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Peirce's Account of Assertion

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Para Tatá

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¿Qué gigantes? –dijo Sancho Panza.

–Aquellos que allí ves –respondió su amo– de los brazos largos, que los suelen tener algunos de casi dos leguas.

–Mire vuestra merced –respondió Sancho– que aquellos que allí se parecen no son gigantes, sino molinos de viento, y lo que en ellos parecen brazos son las aspas, que, volteadas del viento, hacen andar la piedra del molino.

–Bien parece –respondió don Quijote– que no estás cursado en esto de las aventuras: ellos son gigantes; y si tienes miedo, quítate de ahí, y ponte en oración en el espacio que yo voy a entrar con ellos en fiera y desigual batalla.

Don Quijote, Capítulo VII

Miguel de Cervantes

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RESUMO

Costumamos fazer asserções quando proferimos sentenças indicativas como "Está chovendo". Mas, não toda proferição de uma sentença indicativa é uma asserção. Por exemplo, quando dissemos "vou voltar amanhã", poderíamos estar fazendo uma promessa. O que é fazer uma asserção? C.S. Peirce argumentou que "asseverar uma proposição é fazer-se responsável pela sua verdade" (CP 5.543). O propósito do presente texto é interpretar a visão de Peirce sobre a asserção assim como examinar as razões que a suportam. Para cumprir esse propósito, primeiro reconstruo e examino o argumento que, em defesa da sua visão, Peirce propôs em (EP 2.140, 1903), (EP 2.312-313, 1904), e (CP 5.546, 1908). A continuação aponto para três aspetos constitutivos dessa visão, a saber, a asserção como um ato que envolve certa responsabilidade, a proposição como o que é asseverado, e a responsabilidade pela verdade como a responsabilidade de dar razões. Tendo em consideração esses três aspetos, passo a defender as seguintes teses: (1) Peirce concebeu a responsabilidade envolvida na asserção como uma responsabilidade *moral*. (2) Peirce pensou que as proposições são *types*. (3) Peirce interpretou "responsabilidade de dar razões" de modo *dialógico*. Para finalizar, apresento duas objeções à visão de Peirce sobre a asserção e as réplicas respectivas. Concluo que a visão de Peirce sobre a asserção é uma contribuição valiosa ao debate filosófico sobre a asserção.

Palavras chave: asserção, C.S. Peirce, proposições, semântica dialógica, pragmatismo

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SUMMARY

One usually makes assertions by means of uttering indicative sentences like “It is raining”. However, not every utterance of an indicative sentence is an assertion. For example, in uttering “I will be back tomorrow”, one might be making a promise. What is to make an assertion? C.S. Peirce held the view that “to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth” (CP 5.543). In this thesis, I interpret Peirce's view of assertion and I evaluate Peirce's reasons for holding it. I begin by reconstructing and assessing Peirce's case for such view as it appears in (EP 2.140, 1903), (EP 2.312-313, 1904), and (CP 5.546, 1908). Then, I continue by elaborating on three aspects of Peirce's view of assertion, namely, assertion as an act involving a certain kind of responsibility, the proposition as what is asserted, and responsibility for truth as a responsibility to give reasons. With respect to these three aspects, I argue for the following claims: (1) Peirce construed the responsibility involved in asserting as a *moral* responsibility; (2) Peirce held that propositions are *types*; and (3) Peirce was committed to a *dialogical* interpretation of “responsibility to give reasons”. Finally, I end by presenting two objections to Peirce's view of assertion and its corresponding replies. I conclude that Peirce's account of assertion is a valuable contribution to the philosophical debate on assertion.

Key terms: assertion, C.S. Peirce, propositions, dialogical semantics, pragmatism

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

The following commonly accepted abbreviations are used to refer to the standard editions of C.S. Peirce's works:

CP- *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Ed. by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, voll. 1-6. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931 – 1935; ed. by Arthur W. Burks, voll. 7-8. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958 (followed by volume and page numbers).

EP- *The Essential Peirce*. Ed. by Christian J.W. Kloesel and Nathan Houser, vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992; ed. by Peirce Edition Project, vol. 2. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998 (followed by volume and page numbers).

W- *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*. Ed. by Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982 – 2000 (followed by volume and page numbers).

MS- *The Charles S. Peirce Papers Microreproduction Service*, 30 reels, 3rd microfilm edition. Cambridge, MA: The Houghton Library, Harvard University, 1979.

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Introduction

This dissertation concerns C.S. Peirce's account of assertion. The noun "assertion" indicates a very common type of action. Suppose that Adriana and Joe are talking and she utters "Rio de Janeiro is to the north of São Paulo". There are many ways one might describe the act performed by Adriana in uttering this sentence. One might say that Adriana has affirmed, claimed or stated that Rio de Janeiro is to the north of São Paulo. These several ways of describing the act performed by Adriana convey the same type of speech act, namely, *asserting* that-so-and-so. Likewise, in different situations of everyday life, when speakers utter indicative sentences such as "Two plus two equals four" or "It is raining", they are usually performing acts of assertion.

However, one should observe that not every utterance of an indicative sentence is an act of assertion, for one can make several acts other than assertions by using indicative sentences, for example, promising, joking, practicing a language, rehearsing a line from a stage play, etc. Consider just two cases. On the one hand, consider acting. An actor on stage playing Polonius in *Hamlet* utters "Brevity is the soul of wit". Although he is uttering an indicative sentence, it is clear that he is not making an assertion. On the other hand, consider language

practicing. One may practice any language by uttering indicative sentences and not assert anything, for example, when one utters “La neige est blanche” to practice French pronunciation. I shall contrast these and similar cases with cases of genuine utterances of indicative sentences, such as when a historian utters “Napoleon was defeated in Waterloo”. I shall call the former cases “simulations”.

Now, granting the distinction between simulations and genuine utterances of indicative sentences, if one excludes all cases of simulation, one might ask the following question: Are all genuine utterances of indicative sentences assertions? It seems not. Consider two examples. Suppose Joe is waiting for Adriana to eat supper and he utters “Dinner is served”. Here Joe is not asserting anything but *requesting* Adriana to come to the table. Likewise, consider the reply of a father to his teenage son in the following conversation:

Son: I’m going out.

Father: You will come back home at 10:00 p.m.

In the above case, the father utters an indicative sentence, but he is not making an assertion; he is simply *commanding* his son to do something. Cases like these two show that there is not a one to one correspondence between utterances of sentences in the indicative mood and acts of assertion.

Hence, although assertion is a common type of action, the question concerning what qualifies a speech act as an assertion has no straightforward answer. In other words, it is clear that one usually makes assertions by using indicative sentences like "The cat is on the mat". However, if one takes into account that there are cases of simulation and that there is not a one to one correspondence between the genuine utterances of sentences in the indicative mood and acts of assertion, it becomes clear that the act of uttering an indicative sentence is insufficient to perform a speech act of assertion.

Accordingly, the following question is certainly not trivial: How should one understand the act of asserting? One might distinguish four broad kinds of answers to this question. Following McFarlane (2011), I shall formulate these four general views of assertion as follows:

1. To assert is to express an attitude (e.g. Bach & Harnish (1979)).
2. To assert is to make a move defined by its constitutive rules (e.g. Williamson (1996)).
3. To assert is to propose to add information to the conversational common ground (e.g. Stalnaker (1999)).
4. To assert is to undertake a commitment (e.g. Searle (2001); Brandom (1994)).

The above views have shaped the dialectics of the contemporary debate on assertion.¹ Notably, one can find the roots of (4) in Peirce's view that "to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth" (CP 5.543). My aim in this dissertation is to interpret Peirce's view of assertion and to evaluate his reasons for holding it. In other words, I intend to expound Peirce's account of assertion.

Why is the project of expounding Peirce's account of assertion worthwhile? I have found at least three good reasons lending importance and relevance to this project. I shall elaborate on them briefly.

First, the concept of assertion played a central role in Peirce's attempt to revisit his logic and philosophy of logic in his later philosophy. On the field of logic, Peirce major achievement, besides the introduction of quantifiers and bound variables in his 1895 paper "On the algebra of logic: A contribution to the philosophy of notation", is the system of Existential Graphs (EGs), partially introduced in his 1906 paper "Prolegomena to an apology for pragmatism". EGs is a set of diagrammatic systems comprising propositional logic (Alpha graphs), first order logic (Beta graphs) and modal logic (Gamma graphs).

¹ My purpose in enumerating these views is merely to sketch the dialectical situation of the contemporary debate of assertion and Peirce's influence on it. For a comprehensive exposition of the contemporary debate on assertion, see Brown & Cappelen (2011) and Pagin (2015).

According to Peirce, logicians draw EGs on a *sheet of assertion*, which represents the universe of discourse. The graph that logicians draw on the sheet of assertion constitutes a sign that can be asserted or, in Peirce's use of the term, a "proposition". In addition, Peirce offered a semantics for the universal and existential quantifier in terms of assertion dialogues (EP 2.168, 1903).

With respect to Peirce's philosophy of logic, it is relevant to mention that Peirce rethought crucial logical concepts in terms of assertion. For example, in an effort to reject psychologism in logic, he understood judgment as "assertion to oneself" (EP 2.140, 1903), and, as I have mentioned, he characterized the proposition neither as a psychological nor as an abstract entity but as "a sign capable of being asserted" (CP 8.337, 1904). Furthermore, in his mature philosophy, Peirce explained his celebrated pragmatic maxim, which Peirce regarded as a maxim of logic, in terms of assertion: "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" (CP 8.191).² Thus, given the role of assertion in Peirce's logic and philosophy of logic, assertion is arguably one of the most important notions within Peirce's later philosophy.

² See also (EP 2.332).

Second, as I have suggested, Peirce's view of assertion has been influential in the contemporary philosophical debate on assertion. For example, Searle holds that "asserting commits the speaker to the truth of the proposition asserted" (2001:147) and Brandom argues that "to treat a performance as an assertion is to treat it as the undertaking or acknowledging of a certain kind of *commitment* [...]" (1994:142). Views such as these, which focus on the normative effect of asserting, are called in the literature "commitment accounts" of assertion.³

Third, Peirce's account of assertion is one of the most neglected aspects of his philosophy. As far as I know, Chauviré (1979) is the only article directly concerning Peirce's account of assertion. In addition, no paper in the fifty years of publication history of *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* is entirely devoted to address Peirce's account of assertion. However, it is worth to mention that there are some indirect but remarkable treatments of Peirce's account of assertion, namely, Hilpinen (1982; 1992; 1995), Pape (2002), and Atkin (2011).

It becomes clear that the relevance of expounding Peirce's account of assertion is threefold. Firstly, it would help us understand better the later work Peirce developed on logic and philosophy of logic given the role of assertion

³ See also Searle (1969:29, 1979:12); Brandom (1983); Wright (1992); Marion (2012); MacFarlane (2005); and Watson (2004). For a compact introduction to the commitment account of assertion, see MacFarlane (2011:90).

within these core areas of his thought. Secondly, it would help us understand better the core idea behind contemporary commitment accounts of assertion since it involves an interpretation of Peirce's view and an assessment of Peirce's reasons for understanding assertion in terms of the undertaking of a certain kind of responsibility. Thirdly, it would constitute a first step towards a more comprehensive study of Peirce's account of assertion given the little attention Peirce's view of assertion has drawn among Peirce scholars.

So far, I have presented the problem and motivations behind the present thesis. In the remaining part of this introduction, I would like to outline its thematic core. I will proceed as follows. First, I will address some matters of interpretation as well as certain issues concerning the textual evidence, and, second, I will summarize the main thrust of each one of the chapters.

Let me return to Peirce's formulation of his view of assertion in (CP 5.543): "to assert a proposition is to make oneself responsible for its truth". The way Peirce phrased this formulation is revealing. Here he said of assertion that it is a kind of doing. Indeed, Peirce's use of the expression "to make oneself responsible" conveys that speakers are doing something when they assert a proposition, namely, they undertake a certain kind of responsibility. Peirce added the expression "for truth" in order to specify the sort of responsibility

involved in assertion. The driving thought behind this specification seems to be that if what one asserts are propositions, which are the primary bearers of truth and falsity, then the relevant sort of responsibility involved in an act of assertion must be that for the truth of the proposition asserted. Thus, so formulated, one can identify three aspects structuring Peirce's view of assertion: (i) assertion as a speech *act* involving a certain kind of responsibility,⁴ (ii) propositions as *what is assertable*, and (iii) undertaking a responsibility *for the truth* of a proposition as what qualifies the act of assertion.

However, in (CP 5.543) Peirce formulated but not accounted for his view of assertion. He introduced his account of assertion in three passages from unpublished manuscripts, namely, (EP 2.140, 1903), (EP 2.312-313, 1904), and (CP 5.546, 1908). Peirce's account of assertion, as it is presented in these passages, might be outlined as follows: Peirce inspected *paradigmatic* cases of assertion in order to identify in a perspicuous way the essential effect of performing an act of assertion in linguistic communication. He considered that the suitable candidates for paradigmatic assertions are *solemn* assertions. Accordingly, in each one of the aforementioned passages, Peirce inspected each one of the following cases

⁴ Here I use the term "speech act" in the sense of an utterance considered as an action, particularly with regard to its effect. This use of the term is clearly applicable to Peirce's view of assertion. As such, it has no direct relation to Austin's celebrated speech act theory (see Austin (1962)).

respectively: using the expression "You bet" (e.g. uttering "You bet that Joe was at the bar last night"); making an affidavit (e.g. writing the sentence "Joe was at the bar last night" in a document confirmed by oath); and taking an oath (e.g. uttering "I swear that Joe was at the bar last night" in court).

According to Peirce, his inspection shows that in each one of these cases the normative status of speakers change by solemnly asserting a proposition. This change consists in the acquisition of certain responsibility: whenever one asserts a proposition p , one thereby acquires a responsibility for the truth of p . What means "responsibility for truth"? For Peirce, being responsible for the truth of a proposition" means "being responsible to *give reasons* for the proposition" asserted⁵. I shall call this specific sort of responsibility "vindicatory commitment".

For Peirce, the outcome of his inspection lends enough plausibility to the claim that the acquisition of a vindicatory commitment is what qualifies a speech act as an assertion. For example, suppose that Maria asks, "Where is the cat?" and Tim replies, "The cat is on the sofa". In doing so, Tim has made a move in a dialogue for which he has acquired a certain duty, namely, Tim has committed himself to give reasons for the proposition that the cat is on the sofa. Indeed,

⁵ See (CP 5.546).

Maria is entitled to ask him, "How do you know?". In that case, he may defend such proposition by replying, "I have just seen the cat" or "Come here and look!".

As the above outline of Peirce's account of assertion shows, aspect (iii) of his view can be glossed as a vindicatory commitment. Yet it is not entirely clear what he means by "giving reasons". In addition, Peirce did not say much concerning (i) and (ii). With respect to (i), he showed that asserting a proposition involves a certain responsibility, but he did not specify the nature of such responsibility. With respect to (ii), he distinguished between a proposition and its assertion, and simply assumed that the proposition is what is assertable. Hence, although in the aforementioned passages Peirce offered good insights into the three aspects structuring his view of assertion, a clearer and elaborated picture of them requires a deal of interpretation.

As a result, I will structure the bulk of the present work according to these three aspects of Peirce's view of assertion and I will defend an interpretation of each one of them based on the textual evidence at hand. It is thus in order to note a relevant issue concerning this textual evidence: (EP 2.140), (EP 2.312), and (CP 5.546) concern topics other than assertion. As a result, Peirce made compact, almost *en passant*, comments on assertion in all three manuscripts. In order to

compensate for the absence of an elaborated and unified text in which Peirce fleshed out his account of assertion, I followed the common practice in Peirce scholarship of selecting additional passages as supplementary textual evidence. The criterion I used to select such evidence is chronological: all passages belong to Peirce's later philosophy, which may be roughly dated between the years 1902 to 1914.

Lastly, I turn to the structure of this thesis and the interpretation of Peirce's view of assertion I will defend. The aim of Chapter 1 is to reconstruct and discuss Peirce's account of assertion as it is presented in (EP 2.140), (EP 2.312), and (CP 5.546), which constitutes the main textual evidence available on this matter. In section 1.2., I discuss and assess Peirce's methodological approach to the question concerning the nature of assertion. In section 1.3., I discuss and elaborate on Peirce's inspection of three paradigmatic cases of assertion. Finally, in section 1.4., I assess the outcome of Peirce's inspection, which is that assertion is characterized by the undertaking of a certain kind of responsibility (i.e. to assert a proposition p is to commit oneself to vindicate p), and I set the agenda for the next chapters by distinguishing three aspects of Peirce's view of assertion that require further elucidation, namely, (i), (ii) and (iii).

The aim of Chapter 2 is to elaborate on (i). Peirce held that assertion is an act involving a certain kind of responsibility. Here “responsibility” has at least two possible interpretations. In the first sense of “responsibility”, one is responsible in virtue of performing an act of assertion because such act is considered either acceptable or unacceptable to most members of a society. In the second sense of “responsibility”, one is responsible in virtue of performing an act of assertion because asserters are *moral* agents. I shall call these two interpretations the conventional interpretation and the moral interpretation, respectively.

One should note that both interpretations assume that Peirce considered the act of assertion from the perspective of its effect in linguistic communication and, as a result, he came to the view that performing an assertion essentially involves the overt undertaking of a responsibility on the part of the speaker. The point of disagreement between these interpretations concerns Peirce’s view of the nature of the responsibility involved in asserting.

The conventional interpretation contends that Peirce construed it as a conventional responsibility while the moral interpretation contends that Peirce construed it as a moral responsibility. Based on the textual evidence found in (CP 5.546, 1908), which shows that Peirce held that one is responsible in virtue of

asserting a proposition because one is morally liable for the harm one could cause to one's listener if the proposition one asserted is false, I will defend a moral interpretation.

In section 2.2., I clarify the sense of the conventional interpretation and the moral interpretation of responsibility. In section 2.3., I argue for the claim that Peirce was committed to a moral interpretation. In section 2.3., I make some qualifications regarding the plausibility of this claim.

The goal of Chapter 3 is to elaborate on (ii). Here I attempt to understand Peirce's claim that propositions are signs capable of being asserted. In particular, I contend that Peirce meant by this claim that the criteria of identity of propositions depends on its potential assertion. Peirce thought that propositions, *qua* signs, are types. If Joe asserts that Adriana is clever, he is predicating of Adriana certain characteristic, namely, that she has a quick-witted intelligence. The main thrust of Peirce's view of propositions as types is that predication is a type of act: if Joe performs an act of assertion by means of uttering the sentence "Adriana is smart", he is producing a token of a type, namely, the type of action of applying the predicate "smart" to Adriana. For Peirce, such "propositional act-type" is the proposition that Adriana is clever.

Yet, Peirce thought that propositions, so understood, have no existence: every type requires tokens. As such, propositions are tied to speech acts, in particular, acts of assertion. Peirce explained the intimate relation between propositions and assertions in the following terms: asserting a proposition *hic et nunc* relates to certain actions that would lead the speaker and the listener to identify what the speaker is talking about and to determine whether or not what the speaker is saying about it applies. As such, propositions are *assertable* act-types. I base my case for this contention on (EP 2.311-312, 1904), (CP 2.357), (CP 2.292, 1902), and (EP 2.168).

In section 3.2., I introduce Peirce's view of the proposition as a sign. Peirce meant by the word "sign" a triadic relation of the form "x is sign of y to z", where x ranges over sign-vehicles (i.e. a sign's physical form such as a sound, a printed word, an image, etc.), y ranges over "objects" (i.e. the members of the universe of discourse, which is specified by the context of utterance), and z ranges over "interpretants" (i.e. what is interpreted of the object by means of the sign-vehicle). Consider, for example, Dafoe's Robinson Crusoe and the footprint in the sand. The footprint is a sign-vehicle of its object, which is the person who made the footprint, and the interpretant is what is interpreted of the object by means of the footprint. Naturally, Crusoe interpreted the footprint as sign of the existence

of a human being, and thus he worried that “someone else was on the island”. Following Peirce’s view of the sign, I distinguish three aspects of propositions, namely, propositions as sign-vehicles, propositions as being about something that is signified, and propositions as signifying elements. In the succeeding sections of this chapter, I elaborate on these three aspects.

In section 3.3., I show that Peirce held that propositions *qua* signs are types. Then, I elaborate on the type-token distinction as applied to propositions. In section 3.4., I address some aspects of the relation between propositions and whatever it is that they are *of* or *concern* in virtue of being used assertoric practice. Finally, in section 3.5., I explore the intimate relation between propositions and assertability according to Peirce.

In Chapter 4, I elaborate on (iii). Here I attempt to understand Peirce’s construal of “responsibility for truth” as a vindicatory commitment by tackling the following question: How is one expected to honor one’s responsibility to vindicate a proposition? I will defend that Peirce held a *dialogical* interpretation of “vindicatory commitment”. One can conceive a dialogue between a speaker and a listener as a succession of moves. Each move consists in performing a speech act, for example, questioning or asserting.

Accordingly, the *dialogical* interpretation of “vindicatory commitment” hinges on two views: (1) the relation between the speaker and the listener is a symmetrical relation, and (2) the speaker and the listener have a first-person and second-person perspective respectively. My contention is that Peirce attempted to understand the notion of vindicatory commitment in terms of the speaker’s duty to give reasons and the listener’s right to ask for reasons. This view does justice to Peirce’s idea that the responsibility involved in assertion is not an all-or-nothing matter: assertion, as a socially normative act, can be accompanied by challenge and retraction. I base my case for this view on Peirce’s comments on quantifiers in (CP 2.523), (CP 2.453), and (EP 2.168).

In section 4.2., I will outline Peirce’s dialogical semantics for the quantifiers. In section 4.3., I will clarify further the import of the implicit rules governing the correct assertoric use of quantified sentences by considering two examples given by Peirce. In doing so, I will show that (1) and (2) follow from Peirce’s dialogical semantics for the quantifiers. Finally, in section 4.4., I will elaborate on Peirce’s view of the relation between assertion, so understood, and truth.

In Chapter 5, I present two objections to Peirce’s view of assertion. In section 5.2., I introduce the first objection, which is due to Pagin (2004).

