

The Importance of Being Earnest: Scepticism and the Limits of Fallibilism in Peirce *

Luciano Floridi

University of Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute

Invited paper, International conference *Peirce Study Seminar*, Hoger Instituut voor Wijsbegeerte, University of Leuven, 23-24 May, 1997 (forthcoming in the proceedings of the conference)

Jack: "Can you doubt it, Miss Fairfax?"

Gwendolen: "I have the gravest doubts upon the subject. But I intend to crush them. This is not the moment for German scepticism. Their explanations appear to be quite satisfactory, especially Mr. Worthing's. That seems to me to have the stamp of truth upon it."

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act III.

OPENING

The trouble with scepticism is that it is the kind of embarrassing company any thoughtful epistemology would rather be bidden farewell by than welcomed. That some critical philosophies show to have profited from a clever intercourse with sceptical doubts only reinforces this initial impression: epistemologists may fancy scepticism, but they inevitably end up marrying dogmatism. Thus, the most serious charge one can level at a theory of knowledge is not that of having passionately indulged in radical doubts in its prime, but of being less than completely faithful to its antiseptical vow once it has reached full maturity. The intellectual tension underneath this process is obvious: a theory of knowledge is expected both to take advantage of sceptical questions: in order to uproot itself from intellectual dullness and philosophy, in so doing, all the conceptual resources necessary to avoid to be taken in a trap by its own sceptical doubts. I am grateful to all participants to the Peirce Study Seminar, organised by the Institute for Philosophy, University of Leuven, 23-24 May 1997. I am in debt to Guy Debrock and Jaap van Brakel for their comments, which have prompted me to investigate further into Peirce's scientific fallibilism.

difficult skill consists precisely in being sufficiently critical without being utterly blinded by criticism. In philosophers such as Descartes, Berkeley or Hegel the dialectical tension, and the conceptual resources demanded to resolve it, are in the foreground and hence we can appreciate them almost immediately. In others, like Locke, Kant and Peirce himself, both tension and resources tend to lay in the background, not so much because they are felt to be less urgent, but rather because they come to be concealed from the reader's immediate view by logically subsequent issues and theories, sometimes only apparently more pressing. In Peirce's case, which interests us here most, the concealing feature is the profoundly anticartesian nature of his philosophy. Some preparatory investigation is therefore required to disentangle the sceptical tension from Peirce's criticism of Descartes' methodological doubt, and make it visible, on its own, with sufficient sharpness. What does Peirce mean by scepticism, apart from Cartesian methodological scepticism? The very way in which I phrase the question anticipates that there is indeed more than one sense in which Peirce speaks of sceptical theories. Having clarified as much, the next task then becomes to elucidate whether Peirce constantly shows a univocal and consistent attitude towards all types of scepticism. Is Peirce a downright antisceptic? Again, it will soon be manifest that the correct answer needs to be more qualified than it is usually deemed necessary. Once the tension is thus brought to light, a critical assessment of the resources devised to resolve it comes in order. We shall see that Peirce is, quite conclusively, a committed antisceptic in the most significant sense of the word—if Peirce's philosophy fails to qualify as antisceptical than everyone's does—but how far can Peirce's fallibilism be claimed to succeed in entirely divorcing itself from a sceptical outlook? That Peirce is adverse to almost every form of scepticism is a fact. That his fallibilism succeeds in taming the sceptical challenge without also being significantly tinged by it can be argued only on account of the metaphysical price his philosophy is ready to accept. It is a price so dear that apparently no other version of fallibilism is inclined to pay it in these days.

FIRST ACT: WHAT DOES PEIRCE MEAN BY SCEPTICISM?

Drawing a chronological table of the contexts, within Peirce's *Collected Papers* (henceforth referred to with the usual notation of number of volume and paragraph), where sceptical topics are either mentioned or discussed in a significant way is probably the best method to start clarifying the several different meanings that Peirce attaches to the word "scepticism".

The list of passages is far from being exhaustive, but the taxonomy is adequate to illustrate the various typologies. Each form of scepticism deserves now a brief comment.

