

## **Can Perceptions Justify Beliefs?**

### **Peirce's Prescient Reply to Davidson's Argument**

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*Abstract:* In "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," Donald Davidson argues that perceptions cannot justify beliefs because they lack the appropriate propositional structure. Nearly 80 years earlier, Peirce had a sense of this problem and, in 1903, developed a novel theory to resolve it. This essay is a brief explication of Peirce's solution in comparison and contrast with contemporary views.

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In "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," Donald Davidson raises an argument that continues to generate a considerable amount of controversy. The argument is:

- (1) The only thing that can justify a belief is something with the appropriate propositional structure.
- (2) Perceptions do not have propositional structure.

(3) Therefore, perceptions cannot justify beliefs.<sup>1</sup>

Varieties of conceptualism—such as the “bald” conceptualism of Sellars or the “hirsute” conceptualism of McDowell—reject (2). Various iterations of a theory of the Given—the traditional sense datum theory or Anil Gupta’s more recent theory of a hypothetical Given—reject (1). Davidson accepts the conclusion but tries to rob it of its force by claiming that perceptions nevertheless *cause* our beliefs and that our beliefs are justified by other beliefs we hold (hence, his appeal to coherence).

Over 80 years before Davidson’s article appeared, Charles S. Peirce was onto this problem.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, he articulates a unique position in response to it. Here I shall briefly state how claims Peirce makes in the Harvard *Lectures on Pragmatism* of 1903 constitute a reply to the problem.

First, Aaron Wilson (2012) has recently argued that on Peirce’s mature account of perception we do perceive concepts (or, as Wilson calls them, *generals*). If he is correct, it follows that (2) is false.

Now, it will immediately be objected that just because we perceive concepts it does not follow that perceptions have propositional structure. It is true that it does not

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<sup>1</sup> In his own words:

“It will promote matters at this point to review very hastily some of the reasons for abandoning the search for a basis for knowledge outside the scope of our beliefs. By ‘basis’ here I mean specifically an epistemological basis, a source of justification.

“... The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified.”

<sup>2</sup> That he was onto this problem is, I think, evidenced by his comments on the percept and perceptual judgment at (CP 7.619–630).

*directly* follow, but on Peirce's theory of the proposition it does follow. For on Peirce's view propositions do not require a copula<sup>3</sup> and the subject of a proposition is an index (a pointer) or a precept explaining how an index is to be had.<sup>4</sup> So, if I perceive the red of a ball (not just a red ball), then I at least perceive red to be a property of the ball and so perceive that *that red*, where *that* is a "pointer" to the ball and the copula is implicit in the term '*red*.' But, in that case, my perception does have propositional structure.<sup>5</sup> It is in this sense that Peirce's theory has similarities to conceptualism.

Second, however, it does not follow from a rejection of (2) that perceptions can justify beliefs, for they may lack the *appropriate* propositional structure. Indeed, Peirce's position requires him to admit that perceptions do not have the appropriate propositional structure to justify beliefs, for he claims that both perceptual judgments and percepts have the form of an abductive inference.<sup>6</sup> However, abductive inferences can only give us a reason to tentatively suppose or "to suspect" (EP 2.231) that a belief or hypothesis or true,<sup>7</sup> and tentative suppositions and suspicions are a far cry from justification.

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<sup>3</sup> Peirce points out that in languages like Old Egyptian, Arabic, and Greek, sentences need no copula (for example, in those languages one does not say "Smith is a butcher" but "Smith butcher"), so that "there is strictly no common noun.... [W]hat modern and medieval logicians call the *copula* of a proposition never received a name until the time of Abelard" (EP 2.220–21).

<sup>4</sup> "the subject of a proposition if not an index is a precept prescribing the conditions under which an index is to be had" (EP 2.168).

<sup>5</sup> It would also follow from Peirce's position that there is no interesting distinction between perception-as and perception-that.

<sup>6</sup> "Abductive inference shades into perceptual judgment without any sharp line of demarcation between them" (EP 2.227) and "the perceptive judgment is the result of a process...not sufficiently conscious to be controlled. ...If we were to subject this subconscious process to logical analysis we should find that it terminated in what analysis would represent as an abductive inference resting on the result of a similar process which a similar logical analysis would represent to be terminated by a similar abductive inference, and so on *ad infinitum*" (EP 2.227).

<sup>7</sup> This is nicely brought out in essays by Daniel Campos (2011) and Douglas Niño (2009).

Now, insofar as Peirce regards perceptions as having the form of an abductive inference, his position bears some similarity to that of Anil Gupta, who views the Given as a sort of argument form where a perceiver's view (concepts, beliefs, conceptions, etc.) and perceptions together yield a perceptual judgment. However, as just noted, abductive inferences can only give us a reason to tentatively suppose that a belief or hypothesis or true. In this respect, Peirce is in agreement with Davidson: perceptions cannot justify beliefs. It is also here that Peirce parts with both conceptualism and theories of the Given.

Third, the question now arises as to how our beliefs about the external world are justified, if they are not justified by our perceptions. The answer to that question hinges on Peirce's theory of reasoning. It can be briefly stated as follows:

- (A) Our perceptions—which, we have already seen, may well implicate judgments about what we perceive—are such that they “permit a simple theory of the facts” (EP 2.204). However, they do not *furnish* a theory of the facts. Those judgments are but hypotheses, abductions, about how the world in fact is.
- (B) We adopt, as regulative assumptions of inquiry, logical principles, such as the principle of bivalence and the principle that there is a simple theory of the facts. So, it cannot be true, for example, that something is both red and non-red.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cheryl Misak (2011) has defended the view that, for Peirce, bivalence is a regulative assumption. This is also the view of Kant (CPR, A572/B600–A574/B602).

(C) We deduce what would follow from our hypotheses in (A), were they true.

For example, if the ball is red, then if I hold it next to other red things, it will appear similar in color.

(D) We perform experiments, based on the deduction, to confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis. For example, we place the red ball next to tomatoes, apples, etc.

(E) Based on the experiment, we either adopt the hypothesis as probable or approximately true (an induction) or we reject it.

(A)–(E) is highly idealized, simplified, and need not be conscious. There may be times when bivalence fails (as with failed presupposition, vagueness, or propositions about the future), and deductions and experiments might be quite difficult to draw or design. The hypotheses in question may be complex theoretical matters, such as questions about the basic constituents of the universe. Also, the process above might occur without much thought, as when I see an object in front of me, reach for it, and fail to grab it, and so conclude it is farther away than it appears.

Now we can see how Peirce's position differs from Davidson's. First, Peirce does not think that perceptions *merely* cause our beliefs; rather, perceptions supply (or, perhaps better, contain) some of our beliefs in the form of perceptual judgments, as explained above. The perceptual judgment is not merely caused by the perception but interprets it. Second, those judgments are the “the starting-point[s] or first premiss[es] of all critical and controlled thinking” (EP 2:227). They are “first” in two senses. One, they are the foundations for our reasoning; they are what will *permit* a simple theory of the facts. Two, they are where our reasonings that *furnish* a theory of the facts begin. In

these senses, Peirce is a foundationalist—or, better, a quasi-foundationalist—as he regards our theories to rest on our perceptual judgments. Third (and this is why the “quasi-”), those first premises are mere hypotheses. They need to be confirmed in future experiments and experiences. Consequently, what matters for Peirce is not the coherence of our beliefs but the recalcitrance (or lack thereof) of our future experiences. It is those experiences that keep our beliefs from “frictionless spinning in a void,” as McDowell criticizes Davidson’s view.

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