According to Pagin, the assertoric utterance of an explicit performative sentence cannot substitute the assertoric utterance of an indicative sentence in inference. For example, according to Pagin, the assertoric utterance of “I commit myself to the truth of the proposition that Rome is to the north of Naples” cannot substitute the assertoric utterance of “Rome is to the north of Naples” in the inference “Rome is to the north of Naples. If Rome is to the north of Naples, then Rome is to the north of Sicily. Therefore, Rome is to the north of Sicily” in a truth-preserving way. As a result, he concludes that views of assertion such as that of Peirce are inadequate: although explicit performative sentences expressing a commitment to the truth of a proposition should count as assertions, they do not work as assertions in inference. In section 5.2.1., I reply to this objection by using Peirce’s distinction between a proposition and its assertion as well as Peirce’s view of propositions. In short, I argue that in uttering “I commit myself to the truth of the proposition that Rome is to the north of Naples” and “Rome is to the north of Naples”, one can produce two different tokens of the same proposition-type.

In section 5.3., I introduce the second objection. MacFarlane (2011) argued that if one understands “responsibility for truth” in terms of the notion of vindicatory commitment, one can find cases in which one undertakes the duty to

vindicate a proposition but one does *not* assert such proposition. For example, it seems that a lawyer who commits to vindicate the innocence of a client does not assert that the client is innocent. Accordingly, he suggests that the notion of vindicatory commitment is insufficient to characterize the speech act of assertion. In section 5.3.1., I use Peirce's dialogical interpretation of vindicatory commitment to reply to this objection. In short, I will argue that the case of the defense lawyer might be one of assertion and disbelief.

I conclude that Peirce's idea of understanding assertion in terms of its normative effect promises to shed light on the distinctive character of assertoric acts. I note that Peirce's account of assertion does not amount to something like a proof that the picture of assertion it delivers is correct. It rather shows how to understand assertive acts based on the simple idea that they have a particular normative effect on the speaker.

Chapter 1

What is to make an Assertion?

1.1. Introduction

Suppose that Helen asks Maria for something to drink, and Maria utters the sentence "There is a bottle of beer in the freezer". By means of uttering this sentence, Maria is asserting that there is a bottle of beer in the freezer. Yet, what exactly one means by saying that Maria is *asserting* that-so-and-so? In general, what one is *doing* when one asserts a proposition? Peirce's answer to this question is that the act of asserting a proposition consists in making oneself responsible for its truth. In the present chapter, I will introduce Peirce's account of assertion as it is presented in (EP 2.140), (EP 2.312-313) and (CP 5.546).

Accordingly, I begin section 1.2. by presenting how Peirce tackled the question concerning the nature of assertion. In short, Peirce's methodological approach to discern the feature that qualifies a speech act as an assertion consists in inspecting paradigmatic cases of assertion, namely, solemn assertions such as taking an oath. Then, I continue by clarifying why Peirce took solemn assertions

as paradigmatic cases of assertions and evaluating the cogency of his methodological approach.

In section 1.3., I aim to reconstruct Peirce's inspection of three paradigmatic cases of assertion. The rationale for this reconstruction is twofold. Firstly, it explains how Peirce came to his view of assertion. Secondly, it displays the main elements structuring Peirce's view of assertion in a perspicuous way.

Finally, in section 1.4., I discuss the outcome of Peirce's inspection, which is that the most prominent feature of asserting is its normative effect on the speaker: whenever one asserts a proposition p , one undertakes a responsibility to do something, namely, one makes oneself responsible to give reasons. According to Peirce, such feature is what qualifies the speech act of assertion.

1.2. Peirce's methodological approach

Peirce thought that the adequate methodological approach to identify the characteristic feature of the speech act of assertion is inspecting paradigmatic cases of assertion. Peirce first introduced this approach in the *Harvard Lectures*: "Now it is fairly easy problem to analyze the nature of *assertion*. To find an easily dissected example, we shall naturally take a case where the assertive element is magnified,-a very formal assertion, such as an affidavit" (EP 2.140). A year later,

in “Kaina Stoicheia”, written in 1904, Peirce introduced this approach in the following way: “As an aid in dissecting the constitution of affirmation I shall employ a certain logical magnifying glass that I have often found efficient in such business” (EP 2.312). Finally, in an untitled manuscript from 1908, which constitutes Peirce’s most extensive and lucid discussion of assertion, he used this approach one last time:

What is the nature of assertion? We have no magnifying-glass that can enlarge its features, and render them more discernible; but in default of such an instrument we can select for examination a very formal assertion, the features of which have purposely been rendered very prominent, in order to emphasize its solemnity. If a man desires to assert anything very solemnly, he takes such steps as will enable him to go before a magistrate or notary and take a binding oath to it. (CP 5.546)

The above textual evidence suggests that Peirce’s methodological approach to the question concerning the nature of assertion seeks to “magnify” or display the main features of the act of assertion as clearly as possible by inspecting cases of *solemn* assertion. Indeed, in each of the aforementioned passages, Peirce continued his exposition by inspecting each of the following cases of solemn

assertion, respectively: the use of the vernacular phrase “you bet”, making an affidavit, and taking an oath.

Why Peirce took *solemn* assertions as natural candidates for paradigmatic cases of assertion? Solemn assertions are severe and dignified speech acts performed in accordance to public standards of correction. For example, suppose that you ask someone on the street “Is Mario’s Restaurant on Arthur Avenue?” and the person replies “You bet it is”. It would not be difficult for you to evaluate whether this person asserted correctly or incorrectly once you get to Arthur Avenue. Given the familiarity and robustness of the cases selected by Peirce, it becomes clear that the driving thought behind taking solemn assertions as paradigmatic assertions is that they are more suitable for examination than ordinary assertions. According to Peirce, solemn assertions are enhanced assertions, as it were.

Nevertheless, Peirce not just held that solemn assertions are more suitable for examination than ordinary assertions. He went a step further by also holding that a rigorous inspection of cases of solemn assertion is enough to identify perspicuously the distinctive feature of assertoric acts. In other words, Peirce’s approach to the question concerning the nature of assertion is rooted on the

following methodological view: if one inquires into the essential effect of making a solemn assertion, one might understand the distinctive character of the speech act of assertion. Thus, the aim of Peirce's approach is to understand the meaning of "assertion" by inquiring the import of the act itself instead of attempting to reach an adequate definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.⁶

However, at this point the issue concerning the cogency of Peirce's methodological approach arises. If Peirce held that inspecting paradigmatic cases of assertion is sufficient to identify the distinctive feature of assertoric acts, then he assumed that ordinary assertions sufficiently resemble its paradigms, namely, solemn assertions. What lends plausibility to this assumption? Peirce did not consider this question. However, the image of a "magnified" or "exaggerated" assertion gives us a good hint on where to stand regarding this assumption. Since the cogency of Peirce's inspection hinges on such assumption, I shall examine it before introducing Peirce's inspection of three paradigmatic cases of solemn assertion.

⁶ As Hilpinen remarks, Peirce's methodological approach constitutes an interesting alternative to "the attempts to characterize concepts by necessary and sufficient conditions: the latter method has often prompted philosophers to be excessively concerned about 'difficult' and borderline cases, which has sometimes hampered fruitful philosophical theorizing" Hilpinen (1995:274).

Let me begin by briefly elaborating on the meaning of Peirce's assumption that ordinary assertions resemble solemn assertions. Suppose, for example, that Helen utters the following sentences:

(1) I swear that Louie was lecturing when the murder took place.

(2) I claim that Louie was lecturing when the murder took place.

Now, if the utterances of (1) and (2) constitute different ways of performing the same speech act, namely to *assert* that Louie was lecturing when the murder took place, then (1) and (2) sufficiently resemble each other. How one can show the plausibility of the claim that the utterances of (1) and (2) constitute different ways of performing the same speech act?

Under close examination, it is possible to discern that Peirce's suggestion that solemn assertions are magnified assertions has a linguistic counterpart. Verbs such as "swear" and "claim" belong to the category of assertive verbs. Some English verbs that function as assertive verbs are: assert, affirm, state, inform, report, predict, remind, assure, and certify.⁷

Yet there is a distinction between assertive verbs concerning the strength of their asserting. Indeed, verbs like "testify" and "swear" are strong assertive

⁷ For an extensive list of assertive verbs, see Searle and Vandervaken (1985). See also Hooper (1975) for a lucid treatment of assertive verbs from a linguistic point of view. It is worth to notice that Hooper uses the notion of "degree of commitment" to characterize assertive verbs.

verbs while verbs like “claim” and “maintain” are normal assertive verbs. The assertive element of the former verbs is “very prominent”, as Peirce said, while the assertive element of the latter verbs is moderate but sufficiently conspicuous.⁸ It becomes clear that (1) is a case of solemn assertion and (2) is a simple case of assertion. In addition, it is clear that a solemn assertion like (1) is stronger than an ordinary assertion like (2). In other words, testifying is a stronger mode of asserting than claiming.

In the light of this linguistic evidence, it is plausible to conclude that although there is a distinction between assertive verbs concerning the strength of their asserting, all assertive verbs constitute different ways of making assertions. Hence, it is plausible to assume that ordinary assertions sufficiently resemble its paradigms.

I should clarify that I am not claiming that Peirce had in mind this exact line of argument for the assumption that ordinary assertions resemble solemn assertions. Rather, I claim that the above textual evidence, in which one finds Peirce using an image of solemn assertions as exaggerated assertions, makes such line of argument adequate to support this assumption.

⁸ Of course, it is possible to recognize “weak” assertive verbs such as “conjecture”, “hypothesize”, etc., in which the assertive element is smaller than in normal assertive verbs, but no smaller for being unnoticed.

According to the above considerations, one can gloss Peirce's methodological approach concerning the question about the nature of assertion as follows: one performs speech acts of assertion by means of using assertive verbs. One should note, though, that there is a difference between solemn assertions and ordinary assertions. In performing a solemn assertion, one employs a *strong* assertive verb. By contrast, in performing an ordinary assertion, one employs a normal assertive verb. In spite of this difference, it is clear that solemn assertions and ordinary assertions sufficiently resemble each other. Solemn assertions are enhanced assertions, as it were, because their features are intended to be perspicuous as required by their public use. Thus, it is sufficient to inspect cases of solemn assertion in order to identify the characteristic effect of assertion.

So far, I have clarified why Peirce took solemn assertions as paradigmatic cases of assertions and I have evaluated the cogency of his methodological approach. I shall turn now to Peirce's inspection of three cases of solemn assertion.

1.3. Peirce's inspection of paradigmatic cases of assertion

1.3.1. Case 1: Making an affidavit

In the manuscript "Koina Stoicheia", Peirce addressed *en passant* the question concerning the nature of assertion. He inspected a form of solemn assertion, making an affidavit, in order to specify the feature that qualifies a speech act as an assertion.⁹ He wrote:

Imagine, then, that I write a proposition in a piece of paper, perhaps a number of times, simply as a calligraphic exercise. It is not likely to prove dangerous amusement. But suppose I afterward carry the paper before a notary public and make an affidavit of its contents. That may prove to be a horse of another color. The reason is that this affidavit may be used to determine an assent to the proposition it contains in the minds of judge and jury;-an effect that the paper would not have if I had not sworn to it. For certain penalties here and hereafter are attached to swearing to a false proposition; and consequently the fact that I have sworn to it will be taken as a negative index that it is not false. (EP 2.312)

⁹ In his 1843 book *Questions and Answers on Law*, Kinne characterizes an affidavit as follows: "An affidavit, generally speaking, is an oath in writing sworn before some person who hath authority to administer such oath. [...] Affidavits ought to set the matter of fact only, which the party intends to prove by his affidavits; [...]" Kinne (1843:13).

Peirce distinguished here between writing a sentence as a calligraphic exercise and making an affidavit by means of using such sentence. This distinction is just a case of the general distinction between merely uttering a sentence, for example, as a means for practicing calligraphy, and asserting that so-and-so by means of uttering such sentence. By “utterance”, I mean any spatio-temporal item by means of which a speaker makes a speech act, in particular, an act of assertion.¹⁰ This may be a vocalization (i.e. an oral utterance), or an inscription (i.e. a written utterance).¹¹ What is the import of Peirce’s distinction?

The case Peirce considered above attempts to show that there is an essential difference between merely uttering a sentence and uttering such sentence *as a means for* asserting something. According to Peirce, writing down a sentence in a piece of paper has no effect in linguistic communication while making an affidavit has a clear effect on the normative status of its performer (i.e. the performer of an affidavit becomes responsible for the truth of a proposition). Thus, the identity criteria of the act of writing down a sentence in a

¹⁰ In what follows, I will mainly use the terms “speaker” and “listener” to refer to the performer of an assertion and the addressee of that assertion, respectively. However, Peirce uses several other terms as synonymous to “speaker” and “listener”. Thus, depending on the context, I will use as synonymous of “speaker” the terms “asserter” and “utterer” and as synonymous of “listener” the terms “hearer”, “addressee” and “interpreter”.

¹¹ It also includes a physical gesture or sequence of gestures as in sign languages. For example, the hand signals used by commandos to indicate the position of the enemy, etc. For this sort of case see MacFarlane (2011).

piece of paper and the act of making an affidavit by means of such inscription are different. By "identity criterion", I mean the standard by which one judges the identity of an act. Let me elaborate on this point by way of an example.

Suppose that Helen utters the sentence "Socrates loves Xanthippe". In uttering this sentence, it is clear that she is articulating a sentence formed of words in the English language and using such sentence to assert that Socrates loves Xanthippe. Although in making such assertion she thereby utters a sentence, the identity criteria of these acts are different. Helen can perform the same act of assertion in the performance of two different utterance acts if she utters either "Socrates loves Xanthippe" in English or "Sócrates ama Xântipe" in Portuguese. Moreover, this may happen in the same language. For example, suppose Helen uses synonymous sentences such as "Socrates loves Xanthippe" and "Xanthippe is loved by Socrates" to perform the same act of assertion. Furthermore, an utterance act can be performed without performing an act of assertion. For example, when one writes the sentence "Socrates loves Xanthippe" as a calligraphic exercise like in Peirce's example.

The fact that utterances and assertions have different identity criteria motivates the introduction of the distinction between assertoric acts and utterance acts. An utterance act consists simply in the utterance of a linguistic

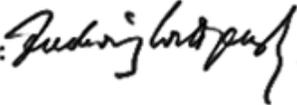
expression. I take that the textual evidence just discussed lends plausibility to the claim that Peirce entertained this distinction.

I return now to the passage. Granting the distinction between utterance acts and assertoric acts, it is clear that the act of writing a sentence has no effect *per se*. It only provides a means of asserting something. Thus, Peirce's main point seems to be that the act of making an affidavit, in contrast with the mere act of writing a sentence, essentially involves a responsibility for the truth of a proposition on the part of its performer.

Performers of affidavits acquire such responsibility because they overtly endorse and recommend propositions by means of performing those acts. Peirce claimed that making an affidavit generates *assent* to the proposition asserted. By "assent", Peirce meant "[...] an act of the mind by which one endeavors to impress the meaning of the proposition upon his [the addressee's] disposition, so that it shall govern his conduct, including thought under conduct [...]" (EP 2.278). Accordingly, if one assents to a proposition, one is disposed to use it in practical reasoning and action as would be manifested in suitable circumstances. Since believing a false proposition can derive in negative consequences for cognition and action, endorsing and recommending a proposition has a clear effect on one's normative status, for one becomes accountable in case the

proposition asserted turns out to be false.¹² Let me elaborate on this point by way of an example.

Consider a child custody case. John Doe, a social worker, is appointed to evaluate the parental skills of Bill Smith, a father fighting the joint custody of his children. In the presence of Smith's attorney, John Doe makes the following affidavit:

AFFIDAVIT	
I, John Doe, declare:	
A. That I am a licensed independent social worker.	
B. That Bill Smith was referred to me for an assessment of his parental skills.	
C. That I saw Bill Smith interacting with his children.	
E. That Bill Smith appears to have exceptional parenting skills.	
F. That unsupervised weekend visitations would be appropriate in this case.	
Signature:	
Sworn before me, Lionel Hutz, on February 18th, 2014.	

The judge allowed Smith to visit his children on weekends without supervision. Evidently, the judge assented to the propositions Doe asserted and made his decision based on them. Suppose now that Doe did not see Bill Smith interacting

¹² In Chapter 2, I will clarify the sense in which an asserter is accountable in virtue of asserting a proposition.

with his children. Doe made an incorrect assertion and is thereby accountable for the negative consequences the decision of the judge may have for Smith's children.

As this example illustrates, making an affidavit is an act that can be evaluated either as correct or incorrect. One incorrectly makes an affidavit if one states a false proposition. And there are penalties for those who make affidavits in case the proposition asserted turns out to be false, for addressees might be negatively affected if they assent to false propositions. As Peirce suggested, this is why one presumes that those who make affidavits are making correct assertions.

Let me recapitulate. One can draw two main points from Peirce's inspection of making an affidavit. The first point is that there is a distinction between utterance acts and assertoric acts. The former kind of acts has no consequences for their performers. By contrast, the latter kind of acts has a clear effect: in making an affidavit, one generates assent one's listeners and, in turn, assent relates to practical reasoning and action. The second point is that asserters are accountable for the negative consequences ensuing in case the propositions they assert turn out to be false. Thus, in making an affidavit, one acquires an overt responsibility for the truth of what one says.

1.3.2. Case 2: The use of the expression “You bet”

In the first of the *Harvard Lectures* on pragmatism, delivered in the spring of 1903,

Peirce wrote:

What is the difference between making an assertion and laying a wager. Both acts whereby the agent deliberately subjects himself to evil consequences if certain proposition is not true. Only when he offers to bet he hopes the other man will make himself responsible in the same way for the truth of the contrary proposition; while when he makes an assertion he always (or almost always) wishes the man to whom he makes it to be led to do what he does. Accordingly, in our vernacular “I will bet you so” is the phrase expressive of a private opinion which one does not expect others to share, while “You bet__” is a form of assertion intended to cause another to follow suit. Such them seems at least in a preliminary glance at the matter to be a satisfactory account of assertion. (EP 2.140)

Here Peirce putted forward a comparison between asserting by means of using the expression “you bet”, followed by an indicative sentence, and wagering.¹³ An assertion is similar to a wager in respect to the negative consequences ensuing if

¹³ I will clarify the sense of the expression “you bet” in what follows. However, for the sake of clarity, I shall mention from the outset that one should not conflate Peirce’s use of the expression with the idiom “You bet” as it is used in US English as an informal response to “Thank you”.

the proposition at stake in each case turns out to be false. For example, suppose that a soccer match between Brazil and Italy is about to take place. Helen wagers against Italy and Tim wagers against Brazil for a sum of \$1.000. It turns out that Brazil won the match. Consequently, Tim should accept the negative consequences ensuing from the falsity of the proposition that Italy won the soccer match against Brazil, namely, paying Helen \$1.000.

A similar situation applies in the case of assertion. Suppose that Helen asks Tim "Where is the dog?" and he replies by asserting that the dog is on the garden. Tim exposes himself to the criticism (and maybe the anger) of Helen if the dog were on the neighbor's house. This point regarding assertion was already present in the case of making an affidavit: the performer of an affidavit is accountable for the negative consequences ensuing if the proposition asserted is false. However, in spite of being a form of solemn assertion, the case of using "you bet" is not bound to a legal setting. The point here is that in social settings one criticizes those speakers who either assert false propositions or assert propositions without committing themselves to defend them.

In addition, asserting and wagering are different in respect to their interpersonal aspects. According to Peirce, if one wagers by using the expression "I will bet you so", as in "I will bet you so that Brazil loses the match", one is

clearly not inviting one's addressee to follow suit. On the contrary, one expects the addressee to take responsibility for the truth of the opposite proposition (e.g. Italy losses the match). Otherwise, one would be betting against oneself. For example, Helen expected Tim to make himself responsible for the truth of the proposition that Italy won the soccer match against Brazil.¹⁴ In this sense, wagering expresses "a private opinion": wagers reserve their reasons or motives to get into a bet.

By contrast, the interpersonal aspect of assertion involves the addressee: when one asserts a proposition, one expects the addressee to follow suit, for one is publicly endorsing such proposition. Let me elaborate on this point. One can gloss the form of assertion "You bet that p " as "you may be sure that p " or "certainly p ", and one may regard it as equivalent to "I assure you that p ".¹⁵ In performing this form of assertion, a speaker overtly recommends the listener to conform to the proposition asserted. Presumably, this is what Peirce meant when he claimed that using the expression "You bet" is a form of assertion

¹⁴ Of course, for the purposes of this example, I am assuming that Helen and Tim are not betting for mere affiliation to their teams; I assume they are betting based on relevant factors that would contribute to an outcome such as statistics, performance of the teams in the last games, the health of the players, etc.

¹⁵ The 1868 magazine "The New Eclectic" is the oldest reference I have found of the expression "you bet": "It may be necessary to add, for the information of English readers, that the expression 'you bet!' is a Californian contraction of the sentence 'You may bet on the truth of what I said'" (1868:503).

“intended to cause another to follow suit”. In order to clarify this point, consider a simple case. Suppose that Helen and Tim had the following exchange:

Helen. I need to get to work immediately, but I am low on gas.

Is the station around the corner on Cuba St open?

Tim. You bet it's open.

It is clear that in uttering his reply, Tim is asserting that the gas station around the corner on Cuba St is open at the time of the utterance. By doing so, Tim is overtly endorsing this proposition and recommending Helen to use it in practical reasoning and action. Tim has acquired a responsibility in performing this kind of speech act because there are foreseeable negative consequences for Helen in case the proposition he asserted were false. Once she arrives at the gas station around the corner on Cuba St, Helen can easily evaluate whether Tim asserted correctly or incorrectly. Indeed, if the gas station on Cuba St were closed, Helen would be mad at Tim.

As the above case illustrates, the overt endorsement of p on the part of speakers using “you bet that p ” as a form of assertion generates in their listeners a disposition to practical reasoning and action. When one uses “You bet that p ”, one is thus liable for the inconveniences in case the proposition turns out to be false. In other words, one is responsible in virtue of using such expression as a

means to assert something. Of course, the speaker may have a valid excuse for incorrectly asserting a proposition. For example, suppose that the gas station in Cuba St was close because of a last-minute gas leak. Should Helen criticize Tim? Clearly not. In this sort of cases, it is clear that one should excuse the speaker.

In sum, Peirce made two important points in the above passage. The first point is that using the expression "You bet" to make an assertion is similar to make a wager in that both acts presuppose that their performers will be accountable in case the proposition at stake turns out to be false. The second point is that if one asserts by means of using the expression "you bet", one publicly endorses p and urges one's listener to follow suit. This means that one entitles the listener to reassert that p , to assert any of its consequences, to believe that p and thus take p as basis for practical reason and action. Hence, Peirce concluded that using "you bet that p " is a form of solemn assertion in which the speaker undertakes a certain kind of responsibility.

