

CS Peirce, 1878 “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”

‘How to make our ideas clear’ (1878)

Introduces the Pragmatic Rule for

- achieving complete clarity about the contents of
 - ◊ concepts,
 - ◊ propositions and
 - ◊ hypotheses.

This initial method for clarifying meaning was later called ‘pragmatism’.

The rule helps us

- to carry out scientific investigations in a responsible self-controlled manner
 - ◊ also has important applications within logic and philosophy.

Uses:

- CLARIFY CONCEPTS fundamental to method of science
 - ◊ reality
 - ◊ probability
- EXPLAIN HOW METHOD LEADS TO TRUTH
 - ◊ Relation between investigation’s
 - ❖ meaning of propositions and
 - ❖ ‘the one TRUE CONCLUSION’
- DEMONSTRATE METHOD of SCIENCE’s SELF-CORRECTIVE Nature
 - ◊ There are NO IMPORTANT PROPOSITIONS WHOSE truth VALUES CANNOT BE ESTABLISHED using the METHOD of SCIENCE.

Three Grades of Clearness (of meaning)

- Why new grade is needed
 - ◊ Why science is method which provides new grade
- Doubt and Belief

- ◇ Thought exists to produce belief
 - ❖ Belief: is
 - ◇ something we're aware of
 - ◇ appeases irritation
 - ◇ establishes a rule (this last aspect is important)
 - ❖ Belief
 - ◇ establishes habit
 - habits determine action
- **Pragmatic principle of meaning:**
 - ◇ meaning is distinguished by habits.
- **Applications of pragmatic principle:**
 - ◇ Transubstantiation
 - ◇ Hardness
 - ◇ Reality
- Upshot:
 - ◇ Because reality has pragmatic meaning, inquiry can converge upon truth.

Three grades of clarity (of meaning)

QUESTION: What is Peirce referring to with the "grades of clearness"?

levels of precision of meaning

QUESTION: What are the the first two level?

FIRST LEVEL

I possess the first when I UNTHINKINGLY APPLY the concept in my experience

I recognize my cup and drink from it

I use water to wet my hands, etc.

SECOND LEVEL

the second involves possession of an ABSTRACT DEFINITION.

For example, we can define reality as `that which is not whatever we happen to think it', but is unaffected by what we may think of it.

These notions of clarity, familiar from the Rationalists' talk of 'clear and distinct ideas', can appear sufficient only in the light of logic which Peirce believed had discredited itself.

Descartes' method had invented clarity of meaning that was not subject to test or disproof. This meant one could never be wrong! The result is MUDDLED CONCEPTS AND WASTED LIVES!

A number of "deceptions" result from relying ONLY on the first two grades of clarity.

- FALSE DISTINCTIONS multiply — we use language sloppily
- We mistake our own CONFUSION for what objects are really like

THIRD GRADE OF CLARITY

QUESTION: what is the third grade of clarity, then?

The third 'pragmatist' grade, Peirce later stressed, accords with experimentalist approaches to inquiry and laboratory experience.

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (30)

Note some important points here:

BELIEF is can be analyzed on three grades of clearness:

1. something we're AWARE of,
2. defined as that which APPEASES IRRITATION, and
3. ESTABLISHES a RULE (this last aspect is important)

THIRD GRADE GIVES METHOD FOR EXPERIMENTAL CLARIFICATIONS

The THIRD GRADE gives us a WAY to EXPERIMENTALLY CLARIFY what we mean

by a term because there are things we can do to test it and observe what sensible effects follow from that test.

TESTING is the tool of SCIENCE which is our adaptive tool for survival. Recall overall picture of belief as ADAPTIVE behavior:

DOUBT — -produces —> IRRITATION — motivates —> ACTIVE THINKING — leads to —> BELIEF (and thought rests). That same BELIEF — -applies as a rule for — -ACTION — - which can lead to —> new DOUBT —> etc.

