Truth as Representation, Not Will: How Peirce’s Modest Correspondence Theory Can Complement Haack’s Innocent Realism

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For more than a quarter century, in numerous lectures, articles and books, Susan Haack has presented enlightening accounts of the concepts of reality and truth. Her Innocent Realism, briefly put, is the idea that there is one real world, meaning (negatively) that there is only one real world and (positively) that that world is integrated (Haack 2014b, p. 89). She has also provided a compelling explanation of the various ways in which truth is valuable: epistemically, instrumentally, and morally (Haack 1998a, p. 21). Some of Haack’s work on these issues has been influenced by Charles Peirce. For example, she has provided detailed explanations and extensions of what Peirce called “the first rule of reason”—that in order to learn, one must desire to learn—and of what he called “genuine inquiry”—investigation motivated by the desire to learn the truth, whatever that truth might happen to be (e.g., in Haack 1997 and Haack 2014a).

Like Peirce, Haack understands the concept of truth to be importantly connected to that of reality; she maintains that in order for truth to be valuable, to be worth pursuing, the idea of truth has to satisfy what she calls the Aristotelian Insight—Aristotle’s dictum that “to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true” (1998a, pp. 21–23). On her view, this Insight conveys the one and only legitimate truth concept—a true proposition is one that says how things really are; and Haack has argued that, despite the fact that there is only one legitimate concept of truth, there are many truths—i.e., many different kinds of true proposition: truths of natural science, of social science, of mathematics, etc. (Haack 2005).

Still, Haack doesn’t connect the ideas of truth and reality in exactly the same way as Peirce. She notes that Peirce gives the idea of reality “a pragmat[ic]ist twist, suggesting that, at the third and highest grade of clarity, the real is the object of the Final Opinion in terms of which he defines truth—a turn in which [she says she will] not follow him” (Haack 2016a, p. 43n59; the first bracketed insertion is Haack’s). As some commentators, including Haack (1976, pp. 232 ff.), have recognized, Peirce’s account of truth is not limited to talk about “the Final Opinion,” the opinion that would be permanently settled by sufficient investigation. Peirce provided what I have elsewhere called a dual-aspect account of truth on which a true proposition is both the content of a belief that would be permanently “fixed” by investigation and one that represents reality (Lane 2018a, chapter 1).

So: Peirce was some kind of correspondence theorist. But Haack has hesitated to inflate the Aristotelian Insight into a full-blown correspondence approach to truth, Peircean or otherwise. On her view, some formulations
of the correspondence theory have teeth—they are very metaphysically ambitious—while others do not (Haack 1987, p.288), and neither toothy nor toothless forms of the theory are satisfying.

[F]or all its seductiveness the correspondence idea is misleading. Either, as in Russell and Wittgenstein, it has real metaphysical teeth, but draws us into an ontology of logically ultimate objects; or its “facts” are nothing more than the shadows of true propositions and its “correspondence” nothing more than a metaphysically pretentious way of saying “really, in fact,” and it gives us only the illusion of explanation. (Haack 2007b, p.235)

Haack’s understanding of “real” is adapted from Peirce’s definition of the word: “what makes something real … is that it is independent of what you or I or anyone thinks about it” (Haack 2016a, p.49); but she says that the question how we should understand the word “about” in that definition is one of “many details [of her Innocent Realism that] remain to be worked out” (ibid., p.54)

One of my goals in this essay is to describe a way in which that detail might be worked out, and my motives—in addition to showing appreciation for Haack’s work and suggesting a way in which it might be supplemented—are as follows. First, I have been thinking recently about Bertrand Russell’s criticisms of William James’s and F. C. S. Schiller’s versions of pragmatism and about the kind of connection between reality and truth that a pragmatist theory must posit in order to withstand such criticisms. Russell attributed to James and Schiller what I call willful pragmatism: a willful pragmatist account of truth is one that omits talk of correspondence or representation and instead understands truth in terms of success, accomplishing a goal, bringing about some desired outcome. On Russell’s account, Schiller’s pragmatism in particular emphasizes “the primacy of the Will. … There is no such thing as ‘mere’ knowing, in which we passively apprehend the nature of a merely ‘given’ object. All knowing is bound up with doing, and everything that we know has been in some degree altered by our agency” (Russell 1992 [1909], pp.277–278). Russell went on to argue that

the excessive individualism of the pragmatic theory of truth is inherently connected with the appeal to force. … If … the only way of discovering which of [a group of] disputants is in the right is to wait and see which of them is successful, there is no longer any principle except force by which the issue can be decided. … [Pragmatism], therefore, although it begins with liberty and toleration, develops, by inherent necessity, into the appeal to force and the arbitrament of the big battalions. (Ibid., p.283)