1.3.3. Case 3: Taking an oath

Finally, I shall discuss a very important piece of textual evidence concerning Peirce's account of assertion. In the following passage, Peirce examined a case of paradigmatic assertion, namely, taking an oath. He wrote:

Taking an oath is not mainly an event of the nature of a setting forth, *Vorstellung*, or representing. It is not mere saying, but is *doing*. The law, I believe, calls it an "act." At any rate, it would be followed by very real effects, in case the substance of what is asserted should be proved untrue. This ingredient, the assuming of responsibility, which is so prominent in solemn assertion, must be present in every genuine assertion. For clearly, every assertion involves an effort to make the intended interpreter believe what is asserted, to which end a reason for believing it must be furnished. (CP 5.546)

Peirce opened this passage by drawing a distinction between saying and asserting. Let me begin to elaborate on this distinction by stating a platitude: when one performs an act of assertion by means of an utterance act, one is not merely mouthing words but rather *saying* something. For example, suppose that Helen assertorically utters the sentence "Joe is ugly". In doing so, she is saying something of Joe, namely, that he is unpleasant in appearance. Alternatively, one might gloss this point as follows: in assertorically uttering the sentence "Joe is ugly", Helen is representing Joe as being a certain way, namely, unpleasant in appearance.¹⁶ Helen was able to do this by combining the predicative expression "is ugly" with the name "Joe". Since asserting and saying are so intimately

¹⁶ I should note that the term "representing" here is does not convey that a sentence has intrinsic representational properties. In Chapter 3, I will clarify this point by discussing Peirce's view of the sign.

related, Peirce thought that a first step to clarify what it is that one is doing when one solemnly asserts a proposition is to differentiate asserting from saying.

Let me elaborate further on the difference between asserting and saying according to Peirce.¹⁷ Consider the assertoric use of different sentences of the same language by means of which one *says* the same thing. For example, suppose that a speaker utters the following sentences in suitable circumstances:

(3) The spouse of Xanthippe was whiskered.

(4) Socrates was bearded.

It is clear that by means of uttering (3) and (4) the speaker has made two assertions but has said the same thing. Now, suppose that the speaker is proficient in Portuguese and he utters the following sentence:

(5) Sócrates era barbudo.

To be sure, one accepts that in uttering (3) and (4) the speaker has said the same thing as in (5). As these examples show, in performing the same speech act of assertion by using different sentences of the same or different languages, a speaker may *say* the same thing.

¹⁷ Peirce used the terms “saying” and “predicating” interchangeably. For simplicity, I will follow Peirce in this use. In Chapter 3, I will elaborate on Peirce’s use of the term “predicating”.

Hence, as the above cases show, asserting entails saying, but the converse does not hold ¹⁸. According to Peirce, one should not conflate saying with asserting. In (EP 2.312, 1904) Peirce made this point in terms of the distinction between *what is said* and its assertion or, alternatively, in terms of the distinction between a proposition and its assertion. He wrote: “the proposition in the sentence, “Socrates est sapiens”, strictly expressed, is “Socrates sapientem esse”. The defense of this position is that in this way we distinguish between a proposition and the assertion of it [...]” Hilpinen interprets this passage as conveying something equivalent to Frege’s celebrated distinction between sense and force. He comments:

A proposition is not an assertion, but rather a sign which is “capable of being asserted” (CP 2. 252), a potential of possible assertion, and the logical and semantic properties of propositions reflect this possibility. What is asserted (or uttered in an assertive speech act) is usually an indicative sentence; thus, according to Peirce, when a proposition is asserted or when it is considered as the content of an assertion, it can be regarded as “equivalent to as sentence in the indicative mood” (CP 2.315). The distinction between an assertion and a proposition (or “thought”) was

¹⁸ In Chapter 3, I will elaborate on the specific sense in which an act of saying is involved in an act of asserting.

explicitly made by Frege, even though he rejected (in his 1892 paper “Über Sinn und Bedeutung”) the view that different speech act types (e.g., assertions and commands) can have the same content. Hilpinen (1992:468)

It is tempting to see a resemblance between Peirce’s distinction between a proposition and its assertion and Frege’s distinction between a proposition (*Gedanke*) expressed by a sentence and the assertoric force of such sentence or “*behauptende Kraft*”.¹⁹ However, the limitations of this comparison are perspicuous, for Frege and Peirce meant very different things by “assertion” and “proposition”. Accordingly, it seems to me that Peirce’s distinction resembles Frege’s only in a very general sense: both distinctions avoid conflating assertion, whatever assertion is, with what is said. To be sure, this is not a trivial point of agreement between Frege and Peirce.

Unfortunately, Hilpinen does not elaborate on Peirce’s tricky example above, which is meant to illustrate his distinction. What Peirce tried to convey by this example? Although I do not claim that Peirce’s example is unequivocal, I will attempt to offer a plausible and adequate interpretation of it. Peirce says that the proposition in the sentence “Socrates est sapiens” is *strictly expressed* by the

¹⁹ See Frege (1984). This is also known as the “Frege-Geach point”, see Geach (1960). See also Dummett (1981).

sentence “Socrates sapientem esse”. Accordingly, the key of this example is to understand what Peirce meant by “strict expression”.²⁰

The Latin sentence “Socrates est sapiens” is an indicative sentence while “Socrates sapientem esse” combines an accusative subject with an infinitive. The latter kind of sentence is used in Latin in indirect speech (i.e. as a subordinate clause after verbs like asserting) and thus is the grammatical equivalent of English that-clause complements.²¹ Thus, according to Peirce, one can “strictly express” the same proposition in two different languages by using the following expressions:

(6a) Socrates sapientem esse.

(6b) That Socrates is wise.

Yet one cannot use (6a) and (6b) alone. Dependent clauses are not complete sentences. In English, for example, they are parts of sentences such as “Maria claimed that Socrates is wise”. Indeed, English assertive verbs take that-clause

²⁰ I should make a caveat here. The current use of the phrase “expression of a proposition” is associated with a conception of propositions as abstract objects. It is widely accepted among contemporary philosophers that that-clauses denote propositions. In addition, those philosophers who endorse this view quantify over propositions and use the term “proposition” as a count noun. If one endorses the view that to quantify over something is to accept an ontological commitment to it, then it would seem that these expressions indicate the view that there are entities called propositions. Peirce was not committed to this conception of propositions. He thought that to conceive propositions as abstract objects is to detach the concept of proposition from its practical significance, which is equivalent to render it unintelligible; see (EP 2.312). I shall elaborate on these two points in Chapter 3.

²¹ See Jones & Sidwell (1986:98).

complements, which are expressions of the form “that s”, where “s” is replaced by an indicative sentence, to compose sentences of the form “A asserts that-s”. Sentences exhibiting this form contain two parts. One is formed by a personal pronoun or name followed by an assertive verb (e.g. “I claim”). I shall call it “assertive clause”. The other part contains a that-clause complement (e.g. that Albert is funny). I shall call sentences of this form “explicit assertoric sentences” (e.g. “Maria claimed that Albert is funny”) in contrast with assertions made by means of the utterance of sentences in the indicative mood (e.g. Maria utters the sentence “Albert is funny”).

Now, considering the above points, Peirce’s example seems to convey that the distinction between a proposition and its assertion is mirrored by the structure of explicit assertoric sentences. In other words, the distinction between a proposition and its assertion has a grammatical counterpart: the distinction between a that-clause and an assertive clause. The assertive clause is the mark of an assertion in contradistinction with its complement or that-clause, which “strictly express” a proposition or what is said.

An opponent of this interpretation might immediately reply that this “grammatical counterpart “is superfluous. One does not usually make assertoric utterances by means of explicit assertoric sentences. The usual way to make

assertions is by uttering indicative sentences. For example, to assert that Socrates is wise, one usually utters “Socrates is wise” rather than “I assert that Socrates is wise”. It is thus clear that although the utterance of an indicative sentence does not contain an assertive verb, one usually understands them as a way to assert a proposition. Evidently, this is in accord with ordinary language use.

However, the rationale of Peirce’s notion of strict expression does not concern ordinary language use. It concerns logical analysis: the notion of strict expression is a convenient way of making perspicuous the difference between the act of assertion and a proposition. By contrast, in uttering an indicative sentence there is no straightforward way of preventing the conflation of a proposition with its assertion.²² Consider an example from Peirce: “Nobody ever asserted [correctly] that the moon is made of green cheese; yet this is a familiar proposition” (MS 599: 5, ca. 1902). Following this example, suppose that Maria utters, “The moon is made of green cheese”. One might assume that she is joking. However, in using the predicative expression “is made of cheese” to *convey* that the moon is composed of curd, or, alternatively, to represent it as being so, one

²² Notably, it seems that both Peirce and Frege noted the importance of not conflating assertion with predication. For Frege’s distinction, see Pfisterer (2010). For a discussion of this confusion in Aristotle, Scotus and Aquinas, see Pini (2004). This conflation is also present in ordinary language: “Proposition (noun): 1. A statement or assertion that expresses a judgment or opinion” Oxford English Dictionary.

has not necessarily asserts such thing. Indeed, if one *asks* whether the moon is made of cheese, one is thereby representing the moon as being so but one is *not* also asserting it.

Hence, although asserting involves saying, the structure of assertoric sentences differentiates saying from asserting. As such, if one uses an indicative sentence as a means to assert what one is saying, one might transform it into an explicit assertor sentence. In Peirce's own words: "That this is so is shown by the precise equivalence between any verb in the indicative and the same made the object of 'I tell you': 'Jesus wept' = 'I tell you that Jesus wept'" (EP 2.478).

I am now in a position to return to (CP 5.546). Granting Peirce's distinction between a proposition and its assertion, one might formulate Peirce's question in this passage as follows: What a speaker is *doing* in relation to a proposition when performing an oath? I shall introduce Peirce's answer to this question by way of a particular example. Suppose that Louie's lawyer called Helen as a witness. While she was on the stand, the judge reminded her that she was under oath. Then, she testified that Louie was jogging with her when the murder took place. What exactly the judge reminded Helen before she testified? The answer to this question is straightforward: that by taking an oath she undertook an overt responsibility for the proposition she was going to assert. In other words, Helen's

normative status changed in virtue of taking an oath, for she acquired a responsibility for the truth of the proposition she asserted.

Why Helen's normative status changed? In (CP 5.546), Peirce remarked that "every assertion involves an effort to make the intended interpreter believe what is asserted". If speakers urge listeners (or interpreters) to *believe* that p by means of asserting that p , then they are recommending their listeners to take p as basis for practical reason and action. For example, Louie may be acquitted because the judge believed what Helen asserted. But consider that if the judge were to find out that what Helen asserted is false, he would realize that he wrongly acquitted Louie. In other words, had Helen asserted a false proposition, she would have caused terrible harm. This is the reason why penalties ensue from perjury.

Of course, the prosecutor of the case may challenge her assertion. For example, he may ask what the nature of her relationship with Louie is, how she is recovering from the knee surgery she had a month ago, etc. At this point Peirce's qualification regarding the term "responsibility for truth" cashes out: asserters

ought to give reasons for the propositions they assert. Otherwise, listeners would not believe what they assert.²³

Let me expand on this point. What is it to take responsibility for the truth of a proposition? This question is not trivial, for it is clear that one plays no role in the truth of a proposition. Accordingly, Peirce glossed “responsibility for the truth of a proposition” as “a duty to give reasons for a proposition”. In other words, to commit oneself to the truth of a proposition is to commit oneself to do something, namely to defend what one says by giving reasons for it upon challenge. There is no need here to appeal to a stronger case of assertion. Indeed, in uttering “The cat is on the sofa”, you are committed to *defend* what you asserted. If your addressee asks you, “How do you know?” you may adequately reply, “I have just seen the cat” or “Come here and look!” As this example shows, Peirce thought that one is responsible for the truth of a proposition in the sense that one acquires the duty to defend or vindicate such proposition within reasoned discourse.

Let me return to the case at issue. Once it is clear that the responsibility for the truth of a proposition consists in giving reasons for that proposition, it becomes clear that in taking an oath one is thereby accountable if either what one

²³ In Chapter 4, I will elaborate on the meaning of “giving reasons” and the interpersonal aspect of assertion.

says is false or one is not in a position to defend what one says. Thus, taking an oath is an act by which one undertakes an overt responsibility for the truth of a proposition.

1.4. The outcome of Peirce's inspection

The textual evidence suggests that Peirce's account of assertion can be reconstructed in the form of the following argument: it is plausible to assume that ordinary assertions sufficiently resemble solemn assertions. Now, by inspecting paradigmatic cases of assertion, one can establish that asserters are not mere sayers but doers, for they publicly endorse propositions and urge them upon their addressees. Assertions are actions with clear consequences for linguistic communication. As such, asserters are agents and in that capacity they ought to be accountable for their actions. Thus, if a speaker S solemnly asserts a proposition p , then S undertakes an overt responsibility for the truth of p . Here "responsibility for truth" means "a responsibility to give reasons". Therefore, whenever S asserts that p , S is thereby responsible to give reasons for p . For example, suppose that a friend of yours asserts that for every natural number n , the product of n and zero is equal to zero. In doing so, she urges you to believe what she said and thus entitles you to reassert it, to assert any of its

consequences (e.g., that $7 \times 0 = 0$), and, for that matter, to use it in the course of proving related theorems. If you ask her "How do you know?" she may point out that it follows directly from the laws of arithmetic. If you reply, "I do not see it!" she may defer to the teacher for an elaborate answer, or she may attempt to offer a proof.

I shall make two qualifications regarding Peirce's argument. First, one might object that Peirce's argument cannot provide conclusive proof that speakers change their normative statuses by undertaking a certain kind of responsibility in virtue of asserting a proposition. In reply, one should note that Peirce's inspection does not intend to offer such conclusive proof. The argumentative scope of Peirce's inspection is moderate. It simply intends to establish the *plausibility* of the idea that speakers undertake an overt responsibility for the truth of a proposition in virtue of performing an act of assertion.

Second, the reconstructed argument accounts only for the claim that asserting has a normative effect on the speaker and not for the claim that this effect is the feature that *characterizes* assertion. In this respect, Chauviré (1979) claims that Peirce's view of assertion is a good example of how he used his principle of pragmatism. The principle of pragmatism says that one should

analyze concepts in terms of its conceivable practical effects (EP 1:132; W 3:266, 1878; EP 2.346, 1905). However, one should note, on the one hand, that Peirce did not explicitly acknowledge the use of the principle of pragmatism in his account of assertion or, at least, Peirce was not clear in this respect. It seems less demanding to assume that Peirce thought that the above argument provides good reasons to characterize assertion in term of its normative effect on the speaker.

Thus, either Peirce thought that the above argument provides good reasons to take the responsibility for truth on the part of the speaker as what qualifies assertion as a speech act or he used the principle of pragmatism as a tacit methodological principle.²⁴ Either way, following (CP 5.543), I shall reformulate Peirce's view of assertion as follows: one asserts that p if and only if one undertakes the responsibility to vindicate p .

1.5. Final remarks

In this chapter, I have attempted to reconstruct and assess Peirce's inspection of three paradigmatic cases of assertion. By reconstructing and evaluating Peirce's

²⁴ I shall not discuss here the import of this principle. For Peirce's several formulations of the principle of pragmatism and the place of this principle in Peirce's philosophy see Hookway (2004; 2012) and Burke (2013).

inspection, it has become clear that Peirce had good reasons to understand the speech act of assertion in terms of its normative effect on the speaker.

According to Peirce, performing an assertion changes the normative status of speakers. This change consists in the acquisition of a commitment on the part of speakers to the truth of what they say. Peirce called this change the “real effect” of assertion. In turn, speakers ought to honor their commitments by giving reasons for the propositions they assert.

Hence, in asserting that p , the speaker endorses p and urges the listener to follow suit. The speaker thereby entitles the listener to assert that p , to assert any of its consequences, to believe that p and thus take p as basis for practical reason and action. Since asserting a proposition has consequences for linguistic communication, one says that a speaker is answerable for his assertions. Hence, according to Peirce, a speaker S asserts that p if and only if S takes responsibility for the truth of p .

I would like to remark that although Peirce did not intend to offer something like a proof that the picture of assertion delivered by his account is correct, he did intend to show how to understand assertive acts based on the simple idea that they have a characteristic normative effect on communication.

Where one should go from here in trying to understand further Peirce's view of assertion? There are three important aspects involved in Peirce's view of assertion, as I reformulated it above, that are worth exploring, namely:

- (i) Assertion as an act that involves the undertaking of a certain responsibility.
- (ii) What is asserted as propositions.
- (iii) Responsibility for truth as a vindicatory commitment.

In the next three chapters, I shall elaborate on these three aspects of Peirce's view of assertion respectively.

Chapter 2

Assertion and Responsibility

2.1. Introduction

The outcome of Peirce's inspection of paradigmatic cases of assertion is that speakers who perform acts of assertion undertake an overt responsibility for the truth of a proposition. In this chapter, I address the following question: How Peirce understood the nature of the responsibility involved in assertion? This question concerns the nature of assertion as an act involving a certain kind of responsibility or, in other words, the nature of assertion as the state or condition of *being responsible* for the truth of a proposition.

In section 2.2., I will introduce two interpretations of Peirce's view concerning the meaning of "being responsible" for the truth of a proposition, namely, the conventional interpretation and the moral interpretation. In section 2.3., I will argue for a moral interpretation by showing that Peirce held asserters as moral agents. In section 2.4., I will make some relevant qualifications concerning the moral interpretation.

2.2. Being responsible in virtue of asserting: Two interpretations

There are at least two interpretations of Peirce's view concerning the nature of assertion as the condition of being responsible for the truth of a proposition. I shall call them the "conventional interpretation" and the "moral interpretation", respectively.²⁵ The former interpretation says that one is responsible in virtue of performing an act of assertion because such act is considered either acceptable or unacceptable to most members of a society. The latter interpretation says that one is responsible in virtue of performing an act of assertion because asserters are moral agents.

Let me offer a clearer picture of the issue that both the conventional and the moral interpretation attempt to resolve. Peirce argued that to assert a proposition p is to make oneself responsible for p . By "making oneself responsible", one usually means "making oneself responsible to *do* something". For example, I can make myself responsible for the well-being of my brother's dog while he vacations by uttering, "I will take care of Fido while you are in Maceió". It is clear that in uttering such sentence, I have made a promise. In turn, it is clear that in virtue of making such promise I have acquired the duty to feed,

²⁵ For a broader distinction between moral and conventional normativity see Reinach (1912/1913). For a specific discussion of this distinction as applied to speech, see Cuneo (2014).

walk, and bath Fido. Suppose that I forget to feed Fido and, as a result, the dog died of starvation. To be sure, I am accountable for the ensuing harm I have caused, namely, the death of Fido and the sorrow of my brother. I deserve blame because I failed to meet my duty. Thus, it is arguably uncontroversial to say that one undertakes a moral responsibility in virtue of promising. By contrast, suppose now that I utter "Two plus two equals four". It is clear that in uttering such sentence, I have made an assertion. Thus, according to Peirce, I have *undertaken* a responsibility for the truth of the proposition that two plus two equals four. However, it is not clear in which sense I am responsible *in virtue of* making such assertion.²⁶ This is the issue that the conventional and the moral interpretations attempt to resolve.

Both interpretations take as starting point Peirce's view that speakers are responsible in virtue of performing an act of assertion. The point of disagreement between these interpretations concerns the nature of the responsibility involved in asserting.

Let me introduce the nature of such disagreement. The conventional interpretation construes the claim that asserters are responsible for the truth of a proposition as a socio-linguistic observation. Accordingly, asserters put forward

²⁶ See Watson (2004) for a detailed comparison between asserting and promising in respect to moral responsibility.

their *bona fides*, so to speak, and are subject to social criticism if either what they say turns out false or they are not able to defend what they say. Since the speaker who asserts a false proposition or is not able to defend it is subject to social criticism, the conventional interpretation holds that the *social relation* between speaker and addressee changes because of the speaker's act of assertion. Thus, it is plausible to claim that the addressee will hold the speaker accountable and that the speaker acknowledges such accountability. However, since the responsibility involved in asserting is a mere socio-linguistic effect on the speaker based on pure convention it does not follow that the speaker is responsible in any moral sense.

The conventional interpretation is suggested by Pagin (2015:20), who reads (CP 5.546) as follows:

Firstly, as a matter of socio-linguistic observation, speakers in fact in some sense take responsibility for, or commit themselves to, being right in what they say. The speaker puts her cognitive authority behind it, so to speak, and has to suffer some measure of social humiliation if what she says turns out false. *Secondly*, there is the further idea that the commitment is made to the addressee or the hearers in general. The speaker who makes an incorrect assertion opens himself to criticism by his addressee, perhaps for misleading him, in a way similar to a subject who fails to live up to a promise. In this

respect, the *social relation* between speaker and addressee has changed because of the assertion. Typically, the addressee will hold the speaker accountable for the correctness of the assertion, and the speaker accepts to be held so accountable. This is again a socio-linguistic observation: it does not follow that the speaker actually *is* accountable.

Pagin's interpretation of what Peirce said in (CP 5.546) is that asserters are not morally accountable for what they assert. If a speaker asserts a proposition and such proposition turns out false, the speaker merely suffers "social humiliation". For Pagin, although listeners *hold* speakers accountable and speakers accept *to be held* accountable, it does not follow that speakers *are* accountable. This is an indirect way to say that speakers are not *morally* accountable. Pagin holds that Peirce's view construes the speaker as accountable only in accordance with a social convention, namely, that speakers are customarily censured when they assert false propositions or are not able to defend the propositions they assert.

Pagin does not elaborate further on this interpretation. However, his point is moderately clear: For Pagin, asserters are like orchestra musicians. Consider a renowned orchestra playing *Boléro*. Bob, who interprets the soprano saxophone, is unprepared. Still he goes on to perform and makes a big mistake. As a result, he suffers social humiliation and censure. His colleagues and his

audience hold him accountable for ruining the orchestra's performance and he accepts to be held so accountable. However, it is clear that he would *not* be accountable beyond certain social conventions. As this analogy illustrates, the conventional interpretation offers a socio-linguistic picture of the responsibility involved in assertion in which "responsibility" conveys a mere behavioral by-product of social interaction that has no moral repercussions.