1. **Cartesian doubt/faked scepticism.** This is an extreme form of scepticism which Peirce considers to be
 - 1.1. the spirit of Cartesianism
 - 1.2. not genuine, since it provides no positive, convincing reasons for really doubting specific classes of beliefs
 - 1.3. self-deceptive, for it is merely speculative but impossible to achieve
 - 1.4. useless and deceitful, because we seem to be challenging all our beliefs by a *fiat* while in fact, by generally casting doubt on all of them we do not seriously challenge any one
 - 1.5. only apparently progressive but truly conservative, since it is only a first step towards the re-acceptance of all our beliefs
 - 1.6. solipsistic, because it is not inter-subjective—it does not arise from the discussion with other members of the epistemic community nor from the epistemic intercourse with reality—but is infra-subjective, that is an intellectual solitaire, self-imposed, unnatural and, by definition, incapable of solution (see 2.3).
2. **Absolute scepticism**
 - 2.1. considers every argument and never decides upon its validity
 - 2.2. is not refutable, since it is based on the logical possibility of counterfactuals (5.327: “[...] nothing can be proved beyond the possibility of doubt” and “no argument could be legitimately used against an absolute sceptic.”)

- 2.3. although it is often accused of being self-contradictory, it is perfectly consistent
- 2.4. impossible (there are no absolute sceptics)
- 2.5. possibly different from Cartesian doubt in so far as the latter is considered a deceptive method (5.319: “I am neither addressing absolute sceptics, not men in any state of fictitious doubt whatever”)
- 2.6. a dialectical method (e.g. in Royce’s *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*), when it is employed to challenge the most fundamental beliefs.

As in the case of Cartesian hyperbolic doubt, Peirce considers absolute scepticism a fruitless and deceptive way of carrying on a philosophical investigation.

3. Constructive/moderate scepticism

- 3.1. scepticism is constructive if and only if it satisfies four conditions:
 - 3.1.1. it is based on sincere and real doubt
 - 3.1.2. it is aggressive towards established beliefs (it is a “masculine” form of scepticism [1.344]), especially when the latter have a nominalist nature (sceptics are the best friends of spiritual truth)
 - 3.1.3. it is fruitful, i.e. by challenging established beliefs it is a source of intellectual innovation and promotes inquiry, and
 - 3.1.4. it is tolerant and ready to acknowledge what it doubts as soon as the doubted element comes clearly to light
- 3.2. it represents the life of investigation, since when all doubts are set at rest inquiry must stop.

- 3.3. it is therefore one of the intellectual forces behind the advancement of knowledge, what can critically unsettle the system of beliefs (8. 43: “scepticism about the reality of things, - provided it be genuine and sincere, and not a sham, - is a healthful and growing stage of mental development.”) and support the Will to Learn [5.583].

4. Ethical scepticism

- 4.1. it is the pragmatic (i.e. ethical and religious) counterpart of Cartesian scepticism, a make-believe position. Men cannot doubt their beliefs at pleasure, let alone their moral values and certainties.

5. Anti-scientific and conservatory scepticism

- 5.1. means doubting the validity of elementary ideas
- 5.2. amounts to a proposal to turn an idea out of court and allow no further inquiry into its value and applicability
- 5.3. is a mendacious, clandestine, disguised and conservative variety of scepticism, which is afraid of truth. Since nothing goes then anything goes and tradition becomes the ultimate and only criterion of evaluation
- 5.4. obstructs inquiry and is to be condemned as anti-scientific by the fundamental principle of scientific method.

6. Nominalist, anti-realist scepticism

- 6.1. only nominalists indulge in anti-scientific scepticism (6.493: “Neither can I think that a certain action is self-sacrificing, if no such thing as self-sacrifice exists, although it may be very rare. It is the nominalists, and the nominalists alone, who indulge in such scepticism, which the scientific method utterly condemns”).

- 6.2. is akin to (5), since nominalists and anti-realists are ready to turn an idea out of court and allow no further inquiry into its applicability.

7. Theoretical blindness

- 7.1. to be a sceptic means to be blinded by theory and fall into a form of intellectualism of a Cartesian or Nominalist kind.

