# From Truth to Application: Peirce and "Mastery of Our Meaning"

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## I.

In a 1907 letter to FW Frankland, CS Peirce insists that "Pragmatism is not a doctrine about what the *truth* of ideas consists in, but about what their meaning consists in." Despite this admonishment, prominent commentators on Peirce have continued to enlist the notion of truth in their explications of the pragmatic maxim. In *The American Pragmatists*, for instance, Cheryl Misak tells us that

> [Peirce's] contribution to the debate is to add "a far higher grade" of clarity to the standard two: knowing what to expect if hypotheses containing the concept are true. (Misak 30)[1]

Similarly, Christopher Hookway tells us that pragmatism holds that "propositions are distinguished by the 'consequences' of their being true" (188). Adding that the maxim is properly clarified "in the subjunctive mood," Hookway contends that it directs us to attend to "a general habit of expectation which traces systematic connections between action and experience if the conception or proposition we are trying to clarify is true" (189).[2]

. Admittedly, such construals of the pragmatic maxim accord well with at least a few of Peirce's formulations. For instance, in a manuscript entitled "The Architectonic Construction of Pragmatism" (CP 1904), Peirce tells us:

> In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception. (CP 5.9)[3]

Formulations like this emphasize what Hookway has called the 'verificationist dimension' of pragmatist accounts of meaning. They focus upon the (predominately sensible) effects that possible states of the world have upon us (and hence what we should expect). Indeed, in the first chapter of *Truth and the End of Inquiry*, Misak further avers that "Peirce's pragmatism is indeed identical, for all practical purposes, with the physicalist interpretation of the verification principle" (11-12). On this understanding, the pragmatic maxim directs us to attend to the sensible effects we should expect of a certain thing were it to be present or state of affairs were it to obtain.[4]

. However, there is a difficulty with construing the pragmatic maxim in quite this fashion, which I think Peirce comes to appreciate later on, and which accounts for striking differences in the tenor of his formulations after 1904. Here's a first pass at the difficulty. Suppose that a certain (type of) state of affairs Q generally follows another P. Then we ought—that is, it is generally to our advantage—to conform our habits of conception to this regularity. We should take our conceptions of P to imply our conceptions of Q. But even though our conceptual habits would ideally conform to the way things are in the real order, when we direct our attention specifically to the *meanings* of our conceptions, then we must restrict ourselves to the implications *we take* those conceptions to have, not those that the conceived states of affairs might actually happen to have. There is a plethora of implications in a conception, either were it to be true or were it to be false, much of which is likely beyond our current clue. So rather than spelling out the pragmatic maxim in terms of the consequences of the world's being (or not being) a certain way, Peirce directs us instead to consider simply the implications of our *takin*g a conception to be true along with those of our *taking* it to be false. As he tells us in "Issues of Pragmaticism" (1905), meaning resides (wholly) in "implication" (and non-implication).

> In another sense, honest people, when not joking, intend to make the meaning of their words determinate, so that there shall be no latitude of interpretation at all. That is to say, the character of their meaning consists in the implications and non-implications of their words; and they intend to fix what is implied and what is not implied. (CP 5.447)

That is, it's the implications of a conception's *application*—in speech acts such as affirmations and denials - that matter to its meaning, rather than the consequences

of its truth or falsity. Stripping truth out of the pragmatic maxim allow *us* to fix what *we* mean by a conception, and so retain—as he puts it in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear"—a mastery of our own meaning. (CP 5.393)

Consequently, the understanding of pragmatism which emphasizes the (sensible) effects of the *truth* of a conception accords less well with several of Peirce's later articulations of the maxim, which focus, not so much upon the consequences of a conception's *truth*, but rather upon the implications of *applying* it. Hence in a 1900 review in *Science*, Peirce characterizes "a doctrine I called Pragmatism" as the view "that the meaning and essence of every conception lies in the application that is to made of it," (Peirce, *Selected Writings* 332) and in "Issues of Pragmaticism" Peirce simply tells us that:

> The entire purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of a symbol. (CP 5.438)

Rather than calling upon the verificationist dimension of pragmatist thought, characterizations like these place greater emphasis on what Hookway dubs its "pragmatist dimension" (and what I prefer to call its "conduct strand").[5]

Here the consequences that the pragmatist directs us to consider are not so much the sensible effects of *states of affairs*, as they are the consequences upon our thoughts and actions *of applying a concept* in thought and inquiry. It is this shift, and its implications, that one is apt to miss, if one construes the maxim in terms of the consequences of truth. In the next section, I will argue that those who defend a truth-centered conception of the pragmatic maxim actually promote a conception that accords more with a Jamesian understanding of pragmatism than that eventually favored by Peirce.