The crux of Russell’s criticism is this: if the only standard of truth is success, then the only method of decisively settling disagreements about whether a claim is true is, not rational debate, but violence. He even went so far as to cite James’s pragmatism as a philosophical antecedent of fascism (Russell 1996 [1935], p.434).

Another reason that I have been concerned with how a pragmatist can articulate the connection between the ideas of reality and truth is that some contemporary pragmatists have distanced pragmatism about truth from correspondence accounts in general and from representationalist accounts in particular. Haack does not err in this way; she recognizes that classical pragmatist accounts of truth—Peirce’s, James’s, and Dewey’s—while “stressing … that [the truth of beliefs] is manifested by the beliefs’ survival of test by experience,” nonetheless assume “that the truth of a belief derives from its correspondence with reality” (1978, p.86; see also Haack 1976). But Richard Rorty (1990) characterized pragmatism as “anti-representationalism,” and more recently Michael Williams has described anti-representationalism as “[t]he heart of pragmatism” (2013, p.129). Even some Peirceans have made moves in this direction. Cheryl Misak, who acknowledges the realist tenor of Peirce’s account of truth, has nonetheless described pragmatism as “arising out of a rejection of the correspondence theory” (Misak 2016, p.284). Misak reads Peirce as defending a view of truth in which success is a key idea: “Peirce thought a belief’s consequences for action are central
not only to constituting it but also to determining its normative status. For the fundamental norm of belief is truth, and, for Peirce, roughly, beliefs are true if they would lead to successful action and false if they would not” (Misak 2016, p.26). This isn’t so extreme as to warrant Haack’s label “vulgar pragmatism” (2009, chapter 9)—maybe we should call it “indelicate Peirceanism”? Regardless, this reading of Peirce positions his views much too close to willful pragmatism.

Generally speaking, the more tenuous a given philosophical theory makes the connection between the ideas of truth and reality, the more susceptible that theory is to Russellian criticisms. It is one thing—a good thing!—for a pragmatist to say that there is a real world, that inquirers can and frequently do have true beliefs about it, and that the ideas of truth and reality are intimately connected. But it’s another thing—an even better thing!—to be able to say in at least rough terms what that connection is and thus to better fortify their pragmatic accounts of truth against Russellian criticisms. What I am now going to suggest is that Peirce’s own approach to these issues is sufficiently realist to withstand Russellian criticisms and that it can also get around Haack’s concerns about toothy correspondence theories, on the one hand, and toothless ones on the other.

So how might we draw upon Peirce’s work to formulate a satisfying explanation of the “about” in Haack’s Peircean account of reality? Let’s start by recognizing that Peirce understood the “about” in his own definition of “real” as having to do with representation: “A real thing is something whose characters are independent of how any representation represents it to be. Independent, therefore, of how any number of men think it to be” (W2:439, 1870). What’s more, Peirce’s theory of truth is a form of representationalism. As I’ve already mentioned, Peirce characterized a true belief both as one that would be permanently fixed as a result of sufficient investigation and as one that represents reality. An even perfunctory examination of his statements about truth should dispel any doubts about this. One of my favorites is this: “A proposition has a subject (or set of subjects) and a predicate. The subject is a sign; the predicate is a sign; and the proposition is a sign that the predicate is a sign of that of which the subject is a sign. If it be so, it is true” (CP 5.553, EP 2:379, 1906). As Haack has rightly noted, “Peirce’s pioneering work in semiotics, and his conception of truth as concordance with the ultimate representation, puts him about as far from ‘anti-representationalism’ as it is possible to be” (Haack 1998b, p.64).