Even without recalling Peirce's famous critique of Cartesianism contained in his 1868 *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* papers, this schematic survey already suffices to show that, initially, Peirce's understanding of scepticism was closely coupled with his discussion of Cartesian epistemology, but that it became more and more articulated through the years, until it was fully absorbed within his technical vocabulary. From the analysis of Cartesian doubt a position is extracted which amounts to absolute scepticism and of which other forms of scepticism listed in 4-7 are further variations. With respect to absolute or Cartesian scepticism, there can be no doubts regarding Peirce's rejection. One only needs to recall that, for Descartes, the hyperbolic doubt is a means to clear the ground for static foundations of a new "dogmatism", a vital element in the internal monologue of the single mind and an essential step towards individualism and the subject's epistemic responsibility; whereas for Peirce a genuine form of doubt is a falsificationist means to keep the road of inquiry constantly open, a vital element in the deontology of scientific communication and an essential step towards the construction of a community of scientific inquirers less fallible than any of its members. The dynamic process of investigation, which permeates Peirce's whole philosophy, makes him aware of the importance and utility of a constructive form of scepticism. It is thanks to a radical form of doubt that in "The Fixation of Belief" we can move from the method of tenacity (dogmatically holding fast to one's beliefs), to the method of authority (deferring to someone else the right to assess the epistemic value of a belief), to the a priori method (the intra-subjective way of coming to the acceptance of a belief without taking into account

either reality or other people's minds), to the scientific method (the inter-subjective way of coming to an agreement about the acceptability of a belief, further constrained by reality). Inquiry is really prompted only by further genuine doubts of an external origin—Peirce defends an “externalist” theory of doubt on the basis of a psychological analysis which first identifies, rather controversially, doubt with surprise, but then correctly negates the possibility to give oneself a genuine surprise, see for example 5.443—and a constructive scepticism shows the importance of being earnest in the pursue of knowledge. It is now in view of the role played by genuine doubts that one may wonder whether Peirce, who is certainly not an extreme sceptic, may nevertheless be qualified as a moderate one.

SECOND ACT: IS PEIRCE'S PHILOSOPHY A MODERATE FORM OF SCEPTICISM?

Peirce rejects absolute scepticism as a methodology (Cartesian scepticism), as an anthropology (Pyrrhonian blessed state of ignorance), as an ontology (irreconcilable dualism, nominalism, anti-realism) and as an epistemology (indirect knowledge, dualism) but he appreciates it as a deontological stance, and when this praise is combined with his strong fallibilism it is easy to misunderstand him for a moderate sceptic, for some of the things that constitute his fallibilism may, at first sight, appear mere rewording of sceptical doctrines. Examples abound, so I shall limit myself to only a few classic quotations:

I will not, therefore, admit that we know anything whatever with *absolute certainty*. [7.108]

All positive reasoning is of the nature of judging the proportion of something in a whole collection by the proportion found in a sample. Accordingly, there are three things to which we can never hope to attain by reasoning, namely absolute certainty, absolute exactitude and absolute universality. We cannot be absolutely certain that our conclusions are even approximately true; for the sample may be utterly

unlike the unsampled part of the collection. We cannot pretend to be even approximately exact; because the sample consists of but a finite number of instances and only admits special values of the proportion sought. Finally, even if we could ascertain with absolute certainty and exactness that the ratio of sinful men to all men was as 1 to 1; still among the infinite generations of men there would be room for any finite number of sinless men without violating the proportion. The case is the same with a seven legged calf. [1.141] Now if exactitude, certitude, and universality are not to be attained by reasoning, there is certainly no other means by which they can be reached. [1.142]

Positive science can only rest on experience; and experience can never result in absolute certainty, exactitude, necessity or universality. [1.55]

On the whole, then, we cannot in any way reach perfect certitude or exactitude. We can never be absolutely sure of anything, nor can we with any probability ascertain the exact value of any measure or general ratio. This is my conclusion after many years of study of the logic of science. [1.147].

Again, we could easily extend the selection, but I take it to be already sufficient to make my point clear: out of its context, Peirce's fallibilism may look dangerously similar to a sceptical position. That it fails to qualify as one, however, is due to the fact that none of the following three theses, which a philosophy should endorse, at least as its implicit consequences, to count as sceptical, would be acceptable for Peirce, namely:

1. knowledge is unattainable
2. truth—as the ultimate description of the essence of the object under investigation—is unreachable, and
3. justification of a synthetic nature (i.e. not merely analytic) is impossible.