I turn now to the moral interpretation. According to this interpretation, Peirce construed the responsibility involved in assertion as a moral responsibility.²⁷ This means that speakers are *morally* responsible for the truth of what they say in virtue of performing an act of assertion.²⁸ Here the relevant sense of "moral responsibility" concerns openness to moral evaluations for one's actions. Such responsibility is not bound to conventions or to the speaker's choice to accept it. In this sense, to be morally responsible for an act is to be answerable for one's action and for any harm caused by one's action. These actions are also social, for they occur in the context of interpersonal relationships (e.g. between

²⁷ For a clear exposition and discussion of moral responsibility, see Clarke, McKenna & Smith (2015); see also Vargas (2013) and cf. Waller (2011), who argues against moral responsibility.

²⁸ Of course, there are different interpretations of the term "normative" not involving moral responsibility. This interpretation involves moral normativity since, as it will be patent in the textual evidence, Peirce thought that asserters are moral agents.

colleagues, friends, family members, etc.). In our case, the interpersonal relation at stake is that between speakers (or asserters) and listeners (or addressees).

This interpretation is suggested but not developed by K.O. Apel in his remarks concerning Peirce's view of assertion in (CP 5.546). He wrote:

Peirce further develops this point of view [i.e. that to assert is to commit oneself to the truth of a proposition] by means of linguistic analysis, first in his 1903 lecture on Pragmatism (5.29ff.) and then, most of all, in a fragment from 1908 (5.546-47). Ceremonious statements that explicitly take responsibility for their content, such as an oath before a court, merely make visible, as through a magnifying glass, the willful, morally relevant, active aspect that is inherent in every assertion [...]. Not just the oath as a legal act, but every assertion that implicitly claims truth is an action by which the one making the assertion enters into reality in a causal, dynamic way and becomes engaged morally in the communication community.

Apel (1981:163)

According to Apel, Peirce thought that the "moral engagement" of asserters in the communication community grants them moral responsibility in virtue of performing acts of assertion. In other words, speakers become moral agents when they engage in assertoric speech. As such, their assertions can be evaluated as correct or incorrect and speakers ought to take moral responsibility for their

assertions as any moral agent ought to do. Thus, the moral interpretation claims that Peirce was committed to the view that asserters are moral agents and, consequently, they are morally responsible in virtue of performing acts of assertion. In addition, addressees attribute moral responsibility to asserters for their acts of assertion.

2.3. Peirce on “Being responsible”

In this section, I will argue for a moral interpretation of Peirce’s view of assertoric responsibility. Now, it is clear that *if* Peirce held that asserters are moral agents, then asserters are morally responsible for the truth of the propositions they assert. Accordingly, in order to argue that Peirce construed the responsibility involved in asserting as a moral responsibility, it will suffice to show that Peirce held that asserters are moral agents. And this is exactly what I will do in the sequel.²⁹

Let me begin by fulfilling an obvious requirement of the above argument. In trying to show that Peirce took asserters as moral agents, one requires a criterion to identify a moral agent. I propose the following criterion: one is a moral agent in virtue of performing an act *x* if and only if one performs *x* and *x*

²⁹ One should note that Peirce did not elaborate on his view about moral responsibility.

has the potential to change one's moral status.³⁰ By "moral status", I simply mean the status acquired by those who meet or fail to meet their moral obligations. In the present case, the relevant moral status is blame, which results from failing to meet one's moral obligation. Here I follow (CP 1.666). This passage contains Peirce's single known remark on the import of the term "morality": "Now what's the use of prying into the philosophical basis of morality? We all know what morality is: it is behaving as you were brought up to behave, that is, to think you ought to be punished for not behaving." Of course, it makes no sense to say that one is punishable if one is not blamable. The root of the idea that asserters are blamable is the general assumption that the kind of acts for which agents are blamable are those acts by means of which they freely and willfully generate changes in a certain situation. Thus, if Peirce thought a speaker who asserts a proposition is *punishable* (and thus *blamable*), in virtue of performing an act of assertion, then he was committed to the view that asserters are moral agents.

I turn now to an examination of two pieces of textual evidence supporting the claim that Peirce thought that speakers who assert a proposition are blamable and punishable. The first piece of evidence is present in (CP 5.546). Peirce wrote:

³⁰ For a philosophical exploration of the concept of moral status, see Warren (1999).

But if a lie would not endanger the esteem in which the utterer was held, nor otherwise be apt to entail such real effects as he [the interpreter] could avoid, the interpreter would have no reason to believe the assertion. Nobody takes any positive stock in those conventional utterances, such as "I am perfectly delighted to see you," upon whose falsehood no punishment at all is visited.

According to Peirce, asserting a false proposition puts at risk the praise of the speaker. Why? When a speaker asserts a proposition, he is endorsing it and urging it upon its addressee. Usually, the addressee comes to assent to the proposition and to believe it. Since believing a proposition is related to reasoning and action, believing a false proposition can endanger the addressee. And it is clear that the addressee understands the difference between believing a true proposition and believing a false one. For example, suppose that a child is about to take a geography test. The child asks her father, "Which is the longest river in Brazil?" The father replies "The Paraná River". Evidently, the assertion of the father changes the doxastic situation of the child. A couple of days passed and the results of the test arrived. Clearly disappointed, the child criticizes her father, who apologizes and compensates her with an ice cream. As this example shows,

it seems that one would judge that the father deserved the criticism of his child.

Asserters are punishable for changing the doxastic situation of their addressees.

Now, for the sake of argument, suppose with Peirce that asserters were not punishable for “the real effects” that addressees could avoid for believing false propositions. It follows that addressees would not understand the difference between believing a true proposition and believing a false one. This claim has absurd consequences for cognition and action. For example, mathematicians would not tell the difference between a sound and unsound proof, postal workers would not tell the difference between right and wrong directions, judges would not tell the difference between sending guilty and innocent people to jail, and, as Peirce mentioned, people would not tell the difference between conventional utterances used to greet people and assertoric utterances, etc. Thus, according to Peirce, asserters are punishable. Since Peirce thought that asserters are punishable, it follows that Peirce was committed to the view that asserters are blamable.³¹

The second piece of textual evidence I would like to discuss is present in an unpublished manuscript from 1903. Peirce wrote:

³¹ It is interesting to note that some recent work on moral responsibility also hinges on the idea of potential blame. For example, Darwall (2006) holds that to be a moral agent is to be subject to moral obligations, which just is to be blameable.

[...] an act of assertion supposes that, a proposition being formulated, a person performs an act which renders him liable to the penalties of social law (or, at any rate, those of moral law) in case it should not be true, unless he has a definite and sufficient excuse; [...]. (EP 2.278)

In this passage, Peirce claims that one is liable to social and moral penalties if one asserts a false proposition. It is clear that he emphasized in the moral element involved in asserting. However, it is not clear what exactly he meant by “moral law” in this context. If one assumes he was using this term in its ordinary sense, then he meant by “moral law” a principle defining the criteria of correct action. Unfortunately, he did not mention which is this principle. Accordingly, it would be more productive to tackle the following question: What is the driving thought behind Peirce’s emphasis on the moral dimension of assertion?

If one is liable to moral penalties in virtue of asserting a false proposition, it is clear that asserting a proposition is an act that has the potential to change the moral status of the speaker. In other words, in asserting a false proposition, a speaker moves from praise to blame. Thus, asserters are suitable candidates for blamable agents. For example, suppose that someone asks you “Where is the cat?” and you reply, “The cat is on the sofa”. According to Peirce, by asserting the proposition that the cat is on the sofa, you have both embraced it yourself

and urged it upon your addressee, who is thereby entitled to reassert it and, for that matter, to assert any of its consequences (e.g., that the cat is in the house).³² Suppose now that at the time of your reply you did not check that the cat was indeed on the sofa and it turns out that the cat left the house and got lost. It is clear that you could have done things otherwise. It is also clear that making one's addressee believe a false proposition because of one's act of assertion can cause harm. Thus, you are liable to moral penalties for asserting a false proposition and you are certainly blamable for doing so. In other words, if one is liable to moral penalties in case the proposition one asserted is false, then performing acts of assertion involves that the asserter is blamable.

At this point, Peirce's remark concerning a "sufficient excuse" calls for attention. One should note that moral liability belongs to persons only regarding their failure to honor their obligations. In other words, holding someone morally liable seems to be a matter of placing *moral* blame on him or her, possibly accompanied by punishment for the misdeed. The justification for the punishment is that the person who is to be punished is morally blameworthy (e.g., I am to be punished because I am blameworthy for asserting a false

³² Although Peirce hinted at the distinction between *direct* and *indirect commitments*, he did not explicitly introduce it. I will explain this distinction in Chapter 5. For this distinction, see Rescher (1968) and (Brandom (1994).

proposition). However, Peirce pointed out that that from the claim that one is blamable does not necessarily follow that one is liable to moral penalties. If one is blamable and one has failed to meet one's obligation but has a valid excuse, one does not deserve punishment. Let me return to the child's geography test. Suppose that it is revealed that the father had a minor stroke the morning he drove his child to school. If this were the case, the father would not deserve criticism.

In normal cases, the penalties ensuing from an incorrect assertion are vague, but not to the point of being unnamed. In (EP 2.312), Peirce wrote: "[...] the only difference between swearing to a proposition and an ordinary affirmation of it, such as logic contemplates, is that in the latter case the penalties are less and even less certain than those of the law". Although it might not be a severe penalty, being subject to explicit criticism, censure and discredit in virtue of asserting a false proposition seems enough punishment for an ordinary person. Thus, according to Peirce, asserters are blamable and deserve punishment unless they have a sufficient excuse.

In sum, in the textual evidence just discussed, Peirce argued that if one's addressee is entitled to use the proposition one asserted in practical reasoning and action, one's moral status changes in virtue of performing acts of assertion.

Assertions are acts by means of which one freely and purposively changes the doxastic status of the addressee. Thus, asserting a false proposition can cause harm to one's addressee. Peirce thought that this aspect of asserting is the one in virtue of which asserters are punishable or liable to moral penalties. Thus, Peirce was committed to the view that asserters are blamable.

Since Peirce thought that asserters are blamable, it becomes clear that Peirce thought that asserters are agents whose moral status changes in virtue of performing an act of assertion. Therefore, asserters are moral agents. In turn, since moral agency implies moral responsibility, it follows that Peirce was committed to the claim that asserters are morally responsible for the truth of the propositions they assert.

One consequence of this interpretation is that addressees are entitled to hold asserters morally responsible for the truth of the propositions they assert. Indeed, Peirce is taking into account that assertions can be evaluated as correct or incorrect. Listeners are permitted to criticize speakers if either the propositions they assert are false or they fail to give reasons for such propositions upon challenge. However, this is not an evaluation of an agent's action in terms of a failure to meet a social convention, but one related to the moral dimension of communication.

So far, I have argued for the moral interpretation of Peirce's view of the responsibility involved in assertion. This interpretation might be summarized in two points. First, moral responsibility for the truth of a proposition is attributed to speakers as moral agents in virtue of their acts of assertion. Second, moral responsibility concerns the accountability that speakers might bear because they have failed to fulfill their obligation as asserters.³³

Since the discussion of the above textual evidence lends plausibility to the moral interpretation of Peirce's view of the responsibility involved in assertion, I shall rephrase Peirce's view of assertion as follows: one asserts that p if and only if one is *morally* responsible to vindicate p .

2.4. Final remarks

I would like to end this chapter by qualifying that I am not claiming that Peirce was unambiguous on his view of the responsibility involved in assertion. I am claiming that the textual evidence makes the claim that he endorsed the moral interpretation highly plausible.

Although Peirce took moral responsibility as qualifying the characteristic effect of assertion, he never introduced his view on moral responsibility.

³³ The responsibility of speakers, as a vindicatory commitment, is the subject matter of Chapter 4.

Accordingly, I have said nothing about Peirce's view of morality. This is certainly problematic, but it would be more problematic to attribute to Peirce a view he did not endorse. For example, it seems plausible to claim that Peirce was a moral consequentialist. Moral consequentialism is the view that moral correctness of acts is determined by their consequences. Under this view, whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act or of something related to that act, such as a general rule binding acts of the same kind. Nevertheless, I have not found any textual evidence supporting the claim that Peirce was a moral consequentialist.

In addition, Peirce did not elaborate on his view of normativity. He famously held that reasoning is a kind of action, and much of his philosophy is committed to the project of discerning the marks of *good* and *responsible* reasoning. In fact, Peirce claimed that logic is a "normative science" in the sense that it is "the doctrine of what we ought to think" and, thus, "an application of the doctrine of what we deliberately choose to do, which is Ethics" (EP 2.142). Moreover, in a text from 1904, Peirce claims that "Thinking is a kind of action, and reasoning is a kind of deliberate action; and to call an argument illogical, or a proposition false, is a special kind of moral judgment" (CP 8.91). But Peirce's view of normativity is still a topic in need of research among Peirce scholars.

Accordingly, I shall not attempt to advance any position on these delicate matters here.

However, I should note that even in the absence of an elaborate view of morality and normativity, Peirce's view of the responsibility involved in assertion as a kind of moral responsibility employs minimal assumptions. These are that asserters are agents, that someone is a moral agent if his moral status changes in virtue of the actions they perform, and that if asserters are moral agents, then the responsibility involved in asserting is a moral responsibility.³⁴ These assumptions seem enough to lend plausibility to Peirce's moral view of the responsibility of assertion.

Finally, it is worth to mention *en passant* that one can develop Peirce's cogent idea of understanding assertion in normative terms in a non-moral way. For example, proponents of the "rule-based" view of assertion defend that what qualifies a speech act as an assertion is its constitutive rule, say,

KNOWLEDGE RULE. One must assert that *p* only if one knows that *p*.³⁵

³⁴ As Watson (2004:60) remarks: "Assertion seems to me an instructive paradigm for contexts of responsible agency that are of more obvious and direct ethical interest. It is instructive not only as an instance of taking responsibility, but also, I suspect, because there is something assertion-like at the core of the ethically central cases. Responsible agency requires that one stand for something, and this is something more basic than the subjection to substantive moral requirements."

³⁵ For a rule-based account of assertion, see Williamson (1996), Williamson (2000; Ch.11), and Goldberg (2015). For a discussion of this account of assertion, see Brown & Capellen (2011).

The main difference between the commitment view and the rule-based view is that the former focuses on the normative effects of making assertions on speakers while the latter focuses on the rules for making assertions speakers ought to follow.

Yet it is easy to see why Peirce's view of assertion, conceived as the undertaking of a commitment, is bound by a rule to which asserters ought to comply:

ASSERTION RULE. One must assert that p only if one is in a position to give reasons for p .³⁶

One should note, though, that an advantage of the commitment account over the rule-based view is that it offers a direct description of what is to make an assertion while the ruled-base account just specifies the norms for making an assertion.³⁷

I shall make clear that I have not intended to make here a comparison between Peirce's view of assertion and rule-views of assertion. I have only pointed out, for the sake of comprehensiveness, that Peirce's understanding of

³⁶ Watson (2004) has remarked that this rule is too strong. For a response to this claim See MacFarlane (2011); see also Marion (2012).

³⁷ For the advantages of the commitment view of assertion over the rule-based view of assertion, see MacFarlane (2011). For a recent attempt to supplement the rule-based view, see Turri (2015). The two views could be combined. For example, see Watson (2004).

assertion in terms of moral responsibility is just one of the several forms that a normative understanding of assertion may take.

Chapter 3

Assertion and Propositions

3.1. Introduction

Suppose that Helen assertorically utters the sentence “Tom Jobim wrote *Águas de Março*”. In doing so, she is committing herself to give reasons for what she said. Peirce identified the familiar notion of *what is said* with the notion of proposition. But, what exactly Peirce meant by the word “proposition”? In this chapter, I aim to elaborate on Peirce’s view of the proposition as “a sign capable of being asserted” (CP 8.837, 1904). In particular, I will argue that propositions are assertable signs in the sense that their criteria of identity depends on the possibility of its assertion.

Accordingly, in section 3.2., I will discuss what Peirce meant by the claim that a proposition is a kind of sign. In particular, since Peirce construed the term “sign” as a triadic relation, I will show that a clear understanding of Peirce’s view of propositions involves three constitutive aspects, namely, propositions as sign-vehicles, propositions as being about something that is signified, and

propositions as signifying elements. Accordingly, in section 3.3., I will show that Peirce held a view of propositions as act-types. The main thrust of this view is that if one performs a speech act, one thereby instantiates an act of saying. In section 3.4., I will briefly discuss Peirce's view concerning how it is possible for speakers to say something *about* something or someone by instantiating propositions. Finally, in section 3.5., I will discuss Peirce's view of the relation between propositions and assertability.

3.2. Propositions as signs

Peirce thought that a proposition is an assertable *sign*. What Peirce meant by the word "sign"? He wrote:

I use the word "*Sign*" in the widest sense for any medium for the communication or extension of a Form (or feature). Being medium, it is determined by something, called its Object, and determines something, called its Interpretant or Interpretand. (EP 2.477, 1906)³⁸

Peirce developed the notion of sign in terms of its crucial function as a means to convey information in interpersonal acts of communication. He called such acts

³⁸ From this notion of sign, Peirce developed a fruitful and complex theory of linguistic and non-linguistic signs. The literature on Peirce's semiotics is vast. Notable works are Randsdell (1977), Savan (1988), Litzka (1996), and Short (2007). I shall focus here only in linguistic signs, in particular the use of indicative sentences in assertoric speech.

of communication “semiosis”: “an act, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of three subjects, such as a sign, its object and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into acts between pairs” (CP 5.484). According to Peirce, sign users employ signs in acts of communication to convey certain characteristics or features of objects by means of the application of predicates. He wrote:

That which is communicated from the Object through the Sign to the Interpretant is a Form. [...] The Form that is communicated does not necessarily cease to be in one thing when it comes to be in a different thing, because its being is a being of the predicate. (MS 793)

Peirce made an important point here: acts of communication are propositional acts, as it were, because one conveys through such acts a feature of an object by means of the application of predicates. Indeed, by the expression “being of a predicate”, Peirce meant here the essential role of predicates as applicable to objects.³⁹

As such, the key element of the semiosis is the sign, which has three irreducible aspects or elements: the sign itself or sign-vehicle, which is *the sign’s physical form* such as a sound, a printed word, or an image, etc.; the object, which

³⁹ In the next section, I will explain in which exact sense Peirce thought that predicates are applicable to objects.

is *what is signified* by the sign-vehicle; and the interpretant, which is *what the sign signifies*. Peirce's point is that a sign-vehicle is about some object because it is subsequently interpreted as a sign of that object. This subsequent interpretation is roughly what Peirce meant by "interpretant".

Let me introduce Peirce's view of the sign as stated above by way of a simple example. Consider a paper map of Brazil. The map is a sign-vehicle of its object, the country of Brazil, and its interpretant is the information it conveys about the position and spatial relations of Brazil in respect to other countries (e.g. Brazil shares a land border with Colombia to the northwest), and the positions and spatial relations between its cities (e.g. São Paulo is in southeastern Brazil).⁴⁰ A map of Brazil is a sign in the sense that one interprets it *as a sign of* Brazil.

The innovative aspect of Peirce's view of the sign is that the sign-vehicle, the object and the interpretant stand in a special relationship to one another, which is a three-place or triadic relation. For Peirce, a sign is an irreducible triadic relation of the form "x is a sign of y to z".⁴¹ Let me briefly elaborate on the *relata* of the sign relation by way of an example.

⁴⁰ Peirce held the view that maps involve predication as languages do. See Rescorla (2009b) for an argument against this view and Casati & Varzi (1999) for an argument supporting it.

⁴¹ It is worth to mention that Peirce's so-called "Reduction Thesis" is the thesis that all relations, relations of arbitrary adicity, may be constructed from triadic relations alone. For Peirce, the paradigm case of a triadic relation is the sign relation. Burch (1991) offers an exposition and proof of Peirce's Reduction Thesis.

Suppose that Helen and Joe are having a conversation about ancient Greek philosophers. She assertorically utters the sentence "Socrates was bearded". Which is the sign-vehicle in this case? The principal feature of the sign-vehicle is its function as a sign-vehicle, the physical form of a sign. Thus, in our example, Helen's utterance of the sentence "Socrates was bearded" is the first *relatum* of the sign relation.

As I have mentioned, Peirce thought that sign-vehicles are *signs of* objects. The context of Helen's utterance indicates that it is about Socrates, the celebrated Athenian philosopher, who is thus the second *relatum* of the sign relation under analysis. Here the relevant sense of "aboutness" is a familiar one. For example, pictures are *of* people, the present text *concerns* Peirce's view of assertion, maps are *of* cities, etc. In the context of semiosis, the predicate "is about" expresses the relation that sign-vehicles, such as the assertoric use of a sentence, bear to whatever it is that they are *of* or *concern* in virtue of being used for the purposes of communication.

In addition, Peirce thought that the relationship between the object of a sign and the sign that signifies it is one of determination: "A Sign is a Cognizable that, on the one hand, is so determined (i.e., specialized, *bestimmt*) by something *other than itself*, called its Object [...]" (EP 2.492, 1909. Letter to W. James). This means that

the object imposes certain constraints that a sign must fall within if it is to signify that object. For example, indicative sentences have a logical syntax.⁴² The sentence "Socrates was bearded" has a logical subject, which is the name "Socrates", and a logical predicate, which is the expression "was bearded" in order to characterize Socrates as bearded. The driving thought behind these logical categories of expression is the distinction between what one is talking about, the object one refers by using subjects, and what one is saying about it, the description or information one conveys of it by using predicates.

I turn now to the interpretant. Peirce identified the interpretant of a sign-vehicle with its role of in communication.⁴³ Accordingly, the third *relatum* of the sign relation in our example is the role of Helen's utterance in communication. Given the context of the conversation, Joe interpreted Helen's utterance as an assertion that Socrates was bearded. Strictly speaking, as Peirce suggested above, the interpretant of Helen's utterance is Joe's interpretation of it as a correct application of the predicate "was bearded" to Socrates. For Helen's utterance combines the predicate "was bearded" with the name "Socrates", by which the speaker refers to Socrates (i.e. the second *relatum*), and *conveys information* about

⁴² As Peirce, I use the adjective "logical" in contrast with "grammatical". In other words, Peirce clearly thought that logical form is different from grammatical form.

⁴³ For a discussion of the notion of interpretant see Savan (1988), Lszka (1990), Hausman (1993), Short (1996), Lszka (1996), and Short (2007).

Socrates to Joe, namely, that Socrates had a growth of hair on his cheeks and chin. Since Joe interpreted Helen's utterance as an assertion, he presumes that this information is correct.