It is the representationalist aspect of Peirce’s account of truth that (to use Haack’s apt expression) “anchors” truth “to the world” (2005, p.99). Peirce seems to have understood that representationalist aspect to provide a verbal definition of “true,” something that one must be able to articulate in order for one’s idea of truth to be clear to the second degree (Lane 2018a, pp.46–47). Thus, on his view, a true proposition is by definition one that is anchored to the world by way of the relation of representation. Both the representationalist aspect and the investigative aspect of his account of truth are fully present in 1877’s “The Fixation of Belief.” Contrary to the received interpretation of his views, Peirce neither revised nor even added to his account of truth in that article’s sequel, 1878’s “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.” As I argue elsewhere (Lane 2018a, pp.38–39), it was only in around 1905 that he began thinking about the investigative aspect as the result of applying the Pragmatic Maxim to the idea of truth. That was not how he presented it in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”; there he used it in support of his pragmatic clarification of the idea of reality: “The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real” (W 3:273, 1878). So his pragmatic clarification of the idea of reality depends on the investigative aspect of his account of truth. It is in our investigative practices—our attempts to dispel doubt and settle belief by way of communal, rational, experiential interaction with what he called “the external permanency” (W 3:253, 1877)—that we are to find the pragmatic import of the claim that something is real. Here it is important to distinguish Peirce’s definition of “real”—that which is independent of what anyone thinks about it—from his definition of “external”—that which is independent of what anyone thinks, about that very thing or anything else (see, e.g., W 3:271, 1878). Given these definitions, everything external—“the external permanency”—is real, but there might be reals that are not external.
Peirce sometimes characterized reality in terms of facts, e.g., “[a] fact is so much of the reality as is represented in a single proposition. If a proposition is true, that which it represents is a fact” (CP 6.67, RLT p.198, 1898). And on at least one occasion he wrote that each fact has a structure: “What we call a ‘fact’ is something having the structure of a proposition, but supposed to be an element of the very universe itself” (EP 2:304, 1904). Unlike the Wittgenstein of the Tractatus, Peirce did not maintain that a given fact has a structure that is independent of how it might ever be represented, and he did not maintain that a proposition must be isomorphic with a representation-independent ontological structure in order to be true. On Peirce’s approach, the world does not come carved up into logically-structured facts that propositions must then mirror in order to represent them. So Peirce is not giving us an example of the toothy metaphysics that Haack has abjured.

On the other hand, this might seem like the sort of toothless account of facts that she has also rejected, one on which facts are nothing but propositional shadows. If we take Peirce’s descriptions of facts as verbal definitions of the word “fact”—as providing only a second degree of clarity with regard to the idea of a fact—then that might be a fair criticism. And Peirce himself might have understood that account of facts in exactly that way; part of his Century Dictionary definition of the term is as follows: "that in the real world agreement or disagreement with which makes a proposition true or false." But it seems to me that we can extend Peirce’s pragmatic treatment of the idea of reality to the related idea of a fact in order to arrive at an account of facts, and of correspondence with the facts, that navigates between toothy Tractarianism and toothless shadowiness, and that does so in a way that might helpfully augment Haack’s accounts of reality and truth. Here’s how.

Again, Peirce pragmatically clarified the idea of reality as follows: “x is real” means that sufficient investigation would permanently settle beliefs the contents of which are propositions that represent x. Pragmatically clarified along similar lines, “it is a fact that x is F” means that sufficient investigation—communal, rational, experiential interaction with the world that is external to the minds of all “scientific intelligences” (CP 2.227, c.1897)—would permanently settle the belief the propositional content of which represents x as being F. Note that the investigative aspect of the truth of a proposition is primary relative to the pragmatic meaning of the claim that what that proposition represents is a fact; it is primary in the sense that we understand the pragmatic import of the claim that it is a fact that x is F in terms of what investigative interaction with the external world would lead us to believe. This does not imply that investigators give structure to the facts by thinking that they are one way rather than another; a real fact is, by the very definition of the word “real,” independent of how anyone actually represents it to be. Rather, this Peircean view of facts implies that what we would end up believing as a result of experiencing the external world and jointly reasoning about our respective experiences—how we would end up representing the world, and thus the structure of the propositions that we would use to represent it—shows us how it really is. And that the facts really are structured in that way helps to explain why investigation would eventually settle beliefs the contents of which have that structure. The world forces certain beliefs upon us; the propositional contents of those beliefs have certain structures; and those structures reveal something about reality, something that helps explain why investigation tends in one direction rather than in another.