## II.

Let's revisit the characterization of the pragmatic maxim that centers around the truth of conceptions, with an eye toward exposing its infelicity. Recall the formulation (CP 5.9) where Peirce directs us to consider the consequences of the truth of a conception. What, then, are the implications of a conception, *were it to be true*? If it *is* true, then according to a Peircean conception, it would be accepted (or at least not rejected) by a hypothetical community of inquirers pushing inquiry to ideal limits. Already, this introduction of an ideal community of inquirers poses a potential hazard for the proper understanding of the pragmatic maxim. For in ultimately accepting a claim, those hypothetically ideal inquirers might well have an understanding of the claim's implications that differs from ours in rather dramatically different ways. As mentioned above, the truth of a conception will

likely have a host of implications for which we have little current appreciation. We now have two separate sets or books of implications to consider. Should we take the implications that are supposed to constitute a conception's meaning to be those that we take it to have, or those that our imagined ideal inquirers take it to have (or those that it actually has, for which we have no current clue)? The versions of the pragmatic maxim that direct us to look to the implications of a conception's truth suggest that we should go for one of the latter options. However, if we do so, then insofar as we are unable to anticipate what implications ideal inquirers would draw from a claim under consideration, we threaten to take the meaning of our conceptions out of our own hands and place it into those of those ideal inquirers. We would no longer be the "masters of our meaning" that Peirce urges us to be at the beginning of "How to make Our Ideas Clear" (CP 5.393). We should be troubled by such a possibility.

To see why, consider the situation if the claim in question happens to be false. For now, when we ask what the implications of a claim would be, were it to be (counterfactually) true, then it begins to look as if a formulation of pragmatism centered around subjunctive truth asks us to consider implications (and correspondingly ideal inquirers) troublingly detached from reality. By forcing us to consider matters, so to speak, in an alternate reality, the mental gymnastics required in order to determine a claim's meaning would be made all the harder, and we would be even less the masters of our own meaning. It is implausible that we should hold the meanings of our conceptions hostage to the implications that would be drawn by hypothetical inquirers investigating an alternate reality, no matter how ideal they may be, and it would be uncharitable to interpret Peirce as recommending that that is what we do. But that is what happens when we take literally the idea that the pragmatic maxim tells us to identify the meaning of a conception in terms of its subjunctive truth.

Moreover—and perhaps more significantly—if indeed a conception is false, then accepting it has implications *in reality* that we should find objectionable. Indeed, those objectionable implications are precisely the ones that would lead ideal inquirers in the actual world to *reject* the claim in question! However, those same objectionable implications are the ones that would most stand to be swept under the rug, if we were really envisioning a claim's implications *were it to be true*. Instead of that non-actual world, we should rather be envisioning a world that matches the implication *we take* our claims to have. For this reason most of all, one should not unpack the maxim merely in terms of subjunctive truth. The implications of a claim, *were it to be false*, are also crucial to meaning and inquiry. To say that we should focus upon the implications of a claim, were it to be true, gives us an insufficiently one-sided account of conceptual meaning.

The message so far is fairly straightforward: the implications of a conception's falsity are every bit as important as those of its truth. That we must often *deny* conceptions demonstrate that we need to consider applications of a conception

independent of its truth. It's not so much the implications of a claim, *were it to be true*, then, that matters for the pragmatic maxim. Rather, it's the implications that a claim actually has, were it *either* to be true *or* false. The subjunctive reading is trying to get at applications of a conception in the face of its falsity, but here we cannot identify a claim's meaning literally in terms of its implications *were it to be true*. Instead, we should be identifying the implications that *we take* a conception to have, and then use those in order to reject the conception in question.

Interestingly, William James might have been the first to appreciate this point. In a contribution that James provided to Peirce for the 1902 *Baldwin Encyclopedia* entry on "Pragmatic" and "Pragmatism" James characterizes pragmatism as follows:

> The doctrine that the whole "meaning" of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences, consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experiences to be expected, of the conception if true, which consequences would be different if untrue, and must be different from the consequences by which the meaning of other conceptions is in turn expressed. (CP 5.2)

There is much to be said about this characterization. For one thing, observe how the disjunction in this formulation brings together both the "verificationist" and "conduct" strands of pragmatism in a disjunction. The meaning of a conception is to be unpacked, either in terms of the "experiences to be expected" (verificationist) or in the "shape of conduct to be recommended" (conduct). For present purposes, however, observe further that this characterization asks us to attend not only to the consequences of the truth of a conception, but also to those it would have if *untrue*. Elsewhere, I have called such formulations of the pragmatic maxim "bilateral." Indeed, the passage above could well be the very first explicit expression of a bilateral account of conceptual meaning altogether.