The main thrust of Peirce's view of semiosis, as the above example illustrates, is that "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (CP 2.308). Here the relevant sense of "interpretation" is that of a communicative activity, which is essentially social. By engaging in this activity, speakers and listeners cooperate to understand what a sign-vehicle *signifies* in the context of its occurrence by making qualifications, asking for explications, giving reasons, etc.⁴⁴ As such, the meaning of a sign-vehicle is not a mental image, nor a mental process, nor an entity (abstract or concrete) but rather its role in communication. This role is the *interpretant* of a sign-vehicle.

Moreover, understanding the meaning of a linguistic expression, a sentence in particular, is not a matter of grasping truth-conditions. This would amount to reduce the sign relation to a mere *dyadic* relation of reference. For Peirce, communication and inference are intimately connected. As such, understanding the meaning of a linguistic expression is a matter of knowing how to use it in inference. In (CP 2.444, n1), Peirce remarked that "the illative [i.e.,

⁴⁴ This aspect of semiosis is crucial. Legg (2005) explores it and calls it "meaning fallibilism".

inferential] relation is the primary and paramount semiotic relation [...] the *production* of propositions is of the general nature of inference, so that inference is the essential function of the cognitive mind".⁴⁵ It becomes clear that Peirce thought that understanding the meaning of a sentence involves both its role in communication and inference.

Let me briefly elaborate on this last claim by outlining the affinity of Peirce's view of meaning understanding and inferentialism. Pape (2002) and Legg (2008) have argued that Peirce was an inferentialist.⁴⁶ Inferentialism, roughly speaking, is the view that to understand the meaning of a sentence is to understand its role in inferential practice.⁴⁷ For example, from the premises "Rio de Janeiro is to the north of São Paulo" and "São Paulo is to the north of Curitiba" it is permissible to conclude "Rio de Janeiro is to the north of Curitiba". From the premise "Peter loves Maria" it is permissible to conclude "Someone loves Maria". This is obvious. But why are these inferences obvious? The

⁴⁵ According to Peirce, one can distinguish three forms of inference: abduction, deduction, and induction (CP 2.266, 2.774). Abduction "is where we find some very curious circumstance, which would be explained by the supposition that it was a case of a certain general rule, and thereupon adopt that supposition" (CP 2.624). By induction, "we conclude that facts, similar to observed facts, are true in cases not examined" (CP 2.636). Finally, in a deduction "the facts presented in the premisses could not under any imaginable circumstances be true without involving the truth of the conclusion" (CP 2.778).

⁴⁶ More precisely, Legg (2008: 118) argues that Peirce was a "Hyper-inferentialist", which means that Peirce held the view that all mental content is inferential.

⁴⁷ Inferentialism has been advocated by many philosophers such as Sellars (2007). Nevertheless, the name "inferentialism" was first coined by Brandom (1994) to refer to his view on meaning and content. For other varieties of inferentialism, see Cozzo (1994) and Peregin (2015).

inferentialist's answer is the following: to accept the aforementioned inferences involving the words "north" or "Someone" is part of grasping the meaning of those words. Alternatively, an inferentialist holds that to know the meaning of a word or a sentence is to know, implicitly, that if one uses that word or that sentence, certain inferences involving them ought to be accepted. The rules of inference involving an expression are meaning-constitutive. Accordingly, an inferentialist does not explain meaning in terms of a relation of representation between linguistic entities and an independently structured reality, but in terms of the use of words in inferential practice, which is just a part of communication.

What is characteristic of the inferentialist approach is the view that meanings are the inferential roles that certain type of sounds and inscriptions acquire in virtue of being used in assertion and inference. Accordingly, inferentialists are committed to at least two important claims: (1) the meaning of a linguistic expression is not an object represented by such expression; and (2) meaning is normative in the sense that to say that a sentence is meaningful is to say that it ought to be used in a particular way in inference and communication. The main point here is that the Peirce's view of semiosis supports the claim that Peirce was committed to (1) and (2). As a result, one can start a sketch of Peirce's view of the proposition *qua* sign by acknowledging what Peirce did *not* mean by

“proposition”. On the one hand, Peirce rejected the view that propositions are entities. As such, Peircean propositions are in contrast with both so-called “Fregean” propositions, which are conceived as structured abstract entities, and “Russellian” propositions, which are conceived as complexes of ordinary concrete objects (the referents of words).⁴⁸ On the other hand, Peirce rejected the view that propositions are psychological entities. Actually, Peirce criticized some German logicians of his time that used the word “proposition” (*Satz*) as the linguistic expression of a judgment (*Urtheil*) since they meant by “judgment” a psychological state.⁴⁹

So far, I have shown that the import of a proposition, as a sign, depends on its role in communication and inference. Accordingly, my question is this: How one should understand the notion of proposition according to this picture of semiosis and the sign relation? Since propositions are signs, a promising way to answer this question is to clarify the following three aspects of the proposition:

- (i) Propositions as sign-vehicles: this aspect concerns propositions as used in acts of communication.

⁴⁸ See Russell (1903) and Frege (1984b).

⁴⁹ Peirce’s main targets were Sigwart and Schöder, see (EP 2.430). Peirce heavily criticized their view because “[t]o explain the proposition in terms of the “judgment” is to explain the self-intelligible in terms of a psychical act, which is the most obscure of phenomena” (CP 2.309).

- (ii) Propositions in relation to their objects: this aspect concerns propositions as being about something that is signified.
- (iii) Propositions in relation to their communicational effect: this aspect concerns propositions as signifying elements.

In the sequel, I shall elaborate on the above tree aspects in an attempt to get a clearer picture of Peirce's view of the proposition and its relation to Peirce's view of assertion.

3.3. Propositions as sign-vehicles and the type-token distinction

What *kind* of sign is a proposition? Peirce wrote: "A proposition [...] is not to be understood as the lingual expression of a judgment. It is, on the contrary, that sign of which the judgment is one replica and the lingual expression another" (EP 2.311, 1904). Interestingly, Peirce thought that both judgments and assertions are *replicas* of propositions. He meant by "replica" the *token* of a *type*.⁵⁰ Thus, Peirce held that propositions, *qua* signs, are types. In addition, one should qualify that since assertions and judgments are paradigmatic examples of proposition-

⁵⁰ The type-token distinction is one of Peirce's celebrated contributions to philosophy. Quine, for example, applied Peirce's type-token distinction to sentences. See Quine (1986).

tokens, and assertions and judgments are acts, it follows that propositions are *act-types*.⁵¹

However, Peirce's view of propositions as acts-types raises at least three new questions. First, what Peirce meant by "Types" and "Tokens"? Second, since Peirce clearly distinguished a proposition from its assertions, what is the nature of propositions as act-types? And third, in which sense assertions are "replicas" of propositions? In the remaining part of this section, I will tackle these crucial questions.

Let me give a first approximation to Peirce's distinction between types and tokens by way of an example. Consider the number of words in the following line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*:

Words, words, words.

It is possible to distinguish two uses of "word" in the above line. According to a first use of "Word", one may count one word; in another use of "Word", one may count three different words. Peirce called words in the first sense "Types" and words in the second sense "Tokens" (CP 4.537). Thus, we have one word-type

⁵¹ Peirce understood judgment in terms of the act of assertion. He wrote: "Do we not all perceive that *judgment* is something closely allied to *assertion*? That is the view that ordinary speech entertains. A man or woman will be heard to use the phrase, "I says to myself." That is, *judgment* is held to be either no more than an *assertion to oneself* or at any rate something very like that (CP 5.29)." Peirce understood "judgment" in terms of *assertion to oneself*. He thought that judgments are the cognitive counterparts of acts of assertion.

and three word-tokens. As this example shows, tokens are *particular* instances, ink marks on the page or vibrations in the air, of a *general* type.

In addition, the same token can embody different sorts of types: “The word and its meaning are both general rules; but the word alone of the two prescribes the qualities of its replicas in themselves” (CP 2.292, 1902). Consider, for example, the following two words:

Dog

Dog

The word “Dog” admits at least two uses. It can be used as a noun to refer to a mammal, and it can be used as a verb, which indicates the action of following someone persistently. These two uses of the word “Dog” can be codified as rules of interpretation or semantic types.⁵² Peirce called rules of interpretation “precepts” (EP 2.286, 1903). In addition, the word “Dog” also embodies another sort of type, namely, a syntactic type or rule of formation. This is the rule in respect to which the word “Dog” is considered a well-formed expression of English and it prescribe the qualities of its replicas, as Peirce claimed. Accordingly, “Dog” and “Tyke” are tokens of different syntactic types, but they express the same precept when one uses them to refer to a mammal. Hence, the

⁵² See Hilpinen (2012) for a similar distinction.

act of using a word can embody different semantic types (e.g. "Dog") and the use of different words can embody the same semantic type (e.g. "Dog" and "Tyke").

Peirce extended the claim that a word and its meaning are both types to sentences used in spoken and written language. Peirce thought that a sentence and the proposition one expresses by the use of such sentence in a speech act are both types. The sentence is a type in the sense of a grammatical rule to compose a well-formed sentence of a language. A proposition-type is a "precept" in the sense of an implicit rule of correct use of a sentence in an assertoric context of utterance. However, the only we can count on is the act, for one does not (and need not) usually make explicit the rule involved in tokening the proposition (e.g. the predicate "dog" applies to *this* animal if and only if it is a dog"). As this example illustrates, the identity of propositions consists partly in the fact that sentences can be used correctly or incorrectly, particularly in assertoric speech. In turn, the actual act of using the sentence in assertoric speech instantiates such prescription or rule of correct use of a sentence.⁵³

One advantage of Peirce's distinction between types and tokens is that it allows achieving generality without any ontological commitment to abstract

⁵³ One should note, though, that this prescription, which is implicit in discursive practice, is not necessarily explicit. As I shall show in what follows, Peirce thought that apprehending the meaning of a sentence consists in knowing how to use it correctly in assertoric practice.

entities: "In order that a Type may be used, it has to be embodied in a Token [...]." (ibid) As this passage shows, Peirce thought that all types require tokens.⁵⁴ Hence, a proposition-token is usually the utterance of a sentence used as a means to perform a speech act that occurs at a specific time and place. Peirce wrote:

A sentence, in the sense here used, is a single object. Every time it is copied or pronounced, a new sentence is made. But a proposition is not a single thing and cannot properly be said to have any existence. Its mode of being consists in its possibility. (MS 599: 5–6, ca. 1902)

According to Peirce, the expression of a proposition is only achievable through its replicas or tokens. On Peirce's conception, proposition-tokens are simply utterances or inscriptions of sentences one uses as a means to perform a speech act, paradigmatically assertion. In other words, the ontological status of proposition-tokens is plain: vibrations in the air, marks on a page, etc., which occurs at a specific time and place.

I turn now to the issue concerning the nature of propositions as act-types: what sort of *act* is a propositional act? According to Peirce, propositions, as act-types, are acts of predication. He wrote:

⁵⁴ Although Peirce claimed that types do not exist, some contemporary authors argue that types exist, for example, Wetzel (2009).

It may be asked what is the nature of the sign which joins "Socrates" to "__is wise," so as to make the proposition "Socrates is wise." [...] But it is not the two signs "Socrates" and "wise" that are connected, but the *replicas* of them used in the sentence. We do not say that "__is wise," as a general sign, is connected specially with Socrates, but only that it is so as here used. The two replicas of the words "Socrates" and "wise" are *hic et nunc*, and their junction is part of their occurrence *hic et nunc*. (EP 2.310)

Peirce suggested here that adding a copula as an extra constituent of predication is a mistake. The mistake consists in not recognizing that predication is something that speakers *do* by producing *replicas* of propositions here and now using sentences. For example, Peirce thought that in *using* the sentence "Socrates is wise", one refers to Socrates by using the name "Socrates" and describes him as being wise by using the predicate "is wise". In this sense, the assertoric use of this sentence constitutes a proposition-token, an occurrence here and now of such proposition. In other words, Peirce thought that the combination *hic ut nunc* of a subject and a predicate results in "the kind of sign that conveys information", which is the proposition (EP 2.275).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Notably, this is Peirce's solution to the problem of predication. This problem has its modern versions based on the Bradley's regress, see Bradley (1930), but it can also trace its root back to the so-called "third man problem" in Plato's *Parmenides* (132a–b). A contemporary treatment of this problem can be found in Davidson (2005). This is the problem that once plausible assignments of semantic roles have been made to the parts of sentences, the parts do not seem to compose a

It is in order to elaborate on Peirce's view of predication as an act. One can distinguish at least two broad views of predication, namely, *linguistic* views and *metaphysical* views. In order to locate Peirce's view and its import, I shall briefly introduce each one of them.

Linguistic views of predication relate to the employment of a predicate, which is a linguistic expression, as a means to convey to others a feature of an object. Angelelli (1980:104) remarks: "In this proper sense predication appears as a relation between a linguistic expression (written word or spoken word or in fact any other sort of sign) and an object (normally extralinguistic)". The driving

united whole. It is a problem at the semantic level that deals with how predicates are related to singular terms and contribute to the unity of the sentences one uses to token a proposition. For example, consider certain black cat. Suppose now that I utter, "The cat is black". In doing so, I have said something true about the cat by combining the noun phrase "The cat" and the predicate phrase "is black". But, what binds together these words into a single sentence that is true? The problem of predication concerns what makes a sentence like "The cat is black" a structural unit with a truth-value and not a mere list of words. In other words, the problem of predication consists in construing "predication" not as a merely syntactic concatenation or, alternatively, as a mere list of words, for example, <*Socrates, is, mortal*>. The problem of predication is so-called because any solution to it should explain the distinctive contribution made by predicates to the truth or falsity of sentences. As I have mentioned, Peirce thought that adding a copula as an extra constituent of predication is a mistake. The mistake consists in not recognizing that predication is something that speakers *do*. For example, Peirce thought that in *using* the sentence "Socrates is wise", one refers to Socrates by using the name "Socrates" and describes him as being wise by using the predicate "is wise". In this sense, the use of the sentence constitutes a proposition-token, an occurrence here and now of such proposition. One should note that understanding the connection between subject and predicate should not be confused with a theory of predicates. A theory of predicates aims to explain the nature and semantics of predicates. For present purposes, it is only required to understand how predicates can maintain their proper *functions* as parts of sentences while at the same time contribute to the unity of sentences in which they occur, the unity demanded by the fact that the proposition one expresses by the use of a sentence can be true or false.

thought behind this use of “predication” is that language users produce oral or written linguistic expressions in order to say something of an object.⁵⁶ For example, when one uses the sentence “Socrates is bearded” to say something about Socrates, namely, that he has a growth of hair on his cheeks and chin.

Accordingly, linguistic views construes “predication” as the relation between a predicate, which is a linguistic expression, and the object referred to by a singular term. As Quine (1960:96) remarked: “Predication joins a general term and a singular term to form a sentence that is true or false according as the general term is true or false of the object, if any, to which the singular term refers”. Here the relevant notion of predication is called “linguistic” because the emphasis concerns the linguistic expressions one uses to talk about objects.

By contrast, the driving thought behind metaphysical views of predication is that there are certain kinds of things, for example, particulars, kinds, properties and relations, which stand in certain ways in the world. As such, what is predicated of the object is not a linguistic predicate but rather an alleged *property* denoted by the linguistic predicate. For example, the cat being black, Socrates being human, Bob loving Maria, etc. Of course, things standing in certain ways in the world make linguistic predications true or false. For example, Socrates being

⁵⁶ See Bogen (1985) for a similar distinction concerning the senses of “predication”.

bearded makes true the sentence "Socrates is bearded". Accordingly, this view admits that the predicate "is bearded" applies to a bearded thing. However, the predicate "is bearded" applies to it in virtue of its being bearded, which means that it instantiates the property beardedness. As a result, this view construes "predication" as the *relation between a property and the particulars that instantiate it*. Here the relevant notion of predication is called "metaphysical" because the emphasis concerns the relation of instantiation, that is, the relation between a property and a thing that has such property.

As the textual evidence so far discussed clearly suggests, Peirce's use of the word "predication" is akin to the first sense just mentioned. Peirce rejected the idea that predicates denote properties. For Peirce, logical subjects and logical predicates are categories of expression with clear contributions to the role of propositions in inference. Logical subjects comprise both proper names (e.g. "Socrates") and quantifiers (i.e. "someone" and "everyone"), which are used to refer to an individual object or a collection of objects. In turn, logical predicates comprise expressions like "is wise", "loves", "is between", etc., which are used to characterize or describe the object (or objects) indicated by the subject (or subjects), as when one sticks a label with the word "Fragile" in a vase.⁵⁷ In

⁵⁷ I take this image from Angelelli (1980).

addition, according to Peirce, logical predicates can be monadic or one-place (e.g. “__is wise”), dyadic or two-place (e.g. “__loves__”), triadic or three-place (e.g. “__is between__and__”), etc.; see (EP 2.427).⁵⁸ As I have mentioned, from Peirce’s logical point of view, the driving thought behind these logical categories of expression is the distinction between what one is talking about, the object one refers by using subjects, and what one is saying about it, the description or information one conveys of it by using predicates.

I would like to stress that the main thrust of Peirce’s view of propositions as types is that predication is a type of act.⁵⁹ For example, if Joe performs an act of assertion by means of uttering the sentence “Adriana is smart”, he is producing a token of a type, namely, the type of action of applying the predicate “smart” to

⁵⁸ However, one should note that Peirce held that there is no ultimate logical analysis of a sentence: “what [a] predicate is considered to be depends upon how we choose to analyse it” (CP 4.438). For example, Peirce considered that the predicate of the sentence “God gives some good to every man” can be analysed in several ways as follows:

“__gives__to__

__gives some good to__

__gives__to every man

God gives__to__

God gives some good to__

God gives__to every man

__gives some good to every man

God gives some good to every man

In the last case the entire proposition is considered as a predicate [i.e. a zero-place predicate]” (ibid.).

⁵⁹ Recently, some authors have defended different versions of the view of propositions as types. For example, Johnston (2009) and Hanks (2015) developed different views of propositions as act-types. Dummett (1996) and Soames (2010) developed different views of propositions as types whose tokens are mental or linguistic *events*.

Adriana. For Peirce, such “propositional act-type” is the proposition that Adriana is clever.⁶⁰

I am now in a position to suggest in which sense a speech act such as an assertion is a token of a proposition. It is clear that one does something more than saying in performing a speech act. In the case of assertion, for example, one undertakes a responsibility for the truth of what one says. By parity of reason, the situation is the same with the rest of speech acts: whenever one performs a speech act, one also instantiates a proposition.⁶¹ Peirce wrote: “[o]ne and the same proposition may be affirmed, denied, judged, doubted, inwardly inquired into, put as a question, wished, asked for, effectively commanded, taught, and does not thereby become a different proposition” (EP 2.312, 1904). Now, the crucial point here is that since Peirce claimed that all types require tokens, which entails that there are no uninstatited propositions-types, propositions are tied to speech acts, in particular, speech acts of assertion.

In other words, since all proposition-types require tokens, in performing a speech act one instantiates a proposition-type. However, one cannot instantiate

⁶⁰ For simplicity, I shall use the expressions “proposition-type” and “propositional act-type” as synonyms. Likewise, I shall use the expressions “proposition-token” and “propositional act-token” as synonyms.

⁶¹ Of course, not every utterance will constitute a proposition-token (e.g. when practicing English pronunciation) and some proposition-token are not performed by utterances, for example, written sentences or non-verbal signs like images or gestures (e.g. the hand signals used by commandos to indicate the position of the enemy, see MacFarlane (2011)).

propositions-types, as acts of predication, in isolation from speech acts. Let me explicate this important point by considering several examples. Suppose that a speaker and a listener are uttering the following sentences in suitable circumstances:

(7) I promise that I will repair the fence.

(8) Tom will open the door.

It is clear that one who utters (7) is making a promise while one who utters (8) is usually making a request. It is also clear that each speech act was performed by the utterance of a different sentence. In addition, the two speakers tokened two different proposition-types: the performer of (7) said that he or she will repair the fence while the performer of (8) said that Tom will open the door.

Let me introduce another example. Consider the following exchange between a primary school student and her history teacher:

S: Was Socrates a philosopher?

T: He was indeed a philosopher.

The student is making a question while the teacher is making an assertion. However, there is a similarity between these performances: they tokened the same proposition-type. The student questioned that Socrates was a philosopher while the teacher asserted that he was so. This means that both the student and the

teacher have said the same, namely that Socrates was a philosopher. Thus, in performing their individual utterances, the student and the teacher have produced two different speech acts that token the same proposition-type.

Likewise, one can token the same proposition-type and perform the same speech act by means of uttering different sentences.⁶² For example, suppose that two speakers utter in suitable circumstances “Miguel de Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*” and “O manco de Lepanto escreveu *Dom Quixote*”. One can also token different proposition-types and perform the same speech act by means of uttering the same sentence. For example, suppose Tim utters “I am hungry” and Maria utters “I am hungry”. Two different propositions have been tokened, since the object is different in the two cases.

As these examples show, it is clear that the identity criterion for proposition-types is different from that of speech acts. How one can determine the identity criterion of a proposition-type on a certain occasion? I shall tackle this question in the remaining part of this chapter.

⁶² Naturally, I shall focus on the speech act of assertion henceforth.

3.4. Propositions and objects

Peirce thought that one can determine the identity of proposition-types by the context of utterance. By “context of utterance”, I mean the interpersonal context or circumstances in which a speech act is performed by the utterance or inscription of a sentence.⁶³ Peirce wrote:

If somebody rushes into a room and says, “There is a great fire!” we know he is talking about the neighborhood and not about the world of Arabian Nights’ entertainment. It is the circumstances under which the proposition is uttered or written which indicate that environment as that which is referred to (CP 2.357, 1902).⁶⁴

For example, in the context of the above exchange between a student and a teacher it is clear that by using the name “Socrates” the student was asking about the man who was born in classical Athens in the year 470 BC, son of Sophroniscus, teacher of Plato, rather than the celebrated Brazilian soccer player. In addition, by applying the predicate “was a philosopher”, the teacher said about Socrates that he was engaged in the activity of philosophy.

⁶³ For present purposes, I shall focus on assertoric contexts of utterance (i.e. the interpersonal context in which a speaker performs an assertion by an utterance).

⁶⁴ Peirce wrote that a proposition is “uttered or written”. This way of speaking does not mean that Peirce conflated sentence with proposition. In Section 2.2. I will show that Peirce applied the type-token distinction to propositions. So constituted, the utterance or inscription of a sentence as a means to perform a speech act constitutes a proposition-token.

As Hilpinen notes regarding the above passage, “[o]ne of the most interesting insights of Peirce’s theory of the proposition was his observation that the identity of the proposition uttered on a certain occasion is often determined by the context of utterance” (1992:478). For example, consider the assertoric utterance of the following two sentences in suitable circumstances:

(9) The cat is on the mat.