In 1906 Peirce wrote that “[a] state of things is an abstract constituent part of reality, of such a nature that a proposition is needed to represent it. … A fact is so highly a prescissively abstract state of things, that it can be wholly represented in a simple proposition” (CP 5.549, EP 2:378). That might sound objectionably Tractarian: it might suggest the idea of elementary propositions mirroring atomic facts. But Peirce went on to say that “the term ‘simple,’ here, has no absolute meaning, but is merely a comparative expression” (ibid.). Some facts are simpler than others, which is why the structures of some true propositions are simpler than those of other true propositions. But there need not be ultimately simple logical atoms represented by absolutely elementary propositions.

Importantly, this approach to explaining the relationship between truth and reality need not be limited to any specific subject matter or area of investigation. It applies just as well to the physical and social sciences, to mathematics and philosophy, to ethics and the law—and it applies regardless of the logical form of
the propositions that are the contents of our beliefs—be they simple subject-predicate propositions, or conditionals, or disjunctions, etc. While Peirce did sometimes explain the truth of a propositional sign in terms of object signs and predicate signs, this does not preclude there being true propositions of other than simple subject-predicate form. On his view, any proposition whatsoever can be analyzed so as to have one or more subject terms—signs that either indexically indicate something in the real world or that serve as rules for arriving at such indexical signs—and a predicate term—a sign that calls to mind some image and that the propositional sign as a whole indicates is to be taken as a sign of the object(s) of the subject term(s) (see W 2:26, 1867; CP 5.542, c.1902; CP 2.318–320, EP 2:281–282, 1903).

All of this indicates one important way in which Peirce’s approach is in harmony with Haack’s. Here is a lengthier statement of her Innocent Realism:

There is one real world … a world largely, but not entirely, independent of us and our actions, beliefs, etc. This one real world is, manifestly, very heterogeneous—including … particulars and generals: natural objects, stuff, phenomena, kinds, and laws; a vast array of human (and some animal) artifacts; mental states and processes, including our thoughts, dreams, etc.; social institutions, roles, rules, and norms; human languages and other sign-systems; a plethora of scientific, mathematical, and philosophical theories (and, in at least some instances, their objects); works of history and art criticism, etc.; myths, legends, and works of fiction, and the characters and places that figure in them. But … this heterogeneity is not the end of the story; the world is also … integrated. The one real world of Innocent Realism is, to borrow James’s marvelously Janus-faced phrase, a pluralistic universe. (Haack 2016a, p.41; the reference is to James 1909)

The Peircean account of facts that I am suggesting allows for just this sort of pluralism. It places no limit on the kinds of fact there might be or the kinds of true proposition that might represent them, and so it is consistent with Haack’s view that, although there is only one legitimate truth concept (that which is captured in the Aristotelian Insight), there are multiple kinds of true proposition: “particular empirical claims, scientific theories, historical propositions, mathematical theorems, logical principles, textual interpretations, statements about what a person wants or believes or intends, statements about grammatical, social, or legal roles and rules, etc., etc.” (Haack 2005, p.88). Unlike Wittgenstein’s toothy correspondence theory, this does not require that the world be a homogeneous expanse of logical atoms.

To sum up: The real is by definition that which is as it is whether or not anyone represents it to be that way, and the true is by definition a matter of representation. Investigation—i.e., “the method of science,” of communal, rational, experiential interaction with the external world—would permanently settle some beliefs in the minds of inquirers, and the contents of those beliefs are true, i.e., they represent the real. The propositional sign that is the content of a true belief represents a fact. That fact shares the structure of that propositional sign, and this helps to explain why the sign has that structure: our experiential interactions with real facts lead us to have some beliefs rather than others, and the propositional contents of those beliefs have the specific structures they do because the real facts that give rise to those beliefs are really structured in a specific way. There are no disciplinary limits to investigation, no subject matter to which investigation cannot be applied, no fixed list of structures that facts can possess or of kinds of fact that there are, and thus no fixed list of structures that might be had by true propositions.