BELIEF is both a STOPPING PLACE and STARTING PLACE for thought.

For beliefs to differ, their habits must differ.

Applications of pragmatic principle:

QUESTION: what is **TRANSUBSTANTIATION** and how can the pragmatic principle (third grade of clearness) help clarify it? (clarifying a religious concept)

- CATHOLIC view is that wine and bread ARE flesh and body.
- PROTESTANT view is that they are symbolic of flesh and body.

QUESTION: what if I as Catholic experience from the wine qua blood a sensation of spiritual bliss, for example. Would this not be a sensible effect? How could Peirce handle this report?

Perhaps, if the protestant also experience that feeling and it leads to the same actions, then the concept transubstantiation is the same. But Peirce would probably not be satisfied with that answer. He is thinking very much of testable, verifiable effects here — what is observable about the host's qualities.

QUESTION: How do we apply the three grades of clearness to the concept “**HARD**”? (clarifying a physical concept)

FIRST GRADE OF CLEARNESS: APPLYING TO "HARD"

Peirce claims that the first grade of clarity with respect to a concept such as 'hard' consists in being able to IDENTIFY THOSE OBJECTS WHICH ARE HARD -- without necessarily being able to give reasons for doing so.

SECOND GRADE OF CLEARNESS: APPLYING TO "HARD"

The second grade of clarity consists in one's being able TO FRAME A VERBAL DEFINITION OF 'HARD' (for instance, "Hardness consists in the ability to resist pressure.").

THIRD GRADE OF CLEARNESS: APPLYING TO "HARD"

The third grade, however, ASSIGNS FUTURE EXPECTATIONS TO HYPOTHESES CONTAINING THE TERM IN QUESTION. (For instance, you might predict that if a particular table is hard, then you can put a plate on it without the plate falling through.)

PRAGMATISM HOLDS

COMPLETE CLARIFICATION of a concept by listing such CONDITIONAL PROPOSITIONS:

- propositions tell what effects my actions will have IF the concept applies to a specified object.
- An `EXPERIMENTALIST'S' VIEW of the CONTENT of PROPOSITIONS.

This third grade of meaning-clarification:

- is derived from the scientific method
 - ◊ especially because
 - ◊ scientific experimentation is the process
 - ❖ of deriving predictions from hypotheses and
 - ❖ then testing those hypotheses by testing their predictions.

The PRAGMATIC TEST of meaningfulness is properly APPLIED

- TO TERMS EMBEDDED in PROPOSITIONS
 - ◊ rather than in isolation

- These PROPOSITIONS ARE HYPOTHETICAL in character.

EXAMPLE: What does "Hard" mean?

- Translates to: WHAT EXPECTATIONS would one draw from hypotheses of the form "X is hard"
 - ◇ "Hardness" becomes a series of conditionals:
 - ❖ "If X is hard, then....".

PRAGMATIC MAXIM **SUPPLEMENTS** TRADITIONAL METHODS OF CLARIFYING THE MEANING OF CONCEPTS

- e.g. analysis of concepts
- Definitions of necessary and sufficient conditions

The pragmatic maxim is a "third grade" of meaning-clarity;

- It was **ALREADY INTRODUCED** to the world along with the scientific method
 - ◇ But Peirce is making it **EXPLICIT** as a method;
 - ❖ philosophy can benefit from this.

REALITY (clarifying a metaphysical concept)

Let's examine the "Third Grade of Clarification" by applying it to "Reality."

REALITY clarification depends upon how reality

- might have general practical effects upon our habits and our actions
 - ◇ that is the only way we can form a concept of it based upon verifiable effects.

TRUTH (clarifying a metaphysical concept)

ACCOUNT OF TRUTH follows from Reality.

Truth is defined:

- by reference to long run convergence of opinion among responsible inquirers
 - ◇ it is not independent of 'thought in general'
 - ◇ but it is independent of what any individual may think at any particular time.