Shortly after James's entry, Peirce gives us his own bilateral version of the maxim in the opening essay of his *Monist* Series of 1905-6 ("What Pragmatism Is"):

> Endeavoring, as a man of that type naturally would, to formulate what he so approved, he framed the theory that a *conception*, that is, the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing on the conduct of life; so that, since obviously nothing that might not result from experiment can have direct bearing on the conduct, if one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the **affirmation or denial of a concept could imply**, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and *there is absolutely nothing more in it.* (CP 5.412, my bold)

Even though Peirce's announced aim in this series is to distance himself from "usurpers" of his original doctrine, he nevertheless incorporates the bilaterality of James' formulation. In so doing, he reinforces the point made earlier - that since claims may have consequences that ultimately lead to their rejection, we need to attend to the consequences of claims we take to be untrue.

However, Peirce's bilateral version is pointedly different from James's, in that it trades in the consequences of a conception's *truth or untruth* for the implications of its *affirmation or denial*. There is a world of difference between the *kinds of consequences* to which these alternate formulations appeal. Though we might well take truth to be a norm of assertion (and falsity a norm of denial), by no means do truths and affirmations of those truths share the same consequences. As Peirce occasionally bemoaned (e.g., CP 2.113), merely attesting that one has $500 in the bank is a far cry from actually having that sum in reserve. Fallible (and alas, occasionally duplicitous) creatures that we are, the consequences (or rather, effects) of a claim's being *true* (or false) is very different from those of its being *affirmed* (or denied). Indeed, it is key to understanding Peirce's account of assertion that the assertion of some conception has significant consequences if that conception turns out *not* to be true or defensible. (CP 5.546)[6] Specifically, to assert some claim is to take responsibility for it. (R 420, 25-6)

For this reason, I contend that those commentators who unpack pragmatism in terms of the consequences of a claim's *truth* are actually giving us a conception of pragmatism that is more Jamesian than Peircean—a somewhat surprising and ironic twist, given how these same commentators generally take themselves to be defending a more Peircean conception of pragmatism against Jamesian excesses. That's the misreading Peirce warns Frankland to avoid in the passage with which I opened up this paper. In the next section, I will explore the consequences of Peirce's shift in focus from truth (and falsity) to affirmation (and denial), and see how it might illuminate the significant differences Peirce saw between his and James' respective understandings of pragmatism.

## III.

So what lessons are we likely to miss out on if we gloss over Peirce's shift from truth to affirmation? For starters, this shift signals that a tune that had originally been played in a predominantly alethic key has now been transposed into a deontic one; normative concerns now play a more central role than causal ones. The formulations of the maxim from the 1905-6 *Monist* series emphasizing the implications of affirmation and denial come at a time in which Peirce is increasingly concerned with habit and self-controlled conduct and a purported "proof" of the pragmatic maxim. In "Issues of Pragmaticism," Peirce stresses that such conduct is one of the chief characteristics of his particular understanding of

the pragmatic maxim: "Pragmaticism consists in holding that the purport of any concept is its conceived bearing upon our conduct." (CP 5.460; see also CP 5.422).[7]

In short, conduct is much more deeply embedded into the pragmatism of the *Monist* series and thereafter. By shifting focus from truth to application, the consequences that matter for meaning are not just those *upon* our practical conduct, but also those that *flow from* such conduct. In this sense, the account expresses a more thorough-going pragmatism, in which meaning is grounded not so much in truth, but rather in the speech *acts* of affirmation and denial. Instead of pragmatics being grafted onto semantics, semantics is now rooted in pragmatics. The important thing is not how conceptions correspond to reality (which is not to say that they don't!), but rather how they can be arranged together to form conceptions, the significance of which in turn is to be understood in terms of the actions and thoughts that those conceptions do or do not license and imply. This is clearly a functionalism about meaning, though a normative functionalism rather than a brutely causal one.[8] The consequences that constitute the meaning of our intellectual conceptions are not so much the causal consequences of states of affairs, but rather the consequences that redound to a speaker or thinker in affirming (or denying) a claim, including especially the further claims that such applications thereby oblige or permit one to affirm (or deny).

In short, Peirce's comes to an understanding of the pragmatic maxim whereby meaning is unpacked more in terms of the implications of speech acts, and less in terms of the sensible effects of the world's being a certain way. Consider the striking way in which Peirce explicitly minimizes the role that sensation plays in the constitution of meaning in the characterization of pragmatism Peirce gives in his 1904 review of Nichols' *Treatise on Cosmology*:[9]

> The word *pragmatism* was invented to express a certain maxim of logic, which, as was shown at its first enouncement, involves a whole system of philosophy. The maxim is intended to furnish a method for the analysis of concepts. A concept is something having the mode of being of a general type which is, or may be made, the rational part of the purport of a word. A more precise or fuller definition cannot here be attempted. The method prescribed in the maxim is to trace out in the imagination the conceivable practical consequences, —that is, the consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct,—of the affirmation or denial of the concept; and the assertion of the maxim is that herein lies the *whole* of the purport of the word, the *entire* concept. The sedulous exclusion from this statement of all reference to sensation is specially to be remarked." (CP 8.191)

One would certainly be hard pressed to square this statement of pragmatism with his earlier claim that "our idea of an object is our idea of its sensible effects" (CP

5.402)! Here we can see that Peirce was clearly moving away from the verificationism that predominated in his initial presentations of the maxim. What is important in not so much that a certain effect does (or does not) obtain. Rather, what is crucial to a conception's meaning is that its application should lead one to *expect* it to occur (or not). The meaning of a conception lies in its place within a web of (habitual) expectations.