Peirce can reject (1), although he accepts that *infallible* and *certain* knowledge is unattainable, because he re-interprets scientific knowledge as a cognitive process of constant approximation and gradual convergence towards the ultimate truth. The precise features of such “convergent realism” are far from being utterly clear even in Peirce himself, but for our present tasks we may say that, for Peirce,

although human knowledge has a socio-historical basis and remains constantly perfectible, this is not equivalent to saying that scientific inquiry is not progressive nor cumulative. Peirce can reject (2), although he accepts to qualify truth as the regulative limit towards which knowledge is constantly proceeding, because he abandons an imagist conception of it. Ultimate truth is indeed unattainable but is not unapproachable. On the contrary, scientific truth is precisely what regulates the dynamic of scientific investigations from outside, while truth in a more ordinary sense—i.e. as qualifying ordinary statements and not understood as the last point of convergence of a perfect community of investigators—acquires a gradual nature in so far as it is translated in terms of increasing degrees of adequacy of knowledge to its own reference. Finally, Peirce can reject (3) because he accepts that justification is not a matter of single and rigid chains of inferences but of adaptable networks of supporting reasons, which can undergo modifications, usually improve but sometime can also worsen, without necessarily collapsing, thus abandoning the individualist approach, fostered by Descartes, in favour of social interaction. For Peirce, science provides probable statements and law-like generalisations which are improving indefinitely, almost as if to allow us a never-ending pleasure in scientific discovery; theories are progressive, cumulative and convergent in the long run, self-corrective and hence never rigidly established; they evolve from being plausible to being likely to being practically certain. As a result, Peirce's meta-interpretation of scientific knowledge is highly optimistic—our degree of ignorance is constantly decreasing through time—and could not be more distant from even a moderate form of scepticism.

THIRD ACT: IS PEIRCE'S FALLIBILISM SUCCESSFUL AGAINST SCEPTICISM?

Once Peirce's antiscepticism is singled out from its anti-Cartesian components and the several ways in which he understands a sceptical

position are seen to be leading to a plain rejection— with the only exception of an explicit appreciation of a deontological kind of scepticism, i.e. of a critical and constructive way of raising sincere doubts and fruitful questions—there still remains a fundamental problem to consider. Peirce’s epistemology is clearly not sceptical, but does his falsificationism have sufficient resources not just to withstand but to undermine scepticism? What are the grounds and the arguments that enable Peirce to reject scepticism? Although some of them are rather implicit, the antisceptical arguments put forward by Peirce’s fallibilist position seem to be reducible to a combination of the following four components: the ontological, the epistemic, the *consensus omnium* and the anthropological argument.

1) The ontological argument: there is an external reality affecting the mind.

That there is an external reality is shown, according to Peirce, by a phenomenological proof: the undeniable clash between mind and reality, which everyone is constantly experiencing and must be aware of. However, an initial dualism “mind vs. reality” (whose absence Peirce rightly believes to be the main shortcoming of Hegel’s idealism), would be welcomed by the sceptic, indeed it is a necessary condition for any form of scepticism. Both Peirce and the sceptic may agree on the presence of an overwhelming impression of independent “otherness”, felt by all subjects whenever they are dealing with external reality. This may not be under discussion. It is rather the possibility of knowing such external reality that raises epistemic problems. Peirce ontological realism then needs to be further reinforced by a theory of cognition and an appeal both to the *consensus omnium* argument and to the anthropological argument.

2) The epistemic argument: in having experience of the external reality the mind is directly affected in an informative and reliable way. Peirce’s “presentational” as opposed to “representational” position, can work as a form of direct realism, allowing Peirce to modify the initial dualism into a bridged dualism or, better still, a *bilateral monism* (this is largely Peirce’s terminology, cf. 5.607). The representationist holds that “[...] percepts stand for something behind them” while the

presentationist holds that “perception is a two-sided [i.e. bilateral] consciousness in which the percept appears as forcibly acting upon us, so that in perception the consciousness of an active object and of a subject acted on are as indivisible as, in making a muscular effort, the sense of exertion is one with and inseparable from the sense of resistance”. However, the fact that, according to a presentational theory of knowledge, an object can exist both as something in the world and as a perceptuum in the mind only helps to explain Peirce’s rejection of scepticism, does not justify it.

3) the *consensus omnium* argument: knowledge is a social enterprise (inter-subjectivity thesis) and truth is what the community of knowers will be able to agree upon if the inquiry is pursued for long enough (evolutionary thesis).

