

Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 9

Naturalism: Peirce II, Quine

METHOD OF SCIENCE. After we discarded other ways of settling beliefs, what is left is to settle beliefs by reference to experience. This is what Peirce proposes, though the details are sketchy. We believe that there is the external world, though we cannot prove there is. Indeed, we should not have to prove it, since our use of senses assumes that there is something external to them. Because of that, doubt does not arise. If there is a 'dissatisfaction' with the assumption of the external world, it does not come from the fact of doubt. 18

The method is able to represent truth and falsehood. There is a possibility, that is, of a genuine disagreement between the practitioners of the method. That is not the case with other methods.

Question 1. Show that other methods exclude the possibility of disagreement.

CRITIQUE OF UNIVERSAL DOUBT. In an important fragment Peirce presents his famous critique of Descartes. Doubt cannot be initiated artificially. Simply putting a question mark on paper does not entail genuine doubt. Thus Descartes' starting point is a non-starter. Similarly, inquiry cannot start with absolutely certain propositions. That is not possible or even recommendable. Inquiry should start from the position free from actual doubt. This is because we have defined inquiry as an equilibrium where doubt is banished. Thus it is a superficial demand for our initial assumptions to be anything more than just that, being doubt free. 11

NATURALISM AND PHYSICALISM. Quine begins with a striking picture. A person is wholly part of the natural world. Knowledge of the world is generated by the irritations of the subject's surface, together with the subject's prior condition.

How can we know that this should be the right picture? Clearly because we know how the world generally operates, with molecules, light rays, and retinas. But this general knowledge, can we not subject it to a devastating philosophical critique, in the manner of Descartes? We cannot; for to question whether there is reality at all, rather than reality in this way or another, would be divorce the discourse about reality from its meaning. Our claims about the world cannot be dissociated from the evidence delivered by the senses. It is only through the engagement with sensory evidence that we learned to reason about the world.

Science, therefore, does not institute a break with common sense. It rather expands and clarifies it. To reject common sense altogether is to undermine the very standards of science that are supposed to be strengthened.

Now it is commendable that naturalism can be combined with common sense. It is, however, unclear how to interpret the content of common sense. If materialism and idealism (as in Berkeley) both derive their authority from common sense, the dispute cannot be settled by a further appeal to common sense.

LANGUAGE AND REALITY. We learn linguistic terms by evaluating the evidence, by getting attentive to contrasts available to our perceptions. This is the first indication of a world external to our senses. Also, this is a supposition that reality is prior to language, that a discourse should be able to 'capture' reality. As sophistication grows, so the boundary between language and reality is blurring. We know the world through the language and the concepts we possess. It is impossible to think of worldly features in separation from our concepts, terms available in our language. 4
5, 7

THEORY CHOICE. If a theory cannot be directly compared with reality (for that would presuppose access to the world independent of the theory), then how can we compare and choose between different theories? The answer is, by comparing their systematic features. One is simplicity: we prefer simpler theories. This, again, is not a standard unfamiliar to common sense. Science merely strengthens it, elevates it into a principle. 6