We can now see that a chief point of contention between Peirce and James is that Peirce comes to emphasize proprieties of conduct, rather than effects of experience. Hence in a late (1908-9) letter, Peirce repudiates James for disjoining the conduct and verificationist strands of pragmatism together in his Baldwin definition:

> The essential principle of pragmatism, as I conceive it, may be stated in this form: Kant's division of concepts into the constitutive and the regulative is faulty in that concepts are in their essence regulative only. The term I invented, "pragmatism," to name my doctrine sufficiently shows that the point I wished to make as supremely important in philosophical inquiries was that an idea which cannot conceivably result in a general effect upon conduct can have no intellectual significance whatsoever. You deliberately erase this distinction in your definition in Baldwin's Dictionary by lumping those which have such effect with others which you assume may exist which merely are, in your not very lucid phrase, "experienced to be expected," by which I suppose you to mean expectations of experience (but I should like to have the whole sentence construed for me, for I do not see exactly what it is that you seek to express)…. (CSP to WJ, 1908 5-8.)[10]

As exemplified in his "Will to Believe" cases, James takes a mere effect of accepting a belief or conception to be conditions that warrant it. By contrast, Peirce comes to focus upon the rational implications that the application of those conceptions in turn warrant. The difference here between the two founding pragmatists couldn't be more stark, yet it is largely occluded if one unpacks the pragmatic maxim in terms of the consequences of truth rather than acceptance.

## Notes

1. Misak is echoing the opening lines of the first chapter of her *Truth and the End of Inquiry*. There she declares that pragmatism's "central insight is that there is a connection between knowing the meaning of a hypothesis and knowing what experiential consequences to expect if the hypothesis is true." (3). Later on, she clarifies: "So the consequences with which pragmatism is concerned are predictions; we can predict that if H is true, then if you were to do A, B would result."
2. See Hookway, *The Pragmatic Maxim*.

3. Here I follow the convention of citing passages from Peirce's *Collected Papers* by identifying the volume and paragraph number separated by a period. I will identify passages from manuscripts not appearing in the *Collected Papers* by their Robin numbers.

4. This assimilation of pragmatism to some flavor of verificationism is characteristic of Peirce's earlier characterizations of pragmatism, and are perhaps encapsulated by Peirce's oft-quoted remark that:

> I only desire to point out that how impossible it is that we should have an idea in our minds which relates to anything but conceived sensible effects of things. Our idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects. (CP 5.401)

that thought in turn ramifies into Peirce's first explicit attempt to articulate the pragmatic maxim in print:

> It appears, then, that the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension is as follows: 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. (CP 5.402)

5. This strand also has origins in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," for instance, when Peirce tells us that:

> The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit; and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise. If beliefs do not differ in this respect, if they appease the same doubt by producing the same rule of action, then no mere differences in the manner of consciousness of them can make them different beliefs." (CP 5.398)

6. See Howat, Andrew. "Hookway's Peirce on Assertion & Truth."

7. This association of pragmatism with conduct endures to the very end of his career, as evidenced by a proposed introduction to an Open Court reissuance of his *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*, "Namely, so far as my pragmatism is a doctrine, it is a doctrine that the significance of any intellectual thought consists in the particular manner in which it tends, and will tend, to regulate the thinker's conduct." (R 620, reprinted in Cornelis de Waal's [2014] reconstruction of the *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*, 192-3). Koopman has also argued that Classical Pragmatism is best framed around conduct, though he centers his "conduct pragmatism" around James. My argument here is that Peirce turns out to be the more thoroughgoing "conduct pragmatist."

8. Here Peirce is continuing a theme first expressed in his 1871 Critical Review of Berkeley's Idealism: "A better rule [than Berkeley's] for avoiding the deceits of language is this: Do things fulfil the same function practically? Then let them be signified by the same word. Do they not? Then let them be distinguished." (CP 8.33)

9. Peirce also appears to minimize the role of sensation in the definition of pragmatism later on in "What Pragmatism is." (CP 5.428), as well as in "Issues of Pragmaticism" (CP 5.458).

10. See also Peirce's own remark in the *Baldwin Encyclopedia* to the effect that James has expanded the scope of pragmatism to include "expectations of experience."

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