(10) O gato está sobre o tapete.

On the one hand, the inscription of (9) and (10) may be regarded as two different sentence-tokens of two different sentence-types, which are the syntactic rules to construct the sentences in English and Portuguese respectively. On the other hand, the utterance of (9) and (10) may be regarded as two different proposition-tokens of the same proposition-type. One can construe this proposition-type as the act of predicating the relation (or dyadic predicate) “is on” of the cat (Ferio) and the mat. For example, according to the context of utterance, (9) and (10) are about two objects, Ferio and a mat, in a certain relation. These objects are referred to by the noun phrases “The cat” and “the mat”, and “O gato” and “o tapete”. In addition, Ferio and the mat are described as being in a certain relation, which is expressed by the predicates “is on” and “está sobre”. These inflections indicate present time. Thus, if I challenge the speaker by uttering “How do you know?”,

she may reply “Come here and look!”. Thus, both sentences have been correctly used in an assertoric context of utterance. In addition, the same proposition act-type has been instantiated by means of two different acts of assertion performed by using two different sentence from two different languages.

It becomes clear that the context of utterance is directly related to Peirce’s semiotic notion of object. Indeed, Peirce thought that the notion of object comprehends anything one can talk about. In other words, the collection of people or objects to which one refers to by using logical subjects in a sentence, which Peirce called “Universe of Discourse”:

In every proposition the circumstances of its enunciation show that it refers to some collection of individuals or of possibilities, which cannot be adequately described, but can only be indicated as something familiar to both speaker and auditor. At one time it may be the physical universe of sense, at another it may be the imaginary “world” of some play or novel, at another a range of possibilities (CP 2.536, 1902).

As Peirce suggested in the above passage, the Universe of Discourse of an assertion or assertoric utterance of a sentence is usually given by the context of utterance in which the assertion is made.⁶⁵ Let me consider an example adapted

⁶⁵ At this point the question concerning fictional discourse arises. Hilpinen notes that “fictional discourse has as its object (i.e. as its ‘object-at-large’) some fictional universe (or perhaps a

from Nunberg (1995): Joe, a restaurant waiter, may utter to his replacement, “The ham sandwich left without paying”. Evidently, Joe has not asserted that the *ham sandwich* left without paying. Nonetheless, he has made an assertion, namely, he asserted that *some client*, the one who ordered the ham sandwich, left without paying.

Accordingly, in respect to the object, a proposition is “a symbol that separately indicates its object” (EP 2.168, 1903). A proposition indicates its object “separately” in the sense that the subject of the proposition- token indicates the object independently of the predicate. Let me clarify this point by way of an example. Consider the assertoric utterance of the following sentence:

(11) Socrates was a philosopher.

One should note that in (11) the speaker used “Socrates” to refer to Socrates, and “was a philosopher” to characterize him as being a certain way. As I have mentioned, the driving thought behind these categories of expression is the distinction between what one is talking about, the object one refers by using subjects, and what one is saying about it, the description or information one conveys by using predicates. It is thus clear that predicating involves referring.

collection of such universes), and fictional names refer (have as their special objects) fictional objects. Peirce seems to adopt this view when he says that the proposition ‘Hamlet was mad’ relates to [i.e., has as its object] a great creation more enduring than bronze. (CP 2.342).” Hilpinen (1992:479-480).

The function of referring is to indicate the object of what one is talking about as when one points out with a finger, say, to a vase. Referring is involved in predicating since by way of an act of predication one communicates what one is saying about the object as when one sticks a label with the word "Fragile" to a vase⁶⁶. For example, the utterer of (11) is talking about Socrates by using the name "Socrates" to refer to him, and saying about him that he was engaged in the activity of philosophy by using the predicate "was a philosopher". But, what Peirce meant by "referring"?⁶⁷

Peirce held that "[a] proper name, when one meets with it for the first time, is existentially connected with some percept or other equivalent individual knowledge of the individual it names" (CP 2.329, 1903). Thus, it is plausible to assume, as this passage suggests, that Peirce thought that the act of referring to an object by using a proper name depends on contextual, discursive, and epistemic factors.

Accordingly, the scholarship on Peirce's theory of proper names has stressed the affinities of his view with the so-called "new theory of reference" by

⁶⁶ I take this perspicuous example from Angelelli (1981).

⁶⁷ This is a vexed question. Hilpinen (1995:286–7) and Short (2007:225-276) remark that Peirce's affinities either lie against a descriptivist theory of names or with the direct reference tradition. Nonetheless, recent scholarship has taken a different route by rejecting the aforementioned emphasis and attempting to articulate an approach of names more close to Peirce's notion of semiosis and context of utterance. For example, Boersema (2011) and Agler (2011).

drawing connections between Peirce's comments on proper names and various aspects of the theory of names held by S. Kripke (1980).⁶⁸ The new theory of reference holds that there is a causal chain of designation that begins with the first "grounding" of the name. Thus, each subsequent use of the name is causally linked to the first. One advantage of the causal theory of reference is its recognition of the importance of the initial act of naming. Emphasis on this originating moment is also important for Peirce. Consider an example offered by Peirce concerning the semantic roles of names. He wrote:

It is convenient to regard such names as Theodore Roosevelt and Rudyard Kipling as singulars. They denote persons who we may roughly say are equally known to you and to me. However, my knowledge of Theodore Roosevelt or of Rudyard Kipling is a little different from yours. I have rather hazy recollections of having perceived a very young man at the club, in which perceptions there was a direct consciousness of a reaction, and I remember we used to say, "That young Theodore Roosevelt is going to be an important personage." I recollect to have perceived that name many times in the newspapers and to have talked about the person referred to with his neighbors and relatives; and I recollect later perceiving in the

⁶⁸ For example, Pape (1982:347), Thibaud (1987:527), Hilpinen (1995:286–7), DiLeo (1997:574, 592–3), Maddalena (2006:29), and Short (2007:225, 276) all remark that Peirce's affinities either lie against a descriptivist theory of names or with the direct reference tradition.

White House a person who seemed to be the President, and who talked as if he were acquainted with me. These circumstances have led me semi-instinctively to suppose that one person preserving an identity through the continuity of space, time, character, memory, etc., has been one singular connected with all these phenomena; [...] (EP 2.221-222)

To be sure, this passage constitutes evidence that Peirce regarded contextual and epistemic factors as crucial to understand the semantic role of names. However, the new theory of reference makes use of notions such as that of a possible world, to which Peirce was clearly not committed. Thus, although this interpretation is to certain extent illuminating, it carries an exegetical burden that is practically unsustainable.

Recent scholarship on Peirce's view of names and singular terms takes a different route by attempting to articulate a semiotic approach of names closer to Peirce's views.⁶⁹ As Eco (1976) clearly remarks, the first point to qualify contra descriptivist and causal interpretations of Peirce's view of naming is that Peirce held that speakers, not expressions, refer. Agler (2011:612), who presented four relevant points to understand Peirce's view on proper names, develops Eco's point as follows:

⁶⁹ For example, Boersema (2009) and Agler (2011).

- (a) One uses proper names as indexical types governed by semiotic conventions.
- (b) One refers by using proper names to singular objects having logical (rather than physical) existence.⁷⁰
- (c) Names are non-descriptive and directly referential of their objects.
- (d) Contextual, discursive, and epistemic factors are integral to a proper name's designation of its referent.

I would like to follow Agler's line of interpretation concerning Peirce's view of reference. In particular, I am interested in using this interpretation to understand the relation between referring and propositions. Accordingly, as Peirce suggests in (EP 2.310), the object referred by the subject (and described by the predicate) determines the identity criterion for propositions: one tokens the same proposition-type if the subject one uses to refer and the predicate one uses to describe a feature have the same object. For example, suppose that I have uttered

⁷⁰ By "logical existence", Agler means the use of names as hypostatic abstractions. Hypostatic abstraction is the logical operation that turns "predicates from being signs that we think or think *through*, into being subjects thought of" (CP 4.549). Mathematicians commonly use this form of abstraction. For example, the set abstraction "{x: x is a prime number}" functions as a singular term for the set of numbers whose members the predicate "is a prime number" applies.

“The spouse of Xanthippe was whiskered” and “Socrates was bearded”. In doing so, I have tokened the same proposition-type on two occasions.⁷¹

Let me expand on this point Peirce’s view of predication and reference suggests that a proposition-token comprehends a twofold function. Peirce wrote:

In respect to being fragmentary, therefore, the two signs are alike. It may be said that "Socrates wise" does not make a sentence in the language at present used in logic, although in Greek it would. But it is important not to forget that no more do "Socrates" and "is wise" make a proposition unless there is something to indicate that they are to be taken as signs of the same object.

(EP 2.310, 1904)

In the above passage, Peirce develops further his recurring idea that what binds together subject and predicate is not a special sign, the copula, but an act. The relevant qualification Peirce made to this central idea is that using a sentence and thus producing a proposition-token indicates that the subject and the predicate of such sentence are to be taken together as *signs of the same object*. In other words, Peirce’s crucial idea is that the act of predicating, which involves the act of referring to an object by using a subject, and whose role as sign is to convey a character of an object by using a predicate, produces a single proposition act-

⁷¹ I have limited myself here to talk about Peirce’s views of names in relation to proposition-types. In Chapter 4, I will elaborate on Peirce’s view of the quantifiers.

token.⁷² Thus, given a certain context of utterance, two proposition-tokens instantiate the same proposition-type if and only if their subjects and predicates are signs of the same object.

However, one might claim that there is a gap between the above criteria of identity for propositions, so formulated, and Peirce's notion of sign as a triadic relation. For, even if Peirce conceived predication as an act, it seems that whether the subject and the predicate of a proposition-token indicate, in their respective qualified senses, the same object is a matter of a dyadic relation between a proposition-token and an object in the universe of discourse. This observation is relevant because it paves the way for introducing the crucial relation between propositions and assertability that I have announced from the beginning of this chapter. In the next and final section of this chapter, I will show how the notion of assertability enters into Peirce's view of the proposition.

⁷² Since, according to Peirce, all proposition-types require tokens and predicating is something one does in speech, I will focus on discussing proposition-tokens in the remaining part of this chapter.

3.5. Propositions and assertability

Since Peirce held that a proposition is an assertable sign, he was committed to the view that the concept of proposition should be understood in terms of *assertability* rather than *actual* assertion. In addition, since Peirce held a view of propositions as act-types, Peirce was also committed to the view that all proposition-tokens are assertable. However, this last consequence is not a platitude. As I showed in section 3.3., Peirce claimed that one can instantiate proposition-types by means of performing any speech act. Why Peirce held that propositions are essentially related to assertability? The purpose of this last section is to tackle this crucial question for Peirce's view of the proposition.

So far, it is clear that the object determines the identity of a proposition-token. However, one aspect of the proposition *qua* sign is missing. Such aspect is the role of propositions as signifying elements or interpretants. Under Peirce's view of the sign as a triadic relation, if a proposition is not interpreted as *a sign of* an object, then it is meaningless. In turn, interpreting a proposition-token as a sign of an object consists in understanding its role in communication and inference. Given the central role of assertion in inference and communication, it is clear that interpreting a proposition-token as a sign of an object ultimately depends on its assertability. In this sense, Peirce thought that there is an essential

relation between the notion of proposition and the notion of assertability. Let me elaborate on this crucial idea of Peirce's view of the proposition.

Peirce thought that two proposition-tokens instantiate the same proposition-type if and only if their subjects and predicates are signs of the same object. However, even if predication is construed as an act, this claim requires qualification because it conveys a mere dyadic relation between proposition-tokens and object. How is it possible for speakers and listeners to interpret proposition-tokens as signs of objects? Peirce wrote:

A man, tramping along a weary and solitary road, meets an individual of strange mien, who says, "There was a fire in Megara." If this should happen in the Middle United States, there might very likely be some village in the neighborhood called Megara. Or it may refer to one of the ancient cities of Megara, or to some romance. And the time is wholly indefinite. In short, nothing at all is conveyed, until the person addressed asks, "Where?"—"Oh about half a mile along there" pointing to whence he came. "And when?" "As I passed." Now an item of information has been conveyed, because it has been stated relatively to a well-understood common experience. (EP 2.478)

Since to assert a proposition is to commit oneself to defend it, Peirce held that the interpersonal aspect of assertion is crucial to understand what is conveyed by the

instantiation of a proposition-token. Indeed, a necessary condition to understand what is conveyed by the use of a proposition-token is that speaker and listener should share a common experience. By "common experience", Peirce meant "all that is, and must be, well understood between utterer and interpreter, at the outset, in order that the sign in question should fulfill its function" (ibid). Peirce's main point, as the above example illustrates, is that the assertoric utterance of a sentence involves a context in which speaker and listener are able to make qualifications, ask questions, give reasons, etc., and thus cooperate to find an object of common experience of which something has been predicated by using the proposition-token.

Since in an assertoric context of utterance the speaker and listener are able to cooperate in order to find the object indicated by the proposition-token and to determine whether the predicate used by the speaker applies or not applies to the object, the relation between propositions and assertability hinges on the criteria of identity *as signs of objects*. Peirce wrote:

In "John is in love with Helen," the object signified is the pair, John and Helen. But the "is in love with" signifies the form this sign represents itself to represent John-and-Helen's Form to be. That this is so is shown by the precise equivalence between any verb in the indicative and the same made

the object of "I tell you": "Jesus wept" = "I tell you that Jesus wept." (EP 2.478)

In this passage, Peirce suggested that if an indicative sentence is not assertable, such sentence could not be a proposition-token. Thus, according to Peirce, the link between propositions and assertability is grounded on the idea that assertoric utterances can be evaluated as correct or incorrect in respect to a specific context of utterance. Hence, Peirce suggested that the criteria of identity of propositions as signs of objects depend on the possibility of its assertion.

The plausibility of this view resides on Peirce's view of propositions as predicative act-types. The role of a proposition as a sign is to convey information about an object. But, according to Peirce, this role must be ultimately fulfilled in assertoric practice because in such practice speakers and listeners are able to cooperate in order to find an object of common experience of which something has been said by using the proposition-token. Can speakers and listeners cooperate to find such object by commanding, promising, etc.? Peirce's answer is negative, for the speech act of assertion is the single act by means of which a speaker undertakes a responsibility for the truth of a proposition. As such, responsibility for truth presupposes the meaningfulness of what is asserted. Accordingly, if a proposition is not assertable, then it would not be tokened

because, for Peirce, one cannot convey something about nothing: “every kind of proposition is either meaningless or has a real Secondness as its object” (EP 2.279). By “real Secondness”, Peirce meant here a member of the universe of discourse. Since Peirce thought that all types require tokens, it follows that the criteria of identity of propositions used *hic et nunc* depend on the possibility of its assertion.

Peirce’s view that propositions are assertable signs, as explicated above, has an interesting consequence, which is that the main semantic properties of propositions relate to what would result in its assertion: “I grant that the normal use of a proposition is to affirm it; and its chief logical properties relate to what would result in reference to its affirmation” (EP 2:311-312). In the sequel, I will attempt to elaborate on this complementary point.

As I have mentioned, Peirce’s view is that if a proposition is not assertable, then it is meaningless. Since assertability relates to two possibilities, namely, the correct and incorrect use of a sentence in assertoric practice, I interpret this view as saying that the predicates “being correctly used” and “being incorrectly used” are contraries, for their application presupposes an object to which a predicate has been applied. The contradictory of “being used” is “being useless”, for

applying the later presupposes that there is no object to which a predicate has been applied.

So constituted, when one makes (correct or incorrect) assertoric use of a sentence, one's addressee presupposes that there is an object (or objects) in respect to which she can evaluate the correctness of the assertoric act. Returning to a previous example, one would use the sentence "Ferio is on the mat" correctly if indeed Ferio were on the mat, and thus the proposition asserted would be true. If Ferio were not on the mat, the proposition would be false and one would have used the sentence incorrectly. On the other hand, if there were no cat, the utterance of both "Ferio is on the mat" and "Ferio is not on the mat" would be meaningless.

Peirce's point, as I interpret it, hints at distinguishing the cases in which a proposition-type is tokened from the cases in which it is not tokened. Let me elaborate further on this distinction. Consider, for example, the utterance of the following two sentences:

(12) Angela Merkel is the president of Brazil.

(13) The present king of France is bald.

The adequate reconstruction of these cases according to Peirce is the following: in uttering (12), the speaker is usually making an assertion. Accordingly, the

listener understands the utterance as a commitment to vindicate the content of this sentence. Thus, it should be possible to establish whether Angela Merkel is indeed the president of Brazil. Since Angela Merkel is not the president of Brazil, it is clear then that in making assertoric use of (12), the speaker is incorrectly applying a predicate to the object she is referring by "Angela Merkel", who is the actual Chancellor of Germany.

On the other hand, in uttering (13) one is not tokening a proposition-type. As I have mentioned, the contradictory of "being used" is "being useless", which presupposes that there is no object to which a predicate has been applied. It is clear that (13) is assertorically useless because there is no speaker that can undertake the commitment to find the actual king of France or give evidence supporting the claim that he exists at the time of the utterance. This treatment clearly reflects Peirce's insight in (EP 2.478) that a speaker cannot convey information by the use of a sentence unless "it has been stated relatively to a well-understood common experience". Accordingly, Peirce would regard (13) as a meaningless *sentence*, because the potential assertoric use of such sentence fails to be a sign of an object in the Universe of Discourse.

3.6. Final remarks

In this chapter, I have attempted to take a step further in the understanding of Peirce's view of assertion by elaborating on his view of the proposition. In short, propositions are assertable signs in the sense of being types. Such types are tokened in the performance of a speech act, and their criteria of identity depends on the possibility of its assertion.

Peirce's view of proposition as a sign capable of being asserted is, to be sure, interesting not just for historical and exegetical reasons. The dialectics of the contemporary debate on propositions has taken for granted that either propositions are the *referents* of that-clauses *or* they are pure *conventions*. To be sure, Peirce's view of assertion in terms of a duty to give reasons and his view of the proposition in terms of assertability is a plausible alternative to understand the notion of proposition without embracing either Platonism or conventionalism.

Chapter 4

Assertion and Vindictory Commitment

4.1. Introduction

Peirce held that a speaker S asserts a proposition p if and only if S is morally responsible to give reasons for p . Here the notion of reason comprises two broad categories, namely, evidence and argument.⁷³ For example, if a prosecutor asserts that the accused is guilty of murder, she can fulfill her duty to give reasons for such proposition by presenting the murder weapon with the DNA of the accused. Likewise, if a mathematician asserts that there are no whole number solutions to the equation $x^n + y^n = z^n$ when n is greater than 2, unless $xyz=0$, she should fulfill her duty to give reasons for such proposition by presenting a proof.

However, assertion, as a moral act, is a form of interpersonal and, more generally, social interaction. As such, speakers, as asserters, *acknowledge* vindictory obligations while listeners, as addressees, *attribute* such obligations.

⁷³ I use the term "evidence" in its ordinary sense, which comprises both information and physical objects. Some philosophical accounts of evidence deviate from its ordinary use. For example, Williamson (2000) argues that one's evidence consists of the totality of propositions that one knows.

Hence, it is still unclear how Peirce's view of vindicatory commitment construes the interpersonal interaction between asserters and addressees. To be sure, clarifying this aspect is relevant for a proper understanding of Peirce's view of assertion.

In this chapter, I will argue that Peirce construed "vindicatory commitment" dialogically. This means that asserters are proponents who have the duty to defend a proposition p and addressees are opponents who have the right to challenge p . As such, the lawyer and the mathematician, for example, are open to the challenges of their respective opponents (i.e. the peers of the mathematician and the defense attorney representing the accused). Thus, according to Peirce, they are open to the possibility of retraction. I base my case on for this interpretation on Peirce's dialogical semantics for quantified sentences.

In section 4.2., I will introduce Peirce's dialogical semantics for the universal quantifier "all" and the existential quantifier "some". In section 4.3., I will develop an argument for the claim that Peirce held a dialogical view of vindicatory commitment. The argument proceeds by showing, first, that Peirce construed the relation between the asserter and addressee as a symmetrical relation, and second, that the perspectives of the asserter and the listener are

those of a first-person and a second-person, respectively.⁷⁴ Finally, in section 4.4., I will address the question concerning Peirce's view of the relation between assertion, understood as a dialogical vindicatory commitment, and truth.

4.2. Peirce's dialogical semantics for the quantifiers

Peirce's view of assertion in terms of the speaker's moral vindicatory commitment entails that assertoric practice is a form of interpersonal interaction. This interaction involves the relationship between speakers and listeners *qua* asserters and addressees, respectively. In other words, since Peirce thought that asserters make commitments to their addressees, he was committed to the view that there is a relation between undertaking a commitment and a social discursive structure.

In addition, since acts of assertion are subject to evaluation as correct or incorrect, the asserter and the addressee have *deontic statuses*, namely, asserters have obligations while addressees have permissions. Evidently, if the speaker does not fulfill her duty, she has made an incorrect assertion. Accordingly, addressees have the right to ask speakers to fulfill their vindicatory commitments and to criticize speakers that do not fulfill their obligations. How Peirce

⁷⁴ For an extensive discussion of the second-person standpoint in Ethics, see Darwall (2006).

articulated the duties of asserters and the rights of speakers in assertoric practice? By tackling this question in the light of Peirce's comments on quantifiers, I will attempt to clarify the interpersonal aspect of Peirce's notion of vindictory commitment. In other words, I will attempt to go from semantics to pragmatics. In particular, I will show that Peirce's dialogical semantics for quantified sentences suggests a dialogical conception of vindictory commitment.⁷⁵ I use the word "semantics" in the sense that the rules Peirce offered for the quantifiers provide an explication of its meaning.

Peirce thought that quantified phrases like "all" and "some" are indeterminate indices. This means that when one uses quantified phrases, one indicates or refers to an object (or objects) indeterminately. He called the form of indeterminacy expressed by an existential quantifier "indefiniteness", and the form of indeterminacy expressed by the universal quantifier "generality". As it is clear in (CP 2.330), Peirce attempted to solve the problem posed by the indeterminacy of quantified phrases by interpreting them as prescriptions, implicit in our habits of inference, which tell the asserter and the addressee how

⁷⁵ For Peirce as a precursor of game-semantics see Hilpinen (1982). For Peirce as one of the precursors of the dialogical interpretation of quantifiers, see Marion (2012).

they ought to act in order to find an object (or objects) in the universe of discourse to which the predicative part of the sentence is applicable.⁷⁶

Accordingly, Peirce interpreted the existential quantifier and the universal quantifier in the following way: “‘Some’ means that the speaker is to select an instance, while ‘Every’ or ‘Any’ means that a second person is to perform the selection” (CP 2.523). Peirce’s dialogical semantics for quantifiers can be informally introduced as follows: let P stand for the proponent as the defender and O stand for the opponent as the attacker. The dialogue begins with P uttering a quantified sentence and O challenging it, with the players moving in alternate turns. The rules that capture the meaning of the quantifiers are as follows: when P asserts $\forall xF(x)$, O chooses a value for x and then P ought to show that the predicate F applies to the selected value of x . When P asserts $\exists xF(x)$, then O asks P to choose a value for x to which the predicate F applies.⁷⁷ I shall clarify further the import of these rules by considering two examples given by Peirce.