I have offered a modestly explanatory account of facts, according to which they are neither “the shadows of true propositions” nor arrangements of logical atoms; it is, I think, a heretofore unrecognized member of the family of correspondence theories. And being a form of representationalist pragmatism about truth, it steers clear of the aspects of pragmatism about which Russell fretted—it assumes that there is a real world that provides the norm for our beliefs, that genuine inquirers can settle our disagreements through experiencing that world and then jointly reasoning about our respective experiences rather than through the use of force. It recognizes facts and insists that the beliefs that represent them are true, i.e., that “there is something that is SO, no matter if there be an overwhelming vote against it”—and as Peirce pointed out, the
very question whether there is such a thing as a true belief "is a question of fact [that] experience alone"—not a priori arguments—"can settle" (CP 2.135, 137, 1902).

Haack has justifiably expressed concern about what Peirce called the problem of buried secrets, "that statements about the past which would not be settled however long inquiry were to continue must be deemed neither true nor false" (Haack 1998a, p.22). Peirce wrestled with this problem, trying out at least three different solutions to it at various times (Lane 2018a, chapter 6), and none of them is clearly adequate. Perhaps the best we can say at present is that the truth of such statements has no pragmatic bearing for us that we can envision or articulate at this time. But we should remember that we have not yet necessarily attained the maximum degree of clearness when it comes to our ideas of reality and truth. Each level of clearness is itself a matter of degree, and as Peirce wrote late in his life, there is no reason why the different levels cannot be further developed simultaneously with regard to the same idea (CP 8.218, 1910). So, for example, there is no reason why increasing clearness at the third level of our idea of reality should not lead us to improve our verbal definitions of the words "real" and "true" and thereby increase the second-level clarity of those ideas.

Finally, as Haack has admonished us, "that we have not yet devised a completely satisfactory and fully general statement of the Aristotelian Insight is no reason to conclude that it isn’t an insight at all" (1998a, pp.22–23). If our ideas of reality and truth are not yet maximally clear (and who’s to say that there even is an upper limit to clarity with regard to those, or any, ideas), what is clear, I hope, is that pragmatist accounts of those ideas must anchor truth to the world in order to avoid Russellian criticisms. With or without the Peircean supplement that I have suggested, Haack’s views of truth and reality do just that.

NOTES


2. Here Haack is alluding to Peirce’s account, most famously presented in 1878’s "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," of the three different degrees or "grades" of clarity that a given idea can have for a given thinker. If an idea of mine is clear to the first degree, then I have a strong sense of recognition—a subjective feeling of mastery—whenever I encounter the idea. If it is clear to the second degree, then I can provide a verbal definition of the word corresponding to the idea. Peirce’s so-called Pragmatic Maxim tells us what is required for a belief to be clear to the third degree of clarity: “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” (W 3:266, 1878). So if I have an idea that is clear to the third degree, I have a concept of the "practical bearings" of the things to which the idea applies. Peirce’s examples indicate that by “practical bearings” he had in mind the experiential consequences that would result were someone to interact with those things.

3. The dual-aspect account of truth that I attribute to Peirce is importantly different than the "double aspect theory of truth" that Mark Migotti (1998) attributes to him.

4. Haack describes Schiller’s concept of truth as being a matter of "practical working; it is human truth, incapable of coming into being without human effort and agency” (introduction to Haack 2006, p.44). And since Schiller’s pragmatism doesn’t divorce truth from reality, it makes not just truth but also reality dependent on us: “As truth is dependent on us, relative to our purposes, so is reality; facts are not discovered but selected, even made, by us” (ibid., p.45).