We know that the *consensus omnium* is precisely what Descartes fights (anti-traditionalism) and that, without further support, Peirce can employ it only as a negative constraint or a “bed test”: whatever inquirers sincerely disagree about still requires further investigation, so the *lack of consensus* is epistemologically significant. However, it is also obvious that all inquirers may be able to agree on a particular selection of scientific statements for as long as we may wish to suggest and yet still miss the truth, so the *presence* of an increasing *consensus* of all generations of inquirers *per se* may be significant but is very far from being conclusive (of course, this is just another way of formulating the problem facing inductive inferences). Thus, the epistemological value of the *consensus omnium* can be ultimately decisive only if the anthropological argument can be defended.

4) The anthropological argument: the pursue of knowledge is a positive, innate feature of all human minds, who have a natural instinct for guessing right corresponding to the intelligibility of the world.

For Peirce, and contrary to the sceptic, not only (a) scientific inquiry is the natural end of human nature¹—this, by itself, would not yet

¹Science “does not consist so much in *knowing*, nor even in ‘organised knowledge’, as it does in diligent inquiry into truth for truth’s sake, without any sort of axe to grind, nor for the sake or the delight of contemplating it,

count as an anti-sceptical argument— but (b) the constant increase in predictive success, manipulative control and explanatory power of science is tantamount to its empirical adequacy because the human “natural instinct for guessing right” is “strong enough not to be overwhelmingly more often wrong than right” (5.173, see also 5.174 and 5.181). Such an insight (Peirce also calls it *natural light*, or *light of nature*, or *instinctive insight*, or *genius*, cf. 5.604) is a kind of epistemic instinct or faculty of divining the ways of Nature. What justifies (b)? Peirce seems to have in mind three main reasons, for he holds that

1. (b) happens to be the case because of evolutionary history (based on the history of science) and the adaptive value of such an instinct (cf. 2.749-54, 6.418). It is a post-facto necessity, the result of evolutionary necessity of organic survival.
2. (b) can be the case because nature and mind do not differ sharply (7.220): “it is a primary hypothesis underlying all abduction that the human mind is akin to the truth in the sense that in a finite number of guesses it will light upon the correct hypothesis”. (For other restatements of the same point see for example 5.522 and 5.604).

but from an impulse to penetrate into the reason of things.” (1.43). The scientist is a man who “burns to learn and sets himself to comparing his ideas with experimental results in order that he may correct those ideas” (1.44). “It is not too much to say that next after the passion to learn there is no quality so indispensable to the successful prosecution of science as imagination. [...] Nothing but imagination can ever supply an inkling of the truth. [...] In absence of imagination phenomena will not connect themselves together in any rational way (1.46). And then in 1.80 Peirce stresses the fundamental importance of instinctive judgements, which he describes as an inward power not sufficient to reach the truth by itself but yet supplying an essential factor to the influences carrying the mind to the truth and equates it to Galileo’s “*lume naturale*”.

3. (b) ought to be the case if the desire to know is combined with a semiotic theory which recognises, as it should, that even the lack of information and the presence of mistakes can be the source of knowledge. This is why a community of inquirers is naturally led to generate knowledge in the long run. Science is self-corrective.

For all these reasons, Peirce's position appears to be very close to scholastic monism: as natural beings we have a fairly reliable way of entering into the world's secrets and the self-corrective nature of scientific inquiry is based on the openness of nature to the mind. If even chickens are endowed with an innate tendency toward a positive truth, there is no reason to think that this gift should be completely denied to man alone (cf. 5.591 and 5.604). Peirce's epistemological "continuism" or naturalism, in line with his anti-dualism, and his conception of a harmonic relation between mind and reality, appear more clearly when perceptual knowledge is under scrutiny. Our perceptual judgements are inevitable because uncontrolled. They are micro-inferences, but subconscious and automatic. A *percept* forces itself upon the mind and it is present as a *percipuum* in a perceptual judgement (5.54: "a judgement asserting in propositional form what a character of a percept directly present to the mind is"). It is reality's blow, and it is not believed or disbelieved, certain or uncertain, true or false, it is simply directly and inevitably experienced, although not passively, since it is subject to complex mental transformations. The inevitableness of percepts makes them indubitable, they cannot be called into question (5.116, 5.181: "perceptual judgements are to be regarded as an extreme case of abductive inferences, from which they differ in being absolutely beyond criticism"), but what is that justifies us in believing that such perceptual judgements capture the intrinsic nature of their references? That they are unconscious and indubitable, not subject to further criticism but forced upon us by reality does not mean yet that they are always epistemologically trustworthy. What makes them an initially reliable ground for knowledge is their relational nature: on the one hand, they are utterly objective because the perceptuum is just the percept as existing in the

mind, on the other hand, the mind is endowed with the innate capacity of taking full epistemic advantage of such percepta. Of course, to say that perceptual judgements are indubitable does not mean that they are necessarily infallible or incorrigible, and this is why the inter-subjective experience of a multitude of inquirers is crucial. The more individuals will test and confirm a particular experience the more unlikely error becomes, and this not because of a fallacious reliance on some elementary inductive reasoning, but because individuals, though fallible, have an absolutely crucial tendency to get things right.