⁷⁶ Peirce called this sort of prescriptions “precepts” (EP 2.168) and “leading principles” (CP. 2.589). He construe them as verbal expressions of “habits of inference” (CP 2.186, 3.160, 3.164).

⁷⁷ Peirce’s interpretation of the existential quantifier seems to commit him to the view that the proponent must show the instance. Suppose that a man is found dead with a knife in his back. To be sure, one can assert that someone killed the man, but one is not in a position to find the assassin in order to give reasons for one’s assertion. One should note that Peirce admits as a reason not just an instance but also an index of existence. An example of an index of existence is the footprint on the sand in Dafoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. In this setting, Crusoe is permitted to assert that someone else is on the island. The footprint, as an index of existence, is an adequate reason. Likewise, the knife in the man’s back is an index of the assassin. Thus, one is permitted to assert

The first example concerns the difference between asserting that some sinners are miserable and asserting that all sinners are miserable. Peirce wrote:

[...] If I guarantee to find a miserable sinner, of course, I guarantee *there is* a sinner in the world. But if I turn the responsibility of picking out the sinner to you, I do not guarantee you can find one. I only say if you do find one, he will turn out miserable. This is the distinction between Universal and Particular propositions. (CP 2.453)

Peirce's use of the expressions "if I guarantee" and "if I turn the responsibility of picking up the sinner to you" exemplifies how the asserter and the addressee alternate their roles in order to assess the assertion of a quantified proposition.

Let me adapt Peirce's example to an specific context. Consider a priest and a parishioner having a pleasant conversation. The priest asserts that some sinners are miserable. The dialogue for this assertion opens with the parishioner exercising her right to challenge it. Then, the priest has thereby the duty to defend it by selecting a sinner that turns out to be miserable. Now, suppose that the priest asserts that all sinners are miserable. In contrast with the former case, the parisher is entitled to pick *ad libitum* any sinner. She finds a sinner that seems very happy, herself. Unfortunately, the priest fails to show that she is

that someone killed the man. Thanks to Marcelo Carvalho for pointed out this objection (in conversation).

uncomfortable with her life. Since there seems to be at least one happy sinner, the priest retracts his assertion.

According to Peirce's explication of the meaning of quantified sentences above, the asserter and the addressee *alternate* their roles in order to assess the correctness of the speakers' assertion. Hence, it is clear that Peirce construed the relation between speaker and listener as a *symmetrical relation*.

The second example is the assertion of the proposition that some woman is adored by every catholic. For Peirce "This means that a well-disposed person with sufficient means could find an index whose object should be a woman such that allowing an ill-disposed person to select an index whose object should be a Catholic, that Catholic would adore that woman" (EP 2.168). The "well-disposed" person is the asserter or *proponent* while the "ill disposed" person is the addressee or *opponent*. The proponent has the duty to select an index of a woman. By "index", Peirce meant any sign that one could use to refer to an object in the universe of discourse (e.g. a proper name).⁷⁸ In turn, the opponent has the right to select an index of a Catholic, which in turn would adore the woman referred by the proponent.

⁷⁸ As the above passage suggests, Peirce was assuming that the "indexes" or names to be used denote objects in the universe of discourse.

Suppose that the priest and the parishoner are the proponent and opponent, respectively. The priest defends by asserting that Mary is loved by every Catholic.⁷⁹ The parishoner attacks by attempting to find a Catholic that does not adore Mary, but fails. Thus, the priest has honoured his duty as an asserter.

Since Peirce conceived the addressee as an opponent, who is entitled to challenge, it follows that he construed the addressee's standpoint as a *second-person perspective*. The second-person perspective is the standpoint *you* and *I* take up when assessing the correctness of an act, in this case an act of assertion. Thus, according to Peirce's dialogical semantics for the quantifiers, addressees have the *right* to challenge the proposition asserted by asking for reasons.⁸⁰

4.3. Peirce's dialogical interpretation of "vindicatory commitment"

There are at least two important consequences of Peirce's dialogical semantics for the quantifiers:

- (1) The relation between speaker and listener is a symmetrical relation.

⁷⁹ Maria is referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ.

⁸⁰ For an extensive discussion of the second-person standpoint in Ethics, see Darwall (2006).

- (2) The perspectives of speaker and listener are those of a first-person and a second-person respectively.

Peirce's *dialogical* construal of the interpersonal aspect of assertion hinges on (1) and (2). Of course, one can oppose to this construal a *monological* construal of the interpersonal aspect of assertion, which hinges on the following two claims:

- (3) The relation between speaker and listener is an asymmetrical relation.
- (4) The perspectives of speaker and listener are those of a first-person and a third-person respectively.

In the remaining part of this section, I will show how the above two different construals of the interpersonal aspect of assertion shape in different ways the notion of vindicatory commitment. As a result, I will clarify the import of Peirce's view of vindicatory commitment.

I shall begin by clarifying how the monological and dialogical construals of the interpersonal aspect of assertion entail different views of vindicatory commitment. What is the relation between the interpersonal aspect of assertion and the notion of vindicatory commitment? Since the deontic status of asserters is that of obligation, it is clear that they ought to vindicate the propositions they assert. One should note that the deontic *status* of asserters relates to the deontic *attitudes* of both asserters and interpreters: asserters *acknowledge* vindicatory

commitments while addressees *attribute* such commitments. In turn, the deontic attitudes of asserters and addressees relates to the way that the vindicatory commitment is *assessed* in assertoric practice. Now, the essential point here is that when one considers the construal of these attitudes and, therefore, the specific way asserters and addressees assess the vindicatory commitment involved in assertion, the asymmetry or symmetry between speaker and hearer is decisive.

If one endorses the claim that assertion is interpersonal in the sense of an asymmetrical relation between the first-person and the third-person perspective, then acknowledging a commitment is definable in terms of *others* taking one as committed. Under this view, the vindicatory commitment is assessed as follows: others (third-person perspective/observers) are authorized to reassert the asserted proposition on the asserter's authority, deferring to the asserter for its vindication. I shall call this view the "monological" interpretation of vindicatory commitment.⁸¹ By contrast, if one endorses the claim that assertion is interpersonal in the sense of a symmetrical relation between the first-person and the second-person perspective, then acknowledging a commitment is not definable in terms of an opponent attributing such commitment. Under this view, the vindicatory commitment is assessed as follows: You (second-person

⁸¹ Henceforth "MIVC".

perspective/opponent) are authorized to challenge the asserter. I shall call this view the “dialogical” interpretation of vindicatory commitment.⁸²

Let me briefly elaborate on the difference between MIVC and DIVC by way of a comparison. Consider Brandom’s construal of the interpersonal aspect of assertion. Brandom reduces the notion of acknowledging a commitment in terms of attributing a commitment. He remarks:

The fundamental concept of the metalanguage employed in specifying the model of assertional practice is that of the deontic attitude attributing a commitment. For the deontic attitude of undertaking a commitment is definable in terms of attribution: undertaking a commitment is doing something that licenses or entitles others to attribute it. Brandom (1994:196)

Although Brandom (1994:54) claims that the social structure of speech is an “I-Thou” sociality, he does not incorporate (1) and (2) into the interpersonal aspect of assertion specifically. Indeed, in discussing his construal of *de re* and *de dicto* ascriptions with Habermas (2000), Brandom (2000) offers the example of a prosecutor and a defence attorney arguing over the trustworthiness of a pathological liar about to take the stand. The point of the example is to illustrate how the assessment of the vindicatory commitment works in assertoric practice.

⁸² Henceforth “DIVC”.

Brandom focuses on the relation between the defense attorney and “others”, which is an asymmetrical relation, and not on the relation between the defense attorney and the prosecutor. The reason for this is that Brandom identifies the addressee with a third-person perspective that assesses the utterance of a speaker.⁸³

However, Brandom’s focus on the audience rather than on the attorneys seems to be inadequate. As Habermas clearly puts it:⁸⁴

Interestingly, Brandom singles out the indirect communication of the speakers with the spectators who are listening to them—rather than the communication of those directly involved—as the paradigmatic case. Certainly, in the courtroom the judges hearing the case and the jury listening to it are the ones who are keeping score, as it were, of how the discussion is progressing and are forming a judgment as to who is scoring points in order to be able to say in the end, for example, how the statement of the controversial witness is to be assessed. During the dispute, however, a reaction is required not from the listeners but from the parties directly involved who address their utterances to one another and who expect each other to take positions. Listeners have a different role than hearers. The listeners take on the role of third persons waiting to see what happens, while

⁸³ See Brandom (1994:54;137;639).

⁸⁴ See also Marion (2012:149).

those directly involved adopt a performative attitude and, in thus taking toward each other the attitude of a first person toward a second, expect a response from each other—regardless of whether this be a positive or negative assessment or an abstention. Habermas (2000:345)

Habermas' point is that Brandom's view of the act of attributing, which crucial for assertoric practice, is not performed by a second-person perspective. Accordingly, Brandom is committed to identify the listener with an observer who assesses the utterance of a speaker and not with an opponent who is expected to reply to the speaker. It becomes clear that Brandom's explication of how the assessment of vindicatory commitment works is a consequence of his view that acknowledging a commitment is definable in terms of *others* taking speakers as committed.

By contrast, consider the structure of Peirce's dialogical semantics for the quantifiers:

	\forall	\exists
Assertion	P asserts $\forall xA$	P asserts $\exists xA$
Attack	O challenges: $\forall x/c$ for any c that O chooses	O challenges \exists O xA
Defence	P defends: $A[x/c]$	P defends: $A[x/c]$ for any c that P chooses

It is clear that the structure of Peirce's semantics for the quantifiers hinges on (1) and (2). Accordingly, Peirce is committed to identify the listener with an opponent who assesses the utterance of a speaker by replying to the latter. As such, the listener is *not* an observer who assesses the utterance of a speaker by deferring the proposition asserted to the latter for its vindication. It becomes clear that Peirce's explication of how the assessment of vindicatory commitment works is a consequence of his view that acknowledging a commitment is not definable in terms of *others* taking speakers as committed. Indeed, Peirce had reasons to claim that even a solitary assertion is an interpersonal act, for "solitary dialectic is still of the nature of dialogue" as the vernacular use of "I say to myself" indicates (CP 5.546). In other words, if one endorses the claim that assertion is interpersonal in the sense of a symmetrical relation between the first-person and the second-person perspective, then acknowledging a commitment is not definable in terms of an opponent attributing such commitment.

Consequently, Peirce thought that the normative attitudes are irreducible elements of assertoric practice. As the structure of Peirce's dialogical semantics for the quantifiers shows, the symmetric relation between asserter and addressee guarantees an alternation of acknowledgements and attributions. Thus, the addressees' right to challenge is not equivalent to the right to defer to the speaker

for vindication. On the contrary, when exercising the right of challenging, the addressee has an active role in assessing the reasons offered by the asserter. In other words, Peirce identifies the addressee with an opponent who shares a common purpose with the asserter: to build mutual understanding. As such, the asserter has the duty to defend p by giving reasons while the addressee has the right to challenge p by asking for reasons.

The main point I have attempted to make by way of this comparison between two related but subtly different views of the interpersonal aspect of assertion is that Peirce's endorsement of (1) and (2) committed him to a dialogical interpretation of vindicatory commitment. Under this interpretation, asserter and addressee hold a symmetrical relation in which the addressee takes the perspective of a second-person. As such, the addressee does not exhaust his role by being authorized to reassert the proposition asserted and deferring to the asserter for its vindication. For Peirce, the addressee has an irreducible role in assessing the asserter's vindicatory commitment by exercising the right to challenge the asserter and, in turn, cashing out the asserter's duty to defend a proposition by giving reasons.

Peirce's dialogical interpretation of vindicatory commitment is very familiar. It seems that when one is judged responsible in virtue of performing an

act it is assumed that one is committed to do something. Thus, listeners are not just permitted to criticize and correct those asserters who do *not* comply with their vindicatory commitments but they are also entitled to challenge them in the first instance. From the second-person perspective involved in holding the speaker responsible, the opponent is concerned with *how appropriately* the speaker should honor the vindicatory commitment acquired in virtue of performing an act of assertion. Peirce's semantics for the quantifiers clearly reflects this important point.

Peirce's dialogical interpretation of vindicatory commitment has at least two interesting consequences. First, since the opponent is concerned with the adequacy of the reasons given by the speaker in order to honor the vindicatory commitment, asserters ought to give *good* reasons for the propositions they assert. Second, and more importantly, since addressees have the right to challenge asserters, the duty to defend that p is *not* equivalent to the duty of actually telling that p is true.⁸⁵ Let me clarify this point. Asserters ought to give good reasons for the propositions they assert. As such, when one asserts that

⁸⁵ Of course, Peirce held that every true proposition is assertable. However, this claim has interesting consequences for Peirce's epistemology. If every true proposition is assertable, then every true proposition is vindicable. Therefore, every true proposition is knowable. It follows from this consequence that Peirce was committed to the so-called "knowability paradox", which says that if any truth can be known then every truth is in fact known. More precisely, $\forall p(p \rightarrow \Diamond Kp) \vdash \forall p(p \rightarrow Kp)$. Hilpinen (2004) explores Peirce's commitment to this paradox and formulates an interesting Peircean solution to it.

p one must have already acknowledged the possibility of a challenge to it.⁸⁶ But being committed to *defend* that p by giving good reasons entails that one could fail to defend that p and, consequently, that one could retract one's assertion that p . By "retracting", I mean to render an act of assertion null, as when a retracted offer is canceled. Thus, the vindicatory commitment involved in assertoric practice can be fully understood only through its relation to both the speech act of challenging and retracting, as it is suggested by Peirce's semantics for the quantifiers.

In sum, since Peirce understood the interpersonal relation involved in assertion as a symmetrical relation between a first-person and a second-person perspective, as entailed by his semantics for the quantifiers, it follows that Peirce construed "vindicatory commitment" dialogically. This means that the speaker has the *duty* to defend that p by giving reasons and the listener has the *right* to attack that p by asking for reasons. In turn, this entails that assertion, as a moral act, involves an irreducibly relationship between a proponent (I, the asserter, first-person perspective) and an opponent (You, the addressee, second-person perspective).

⁸⁶ For this last point, see Marion (2012).

Accordingly, I shall rephrase Peirce's view of assertion as follows: A speaker S asserts that p if and only if S has the moral duty to defend p by giving good reasons to a listener L and L has the right to challenge p by asking for reasons.⁸⁷

4.4. Dialogical vindicatory commitment and truth

Peirce understood "responsibility for truth" as a dialogical vindicatory commitment. This view raises a relevant question: What is the *relation* between assertion and truth? In this section, I will attempt to outline an answer to this vexed question.

Let me begin by sketching Peirce's view of truth.⁸⁸ Peirce's view of truth hinges on the practice of inquiry. Peirce meant by "inquiry" a dialectical interplay between belief and doubt. He clearly conveys this thought in the following excerpt:

[...] You only puzzle yourself by talking of this metaphysical "truth" and metaphysical "falsity," that you know nothing about. [...] if by truth and falsity you mean something not definable in terms of doubt and belief in any

⁸⁷ Interestingly, Peirce's view of assertion is an almost unexplored antecedent of the dialogical tradition in logic. For similar formulations of this view, see Lorenz (1981:20) and Marion (2012:148).

⁸⁸ A detailed introduction of Peirce's view of truth would exceed the scope of this thesis. For a notable work on Peirce's view of assertion, see Misak (1991).

way, then you are talking of entities of whose existence you can know nothing, and which Ockham's razor would clean shave off. Your problems would be greatly simplified, if, instead of saying that you want to know the "Truth," you were simply to say that you want to attain a state of belief unassailable by doubt. (EP 2.336, 1905)

Here Peirce rejected metaphysical views of truth. The point is bold: there is no much more to say about truth besides that a true belief is one that is *undefeatable* by doubt. Peirce characterized doubt as a state of disruption and irritation, a state where one's practical reasoning and action no longer comply with belief (W 3:246, 1878). By contrast, Peirce characterized belief as a state of stability and easiness in which one is disposed to use one's beliefs almost unreflectively in practical reasoning and action.⁸⁹Evidently, Peirce thought that if one finds recalcitrant evidence against a belief, doubt impetuously arises. As a result, whenever one doubts, one is willing to end the disruption. In other words, one is willing to inquiry in order to attain a state unassailable by doubt.⁹⁰

Since inquiry is the practice by means of which one settles belief, Peirce held the view that a proposition, what is believed or doubted, can be either true

⁸⁹ Peirce's view of belief was influenced by Alexander Bain's dispositionalist theory of belief. This theory hinges on the idea being that a belief is whatever disposes us to act. See Bain (1859).

⁹⁰ On this point, see Hookway (2004b:130).

or false. However, Peirce's main qualification regarding this view is that a proposition cannot directly furnish reasons for it being either true or false (EP 2.276, 1903). The reasons must come from the practice of inquiry. As such, a true proposition is one that is *undoubtable* at the end of inquiry (EP 2.204; 336; 347).

I turn now to the relation between truth and assertion. I have mentioned that Peirce construed "inquiry" as a dialectical interplay between belief and doubt. One should note that this interplay matches the dialogical interplay between proponent and opponent involved in assertoric practice. Indeed, the parties involved in the practice of inquiry can be gathered into two broad categories, namely, proponents attempting to defend a proposition p and opponents attempting to challenge p . My point is the following: if one conceives inquiry as a kind of assertoric practice, one can discern how Peirce related assertion to truth.

Let me elaborate on this claim by considering the directions of fit of the act of asserting a proposition according to Peirce's view of assertion.⁹¹ By "direction of fit", I mean the direction of the "match" between the world and a speech act of

⁹¹ I take this way of glossing this point from Searle's use of the distinction between directions of fit to analyze different speech acts in Searle (1979). This distinction was originally developed by Anscombe (1963).

assertion that is required for the latter to be correct.⁹² A corollary of Peirce's view of assertion as a dialogical vindicatory commitment is that an assertion that p is correct if and only if the speaker has good reasons to defend p upon challenge. Hence, according to Peirce's view, assertion has word-to-world direction of fit because the correct assertion of a proposition-token must match the world. For example, consider again Tim asserting that the cat is on the sofa. If Tim asserted correctly, then he ought to be able to show the cat, Ferio, on the sofa as conveyed by the proposition he asserted.

Speakers assert propositions, which can be either true or false. Since assertion has word-to-world direction of fit, the truth-value of a proposition must originate at the boundary where language meets the world. Peirce's dialogical semantics for the quantifiers shows that such boundary is *action*. Peirce wrote:

Every proposition refers to some index: universal propositions to the universe, through the environment common to speaker and auditor, which is an index of what the speaker is talking about. But the particular proposition asserts that, with sufficient means, in that universe would be found an object to which the subject term would be applicable, and to

⁹² I shall clarify that the term "world" here has no ontological weight. It is a mere substitute for Peirce's notion of "universe of discourse", which I introduced in Chapter 3.

which further examination would prove that the image called up by the predicate was also applicable. (CP 2.369)

As this passage suggests, Peirce thought that a correct assertion relates to certain actions concerning the object of the proposition asserted, namely, the actions that show that the use of the predicate applied to the object(s) fits the world. In other words, a correct assertion relates to the actions that show that the proposition asserted is *unchallengeable* by an opponent. Accordingly, I shall gloss Peirce's view of the relation between assertion and truth as follows: a proposition is true if and only if its assertion is correct (i.e. unchallengeable at the end of the dialogue).⁹³

What about mathematical assertions? In the case of mathematics, Peirce thought that the meeting point between assertion and truth is the act of proving. He wrote:

As a fact, I have not the slightest doubt that twice two is four; nor have you.

Then let us not pretend to doubt mathematical demonstrations of mathematical propositions so long as they are not open to mathematical

⁹³ The root of Peirce's view of the relation between assertion and truth has been developed by various philosophers. Notably, Dewey (1938:9) characterized truth in terms of "warranted assertability", which is how he construed the notion of assertoric correctness. In turn, Dewey influenced Dummett (1991) and Putnam (1981).

criticism and have been submitted to sufficient examination and revision.

(2.192, c.1902)

For Peirce, an assertion of a mathematical proposition is correct if and only if the speaker gives a sound proof of such proposition. However, this view leads to the issue concerning the relevant notion of proof: even if one assumes that a mathematical proposition is true if and only if one gives a proof of it, it is still not clear what one means by “proof” here. Let me clarify this issue by briefly introducing two contrary views concerning the notion of proof.

Prawitz (1998) claims that a mathematical proposition p is true if and only if *there is* a proof of p . However, he holds that the existential quantifier in his formulation ranges over an abstract object. For Prawitz, a proof is an abstract object that the mathematician discovers and represents by means of offering a particular proof. By contrast, Dummett (1998) claims that a mathematical proposition is true if and only if one *constructs* a proof of it or possess a *method* that generates a proof (or a disproof). One can easily identify the point of disagreement between Prawitz and Dummett by way of an example. Consider Fermat's last Theorem. According to Prawitz's view, this theorem was true before Andrew Wiles completed his celebrated proof. In other words, since proofs *qua* abstract objects are atemporal, Fermat's last Theorem was already

true; mathematicians simply did not know it. By contrast, according to Dummett's view, when Wiles offered his proof, and overcame certain challenges from his peers, it became permissible to assert the proposition that there are no whole number solutions to the equation $x^n + y^n = z^n$ when n is greater than 2, unless $xyz=0$. Before that, this proposition was only a conjecture.

Unfortunately, Peirce did not address the issue concerning the relevant notion of proof for his view of assertion. However, recent work on Peirce's philosophy of mathematics, for example, Pietarinen (2006), suggests that Peirce sympathized with mathematical constructivism. If this interpretation is correct, then one may plausibly assume that Peirce's view of proofs is akin to that of Dummett's. Of course, Dummett's view is a plausible but controversial. Since this topic is still obscure within Peirce scholarship, I shall clarify that I am merely suggesting an affinity between Peirce and Dummett regarding the relation between truth and assertion in mathematics, which is a relevant issue for proponents of the commitment account of assertion.