5. Cheryl Misak says she arrived at a view somewhat like Russell’s before learning that he had gotten there first (Misak 2016, p.111n18). Russell expressed the point like this: “In the absence of any standard of truth other than success, it seems evident that [on James’s account of truth] the familiar methods of the struggle for existence must be applied to the elucidation of difficult questions, and that ironclads and Maxim guns must be the ultimate arbiters of metaphysical truth” (Russell 1992 [1909], p.282; and he was not alone in seeing a connection between pragmatism and fascism. In an April 1926 interview with the Sunday Times of London, Benito Mussolini himself cited...
James’s pragmatism as an influence: “The pragmatism of William James was of great use to me in my political career. James taught me that an action should be judged rather by its results than by its doctrinal basis. I learnt of [sic] James that faith in action, that ardent will to live and fight, to which Fascism owes a great part of its success. . . . For me the essential was to act” (quoted in Perry 1935, v.2 p.575, and in Livingston 2016, p.35). A few months later Mussolini again cited James as an influence in an interview with New York Times Magazine (see Livingston 2016, pp.35, 179n55). As Livingston recounts, the later interview motivated Horace Kallen to interview Mussolini about James’s influence. But when Mussolini was unable to name a single work of James’s that he had read, Kallen “conclude[d] that the dictator ‘was clearly far more aware of William James’s name than his teachings’” (Livingston 2016, p.36; Livingston quotes from Kallen 1927, p.212). For more on the alleged influence of James’s pragmatism on Mussolini, as well as on its clear influence on the Italian pragmatists Papini and Prezzolini, see chapter 2 of Livingston 2016.

6. Elsewhere I have argued that one sort of success does play a role in Peirce’s account, but contra Misak, it is a very specific sort of success—success in dispelling doubt and permanently “fixing” belief. See Lane 2018a, pp.34–37, and Lane 2018b, pp.403–404.

7. Note the emphasis on would—were this aspect of his account to instead characterize truth in terms of what will be believed, it would be less realistic and thus tend toward willful pragmatism.

8. Although Peirce did on occasion describe a true belief as one that accords with the ultimate representation, he more frequently described it as one that accords with reality; and, after all, if it accords with the ultimate representation, then, on the assumption that what’s represented in the ultimate representation is reality, a true belief also represents reality.

9. As I have put the point elsewhere, “any account of truth that denies that truth amounts to representation of the real world is guilty of changing the subject, of providing an account of something other than truth” (Lane 2018a, p.50).

10. Peirce could not pragmatically clarify the idea of the real in a way that depends on the other aspect of his account of truth—the representative aspect—since that aspect is itself dependent on the idea of reality. See Lane 2018a, pp.42–43.

11. On Peirce’s view, reals that are not external are internal, items and events that are dependent on the thinking of some mind or other. For more on Peirce’s treatment of these and related concepts, see Lane 2018a, pp.1–7.

12. Here I am correcting a mistake I made when I wrote that on Peirce’s view a given “fact need not share a form with the proposition that represents it” (Lane 2018b, p.401). As I explain here, I now understand Peirce to hold that while a fact does share a form with a true proposition, that form is not one that obtains independently of how the fact might be represented. Atkins (2016, p.1176) quotes EP 2:304 and notes that Peirce is “not explicit about how facts and propositions are structurally isomorphic. Once we do understand how they are structurally isomorphic, we will find that Peirce has a fairly straightforward argument against the claim that there are facts beyond the ken of discovery and so truths beyond the ken of discovery.”

13. The full definition is: “A real state of things, as distinguished from a statement or belief; that in the real world agreement or disagreement with which makes a proposition true or false; a real inherence of an attribute in a substance, corresponding to the relation between the predicate and the subject of a proposition” (CD p.2112, 1889–1891). See CP 1.427, c.1896 for a lengthy treatment of fact as part of the triad quality/fact/law.

14. Peirce sometimes compares the image called to mind by a propositional predicate to a “composite photograph,” e.g.: “The predicate [of a proposition] is a word or phrase which will call up in the memory or imagination of the interpreter images of things such as he has seen or imagined and may see again. Thus, ‘gave’ is the predicate of the [proposition ‘Anthony gave a ring to Cleopatra’] and it conveys its meaning because the interpreter has had many experiences in which gifts were made; and a sort of composite photograph of them appears in his imagination” (CP 5.542, c.1902; see also CP 2.435, c.1893; CP 3.621, 1901; CP 2.317, EP 2:281, 1903; CP 7.634, 1903; CP 4.447, c.1903).
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