CONCLUSION: WHAT PEIRCE'S ANTI-SCEPTICISM CAN TEACH US

Peirce's anti-scepticism appears to be based, in the end, on a strong metaphysical position, namely the postulation of a reliable communication between being and mind, and the rejection, as utterly unreasonable, of an unrecoverable, static dichotomy between man and a mechanised, soul-less universe, as if between the two there were a wall of silence which made reality unknowable and unintelligible. Of course, many "philosophical characters" could not disagree more deeply with such a view: the sceptic himself, the Kantian philosopher, the existentialist, and the relativist, to name only a few. I think they are right, but it is not with this particular problem that I wish to close this paper. In at least an important and common sense of the word "understanding", Peirce seems to be right in acknowledging that

[...] unless man has a natural bent in accordance with nature's, he has no chance of understanding nature at all (6.477).

He appears to believe that the history of science provides plenty of evidence to vindicate the presence of such a "natural bent". Peirce's metaphysical view of man's organic position in the world is what allows his fallibilism to be a version of realism—knowledge is increasingly more and more achievable and it is knowledge of the world in itself—rather than instrumentalism—knowledge works, and the world is at least compatible with scientific theories—and I take

this to be a most interesting suggestion contained in his anti-septicism. A fallibilism which does not attribute the source of its success to nature itself, e.g. by endorsing some theory of a “natural bent”, cannot be thoroughly faithful to its profession of anti-septicism. The presence of reality can assure only empirical restraint and hence practical reliability but not insightful comprehension of the object of knowledge and then true understanding. When lacking a metaphysical ground, versions of falsificationism such as Neurath’s, Popper’s or Quine’s are forced to abandon the initial assumption that reliable and inter-subjectively acceptable beliefs are actually capturing the intrinsic nature of their ontic counterpart. What has Neurath’s raft got to do with the sea, Popper’s pile house with the swamp, or Quine’s fabric/force field with the environment? Science becomes a systemic, holistic set of statements which, missing a firm and direct channel of communication with its external reference, also lacks a direct correspondence with nature. Without a strong metaphysics such as Peirce’s the view of a progressive, cumulative, converging and more and more adequately true science is no longer ontologically justified. Reality at most indirectly constrains but does not inform, and knowledge becomes a matter of signs not of indices (which cannot change), nor of icons (which are isomorphic). New weather means different flag, but the flag is a mere convention indicating the weather, it does not capture its nature. Fallibilist systems can be well structured, but lacking the assurance that mind and being are truly communicating they stand in front of the world as separate, constantly revisable manifold of laws and empirical statements. Their indexical components (Neurath’s protocols, Popper’s observations, Quine’s observation sentences) are the most basic, but because they too are revisable, though more hardly so, then, since we assume that their references remain stable, we must infer they are not really in touch with it. Science is linked with reality, but does not describe it as it is in itself. Without an anti-dualist principle, such as Peirce’s “natural bent” and his theory of direct cognition, the connection between science and reality may well be just one of constrained construction of a system of laws and experiential statements which may still be far

from capturing the essential nature of their references. Back to Peirce then? Not quite, for unfortunately a last problem remains. It is not by chance that fallibilism has recently developed towards a non-metaphysical and instrumentalist position. As Gwendolen would put it, the twentieth century may not be the moment for absolute scepticism, but it no longer time for medieval optimism either, for Peirce's and other similar views are far too intellectualist. We only need to recall his phenomenological method to be able to show, quite easily, that man is not so earnest to inquiry, let alone being naturally bent to know the world. Fallibilism cannot retreat to a metaphysical trench of a Peircean kind to escape its instrumentalist fate, it can only move forward towards a full acceptance of its constructionist nature. This is the direction towards which, more or less consciously, contemporary philosophy seems to be moving.