might conduct an inquiry. The important point that Wittgenstein and Peirce share, is that these doubts make no difference to our actual beliefs and practices, they have no purchase on them. Which allows Peirce and Wittgenstein to consider the more interesting question of how genuine doubts do make a difference to what we think and do,

"450. I want to say: Our learning has the form 'that is a violet', 'that is a table'. Admittedly, the child might hear the word 'violet' for the first time in the sentence 'perhaps that is a violet', but then he could ask 'what is a violet?' Now this might of course be answered by showing him a picture. But how would it be if one said 'that is a...' only when showing him a picture, but otherwise said nothing but 'perhaps that is a...' - What practical consequences is that supposed to have?"

In 450. Wittgenstein shows that a child could not be taught to use a word by hearing them as expressions of uncertainty. The practice of showing the child a picture and

saying "perhaps that is a..." would be an absurd way of trying to teach the child how to use a word, it would not be a recognisable language game, to us. This presupposes that there are language games in which genuine doubt plays a role. In paragraphs 310 – 317 Wittgenstein imagines a pupil who continually interrupts his teacher with doubts about the existence of things and the meanings of words. Just as someone who looks for objects by opening a draw, seeing that the object is not there, closing the draw, waiting and then opening the draw again has not learnt how to look for things; so the pupil who asks questions about the existence of objects when nobody is looking has not learnt how to ask questions.

Wittgenstein is calling for us to suppose that in any act of doubting there must be grounds for doubt. However, he is aware that there is no general rule or guideline which determines when a doubt is unreasonable or groundless.

"452. It would not be reasonable to doubt if that was a real tree or only.... My finding it beyond doubt is not what counts. If a doubt would be unreasonable, that cannot be seen from what / hold. There would therefore have to be a rule that declares doubt to be unreasonable here. But there isn't such a rule either."

The positive account of doubt shows that particular doubts arise in particular contexts, rather than there being an absolute rule that determines when doubts are grounded or not. This is because, particular doubts occur in particular contexts.

4. Doubt Arises in A Context

Doubting occurs within a language game, not outside of it. The act of doubting presupposes the ability to engage in such language games and the language games themselves presuppose certain characteristics of the act of doubting.

"255. Doubting has certain characteristic manifestations, but they are only characteristic of it in particular circumstances. If someone said that he doubted the existence of his hands, kept looking at them from all sides, tried to make sure it wasn't all done by mirrors, etc. we should not be sure whether we ought to call that doubting. We might describe his way of behaving as like the behaviour of doubt, but his game would not be ours."

Wittgenstein goes on to ask how we would convince someone who professed to doubt that they had hands or a body. What sort of language games would apply here? Doubt with grounds and some practical consequence can now be seen as being part of the language game of doubting, but only relative to particular circumstances.

Peirce concurs, a genuine doubt has the ability to alter our beliefs, whereas sceptical doubts never do. A doubt is motivated by a positive reason for holding it, being directed at a specific belief. This is why a doubt occurs in a particular context and initiates a particular inquiry. Doubt presupposes belief and inquiry, without them there could be no genuine doubt.

5. Conclusion

I have given only a brief sketch of the rich points of comparison between Peirce and Wittgenstein. They both agree that universal doubts are idle, this is because they have no practical consequences, they make no difference to the ways in which we would conduct ourselves. Doubts

require grounds, they must be positive and directed, or reasonable. However, there are no hard and fast rules for determining grounds for doubt in any particular context. But, doubts do arise in a particular context and we do recognise them when they stimulate us to consider our current beliefs.

Literature

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