Finally, I shall consider two possible objections to Peirce's view of the relation between assertion and truth. On the one hand, one might object that such relation is a mere ideal for inquiry. In ordinary assertoric practice, there are no firm standards of assertoric correctness. Moreover, addressees not usually

engage in evaluating speakers' assertions. Thus, actual assertoric practice does not furnish evidence that Peirce's view of the relation between assertion and truth is plausible. On the other hand, one might object that Peirce's view is too radical, for it seems to convey that in ordinary assertoric practice, addressees ought to continually challenge asserters. But if this were the case, conversation and action are in risk of paralysis.

A possible reply to the first objection is that Peirce's philosophical project aims at understanding assertoric practice not to explain *actual* assertoric practice. In addition, it seems that actual assertoric practice is at least consistent with Peirce's view of assertion as a dialogical vindicatory commitment. As Rescorla (2009:115) clearly puts it, "[in] ordinary conversation, we frequently adduce a speaker's 'conversational commitments.' We say that a speaker is committed to some proposition, or to some proposition being true. We criticize a speaker who cannot defend his conversational commitments when faced with challenges or counter-arguments". To be sure, the dialogical interplay of ordinary conversation involves an element of evaluation. This element might be weak, but it is perceptible enough.

A possible reply to the second objection is that Peirce's view of the relation between assertion and truth assumes fallibilism. Peirce coined the term

“fallibilism” to convey the view that one should remain open to new reasons and thus to the possibility that one has made an incorrect assertion. Thus, one should remain open to challenges and the possibility of retraction.⁹⁴ However, Peirce’s fallibilism, so understood, holds that it is possible to remain open to challenges, and to the possibility of retraction, while also reasonably endorsing a proposition for the purposes of current inquiry and action. To be sure, fallibilism is a controversial view, but it is plausible enough to accommodate this objection.⁹⁵

4.5. Final remarks

In this chapter, I have attempted to clarify further Peirce’s construal of the notion of vindicatory commitment. By discussing Peirce’s semantics for quantified sentences, I have argued that Peirce entertain a dialogical interpretation of “vindicatory commitment”. This interpretation has two main features. First, Peirce construed the relation between the asserter and addressee as a symmetrical relation. Second, the perspectives of the asserter and the listener are those of a first-person and a second-person respectively. Hence, Peirce interpreted “vindicatory commitment” in terms of the asserter’s duty to defend

⁹⁴ See (CP 1.13-14, 1897).

⁹⁵ For a general and compact picture of fallibilism, see Leite (2010:370). For a discussion of Peirce’s fallibilism, see Cooke (2006).

that p with respect to an opponent, a second-person perspective, having the right to challenge that p .

For Peirce, assertoric practice involves a symmetrical relation between two normative primitives: obligation or the duty to defend, and permission or the right to attack. In other words, if one is responsible for the truth of p , one's listener acquires the *right* to challenge p by asking for reasons while one undertakes the *duty* to defend p by giving reasons. We have thus a dialogical social practice of giving and asking for reasons, as it were, in which assertion is the basic move.

Chapter 5

Objections to Peirce's View of Assertion

5.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present two objections to Peirce's view of assertion and some possible replies to them. These are the main objections that have been presented against the commitment account of assertion, which is the view of assertion that has its roots in Peirce, and are crucially relevant for any attempt to elaborate on Peirce's view of assertion.

The first objection, which I introduce in section 5.2., is due to Pagin (2004), a major opponent of commitment accounts of assertion. He argues that the utterance of explicit assertoric sentences, which Peirce's view sanctions as assertions, do not count as assertions. He does this by presenting as a counterexample the "inferential integration" test. This test attempts to show that one cannot successfully substitute explicit assertoric sentences for their indicative counterparts in inference because such substitution affects truth-preservation. This objection targets Peirce's idea of understanding the speech act of assertion

as the undertaking of a certain kind of responsibility. In section 5.2.1., I reply to this objection by using Peirce's distinction between a proposition and its assertion and Peirce's view of propositions. In particular, I use Peirce's insight in (EP 2.478) that the assertoric utterance of an indicative sentence is equivalent to the utterance of an explicit assertoric sentence.

In section 5.3., I introduce the second objection, which consists in a general counterexample against commitment accounts of assertion. This objection, due to MacFarlane (2011), targets Peirce's notion of *vindictory* commitment by putting forward the case of a defense attorney that overtly commits to defend her client. According to MacFarlane, the lawyer undertakes the duty to give reasons for the proposition that her client is innocent but she has not asserted such proposition. Since Peirce's view sanctions the lawyer as asserting the innocence of her client, MacFarlane's counterexample targets Peirce's idea of understanding the speech act of assertion as a *vindictory* commitment. In section 5.3.1., I use Peirce's dialogical interpretation of vindictory commitment to reply to this objection. In particular, I use Peirce's insight that to assert that p is not equivalent to say that p is true.

5.2. First objection: Pagin's "inferential integration" test

According to Pagin (2004), if to assert is to undertake a commitment to the truth of a proposition, then one could assert that p by uttering sentences of the form:

(α) I here thereby commit myself to the truth of the statement that- s .

In other words, since utterances of sentences of the form (α) and assertoric utterances of indicative sentences should have the same normative effect on the speaker, the utterances of both kinds of sentences should count as assertions that p . According to Pagin, the only difference between uttering an indicative sentence and sentences of the form (α) is that the latter are explicit assertoric sentences.

Pagin then contends that by uttering sentences of the form (α) one commits oneself to the truth of a proposition p and one does *not* assert that p . According to Pagin, this contention can be substantiated by way of a test, which he calls the "inferential integration" test. Pagin writes:

An assertion, whether direct or indirect, should *integrate inferentially* with other assertions of the speaker. By that I mean that any assertion should provide a premise for inferences *jointly* with the other assertions, of the same speaker or of other speakers taking part in the conversation. For instance, if I assert that p , directly or indirectly, and also assert that *if p , then*

q , then the statement that q is a consequence of my assertions. So, if I perform an indirect assertion that p by means of an utterance, then inferentially it should be as if I had performed a direct assertion. And so it is, I think, with irony and with rhetorical questions, to the extent that these are used for indirect assertions. Pagin (2004:851)

The inferential integration test “is meant to test the claim that an utterance of a particular sentence s constitutes an assertion that p , directly or indirectly.” (ibid.) Accordingly, Pagin strategy consists in showing that the commitment account would wrongly count as assertions that p utterances of sentences that do not *entail* that p . Pagin considers the following two inferences:

Inference 1: If 73 is a prime number, we cannot share the stones equally.

73 is nicely divisible [Ironic Premise].

Thus, we cannot share the stones equally.

Inference 2: If 73 is a prime number, we cannot share the stones equally.

I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number.

Thus, we cannot share the stones equally.

In contrast with **Inference 1**, in which the utterance of the ironic premise “73 is nicely divisible” can take the place of the assertion *that 73 is a prime number*, Pagin claims that the premise “I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a

prime number" cannot substitute an assertion that 73 is a prime number in **Inference 2**. And the reason Pagin adduces is that "to get the desired conclusion [in **Inference 2**] in a truth preserving way, a further premise (such as 'if I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number, then 73 is a prime number') would have to be added" (ibid). As a result, Pagin concludes that "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" does not itself count as an assertion that 73 is a prime number. Thus, one should reject the commitment account of assertion.

5.2.1. Reply to the first objection

One should note that Pagin bases his argument on the assumption that explicit assertoric sentences expressing a commitment to the truth of a proposition should be able to take the place of assertions in inferences. To be sure, to attack this assumption would constitute an unacceptable price argumentation. However, Pagin is orthodoxly assuming the truth-conditional semantic interpretation of the notions of proposition, implication, and truth-preservation, and such interpretation is not beyond controversy. Hence, it seems a better option to block Pagin's conclusion that "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" cannot take the place of an assertion that 73

is a prime number in **Inference 2** by taking distance from his truth-conditional semantic interpretation. Following this route, I shall suggest a reply to resist Pagin's objection.⁹⁶

Which is Pagin's criterion of identity for propositions in the inferential integration test? In order to answer this question, I shall present the notion on which Pagin's inferential integration test hinges, which is the notion of correct inference. Pagin writes:

Let's understand an inference to be correct provided that the truth of propositions that are asserted by utterances of the premises guarantees the truth of the proposition that is asserted by an utterance of the conclusion.

Where there is no such guarantee, the inference is incorrect (obviously, indexicality does require extra qualifications, but I have omitted those).

This understanding of correctness is, I think, faithful to our intuitions.

Pagin (2004:851-852)

According to this understanding of correct inference, Pagin claims that **Inference 1** is a correct inference. In other words, he claims that the truth of the proposition

⁹⁶ Two major replies to Pagin have been offered. First, MacFarlane (2011) argues that the inferential test does not show that uttering "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" is not a way of asserting that 73 is a prime number. According to MacFarlane by uttering sentences like "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" one performs *two* assertions. Second, Pegan (2009) replied to Pagin's objection by weakening the commitment account of assertion and ruling out the counterexample. See Pagin (2009) for his rejoinder.

asserted by the utterance of the ironic premise "73 is nicely divisible", which is *that 73 is a prime number*, in addition to the truth of the proposition asserted by the utterance of the premise "If 73 is a prime number, we cannot share the stones equally" guarantees the truth of the proposition that is asserted by an utterance of the conclusion "we cannot share the stones equally".

By contrast, Pagin claims that **Inference 2** is an incorrect inference. Since Pagin sees no problem with the premise "If 73 is a prime number, we cannot share the stones equally", it follows that his point is that *the truth of the proposition* asserted by the utterance of the explicit assertoric sentence "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" *fails* to guarantee the truth of the conclusion. Why? Evidently, Pagin suggests that one asserts the same proposition by the uttering "73 is a prime number" and "73 is nicely divisible" while one asserts different propositions by uttering "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" and "73 is a prime number".

Let me elaborate on this last point by using some formal apparatus due to Rescher (1968). In his "Logic of assertion", Rescher supplements the orthodox syntax of propositional and quantificational logic with the "A-operator" or "Ax". Accordingly, in the case of propositional logic, the formulas of a propositional language \mathcal{L} take the following form: "Axp", where p stands for any propositional

constant. Rescher interpreted sentences of this form as “the assertor x asserts the proposition p ”.

Now, according to this formalism, **Inference 1** and **Inference 2** are rendered as follows:

Inference 1*

(1) $Ax(a \rightarrow b)$

(2) Axa

Thus, Axb

Inference 2*

(1) $Ax(a \rightarrow b)$

(2) Axc

Thus, Axb

In order to capture Pagin’s point, I have assigned different propositional constants to the proposition asserted by the utterance of the ironic premise “73 is nicely divisible” in **Inference 1*** and the proposition asserted by the utterance of the explicit assertoric premise “I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number” in **Inference 2***. This clarifies the reason Pagin thinks one needs to add an additional premise to **Inference 2** to get the desired conclusion as exemplified in the following inference:

Inference 3

(1) $Ax(c \rightarrow a)$

(2) $Ax(a \rightarrow b)$

(3) Axc

Thus, Axb

Hence, my question is this: which proposition one asserts by uttering “I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number”? Pagin does not answer this question. He simply begins by stipulating a characterization of correctness and then claims that **Inference 2** “is not intuitively correct” (2004:852). However, I do not see how the inferential integration test shows that one asserts different propositions when one utters “I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number” and “73 is a prime number”. In other words, I do not see how Pagin’s notion of correctness imposes a criterion of identity for propositions such that **Inference 2** turns out to be *intuitively* invalid.

Accordingly, I shall use Peirce’s distinction between a proposition and its assertion and Peirce’s view of propositions to show that the utterances of “I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number” and “73 is a prime number” have the same role in inference and, thus, are equivalent.

Firstly, Peirce’s distinction between a proposition and its assertion as mirrored in explicit assertoric sentences is relevant here. When one asserts a proposition by using a that-clause, one always does it in the utterance of an explicit assertoric sentence. It is clear that the sentence “I commit myself to the

truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" does not involve an assertoric verb. However, it functions as an explicit assertoric sentence whose subordinate clause is "that 73 is a prime number". Following Peirce's terminology, the proposition strictly expressed by this sentence is that 73 is a prime number. The act of assertion is captured by the assertive clause "I commit myself to the truth of the statement", which conveys that someone is performing such act.

Now, the main point one can draw from Peirce's view is that one should not conflate the *act* with its *content*. Thus, there is no reason to conflate what is expressed by the assertive clause with the proposition expressed by the corresponding dependent clause. As Peirce remarked: "That this is so is shown by the precise equivalence between any verb in the indicative and the same made the object of "I tell you": "Jesus wept" = "I tell you that Jesus wept" (EP 2.478). Note that Pagin is committed to the claim that the utterances of sentences such as "I assert that 73 is a prime number" are not assertions, which is implausible. He acknowledges this problem when he recognizes that "[t]here is a good reason to suspect that my refutation method overgenerates counterexamples [...]" Pagin (2004:854).

I turn now to show in which sense the utterances of "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" and "73 is a prime number"

have the same role in inference. If one accepts Peirce's account of propositions in terms of types, one might argue that the assertoric use of these sentences constitute different *tokens* of the same proposition-type, namely, that 73 is a prime number.

Accordingly, if one uses Peirce's criteria of identity for propositions in terms of the possibility of its assertion, the question concerning the identity criteria of the proposition tokened by "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" and the proposition tokened by the utterance of "73 is a prime number" is to be answered in terms of the asserter's vindicatory commitment. The adequate way of honoring one's vindicatory commitment for these sentences is the same, namely, advancing a proof that 73 is only divisible by 1 and 73. Such proof establishes that the predicate "is a prime number" applies to the number 73. While making such proof, I could perfectly write on the board "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number", but the fact that I committed myself to vindicate such statement has no effect on the proof. The situation is the same in the case of a proof using as premise "73 is a prime number". As conclusions of the same proof, "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" and "73 is a prime number" instantiate the same proposition-type, which is the act of predicating of

73 that it is a prime number. Thus, one can token the same proposition-type by the assertoric use of "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" and "73 is a prime number". Therefore, **Inference 2** is a correct inference.

Secondly, one can reply to Pagin in a different way by using the distinction between direct and indirect commitments, which is in complete agreement with Peirce's view of assertion. Rescher (1968) develops this distinction as follows:

It is important to distinguish between those specific propositions *overtly and explicitly* put forward on certain historical occasions and those to which he becomes *implicitly committed* in virtue of the explicit assertions he overtly makes. These later will be the 'tacit' assertions that are covertly or implicitly contained in what is overtly asserted, but of whose very content the assertor may well be unaware, failing entirely to realize his tacit commitment thereto. It is this second, implicit mode of assertion or 'commitment to assert' - in contradistinction to overt and explicit assertion - that is of fundamental interest for the construction of a '*logic of assertion*'.

Rescher (1968:250)

Rescher interprets the A-operator in terms of a "commitment to assert". One should qualify that the commitment to assert can be either implicit or explicit.

For example, suppose that Tim asserts that the rose is red. It follows from what Tim asserted that some rose is colored. Accordingly, one says that Tim is *directly* committed to the proposition that the rose is red and *indirectly* committed to the proposition that some rose is colored. In general, we say that by asserting that p one is indirectly committed to the consequences of p . According to Rescher, this distinction manifests itself in the postulation of the rule: If x asserts p , and p entails q , then x asserts q .

Now, if one assumes Pagin's notion of correct inference strictly, which sanctions all classically valid inferences as correct, one should note that the conditional "If I hereby commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number, then 73 is a prime number", which Pagin endorses, is vacuously true. Thus, the inference from this vacuous conditional and "I hereby commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" to the conclusion that "73 is a prime number" is classically valid and correct under Pagin's notion of correct inference.

Following Rescher's rule, which is classically valid, since "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number" vacuously implies "73 is a prime number", it follows that if one asserts "I commit myself to the truth of the statement that 73 is a prime number", then one implicitly asserts "73 is a

prime number". In turn, Pagin (2004:851) claims that "if I assert that p , directly or indirectly, and also assert that *if p , then q* , then the statement that q is a consequence of my assertions." Therefore, **Inference 2** is correct even by Pagin's own standard of correctness.

5.3. Second objection: McFarlane's lawyer case

I shall now introduce an objection to Peirce's account of assertion based on MacFarlane (2011).⁹⁷ The objection consists in a simple counterexample to Peirce's construal of responsibility for truth as a vindicatory commitment. I shall call this counterexample the "Lawyer case":

[...] suppose I hire a lawyer to defend me in a criminal trial. I might ask her to sign a contract that commits her to vindicating my innocence in the face of challenges. It seems to me that she can sign this contract, and do so overtly, without having asserted that I am innocent. When she is at home with her family, she might assert to them that I am guilty, and she would not be subject to criticism for having asserted contradictory things. MacFarlane (2011:95)

⁹⁷ MacFarlane's objection is a special case of a general objection to commitment accounts of assertion due to Pagin (2004).

MacFarlane rightly assumes that if one characterizes the speech act of asserting as the undertaking of a vindicatory commitment, then any form of overt commitment to vindicate a proposition, for example, signing a contract, should count as an assertion. Accordingly, the lawyer case attempts to show that an epistemic explanation of “responsibility for truth” in terms of vindication seems to *wrongly* count as assertions that p forms of overt commitment to vindicate that p such as the lawyer’s signed contract.

Let me illustrate this counterexample by way of an example. Suppose that a prosecutor has accused John of murdering someone. Immediately, John hires the best lawyer in town for his defense. In the contract for legal representation signed by John’s lawyer, one can read the following clause:

(L) I hereby commit to vindicate that you are innocent upon challenge.

According to Peirce’s account, it is clear that the contract signed by the lawyer should count as an assertion that John is innocent. Did the lawyer assert that John is innocent? According to MacFarlane, it seems that this is not the case. Thus, if MacFarlane is right, the lawyer case shows that it is possible for a speaker to undertake a commitment to vindicate a proposition and *not* thereby assert that proposition. Thus, if this counterexample works, Peirce’s account appears to face a serious difficulty.

5.3.1. Reply to the second objection

In reply, I shall argue that if one accepts Peirce's dialogical interpretation of vindicatory commitment, then one can defuse the lawyer case. It is common ground in this debate that uttering (L) should have the same normative effect on the lawyer as the lawyer's utterance of the sentence "I assert that you are innocent". According to McFarlane, it is intuitive that in uttering (L) the lawyer is not asserting that her client is innocent. I shall note that McFarlane does not clarify why it seems that the lawyer is not asserting when she utters (L). Perhaps he is assuming that to assert that p is, in some sense, to tell that p is true. However, McFarlane's assumption depends on how one conceives the interpersonal relation between speaker and listener.

Considering this point, I should note from the outset that the lawyer case depends on the assumption that speakers undertake vindicatory commitments in isolation from the interpersonal aspect of assertion. Indeed, the counterexample works at its full capacity when one assumes no relation whatsoever between normative attitudes and the interpersonal relation between speaker and listener. This means that it is assumed that in uttering (L) there is no clear relation to an assessment or criticism by others, let alone an assessment by an opponent or second-person perspective. According to this picture, to assert is to put forward a

proposition as true by undertaking a vindicatory commitment. Indeed, at the end of his paper, MacFarlane (2011:95) suggests that “Brandom’s authorization of others to reassert the asserted content, deferring to one for its vindication” could shed some light on how to tackle the lawyer case. This is certainly a good insight. However, as MacFarlane suggests, this condition is not sufficiently strong.

I would like to suggest that Peirce’s dialogical conception of vindicatory commitment defuses the lawyer case by rejecting the assumption that a vindicatory commitment is just a commitment to give reasons in isolation from a social structure.⁹⁸ In particular, it seems inappropriate to detach the notion of vindicatory commitment from a dialogical social structure. As I have argued in Chapter 4, according to Peirce’s dialogical setting, the asserter has the duty to defend that p in respect to a listener that has the right to challenge that p . In other words, Peirce embedded the notion of vindicatory commitment into a dialogical social structure in which the relation between speaker and hearer is a symmetrical relation between a first-person perspective and a second-person perspective.

If the relation between the speaker and listener is symmetrical, then the speaker’s duty to defend that p is not isolated from the listener’s right to attack

⁹⁸ One should note that the main difference between Brandom and Peirce in this respect is thus symmetry.

that p . If assertion is not to be understood in isolation from the speech act of challenge, then a speaker cannot undertake the commitment to vindicate that p and at the same time not acknowledging the possibility of a challenge to p on the part of the listener. In other words, under a dialogical interpretation of vindicatory commitment, the asserter's duty to defend that p entails the addressee's right to challenge that p . As a result, the asserter can *retract* the assertion that p . Therefore, in asserting that p one is not actually telling that p is true.⁹⁹

Let me apply this consequence of Peirce's dialogical view of vindicatory commitment to the lawyer case. On the one hand, MacFarlane's intuition seems to be that if one asserts a proposition, one actually tells the truth. To be sure, this intuition renders the claim that the lawyer asserts that the client is innocent unpalatable. However, this intuition is misleading. Why? According to Peirce's view, one should *not* conflate the lawyer's commitment to vindicate the proposition that John is innocent with the commitment to tell that such proposition is actually true.

On the other hand, how should John's lawyer honour her commitment? If one follows Peirce's dialogical interpretation of vindicatory commitment, it

⁹⁹ For an elaboration of this general point, see Rescorla (2009).

becomes clear that the right focus is on the relation between John's lawyer, as a defense attorney, and the prosecutor. The simple duty of the defense attorney is to defend that the client is innocent against the challenges of the prosecutor. Hence, John's lawyer cannot undertake the duty to defend the proposition that John is innocent and, at the same time, not acknowledging the right of the prosecutor to challenge such proposition. In this sense, John's lawyer asserted that John is innocent by signing a contract that commits her to vindicate that he is innocent.

Is so striking to claim that defense attorneys assert the innocence of their clients? Notably, Goldberg (2015) answers this question in the negative. In contrast with MacFarlane's intuition, Goldberg notes that in a court of law, and in a philosophy seminar, assertions are made. Moreover, these cases seem to provide supporting evidence for the commitment view of assertion. Indeed, "[t]he proponent of the commitment view might well claim support in the fact that in these sorts of professional settings the commitment is explicitly adopted by the speaker; after all, this is what we would have expected if the commitment view were true" Goldberg (2015:31).

In relation to the case at issue, Goldberg (2015:30) remarks that "In a court of law, lawyers for each side make all sorts of assertions—indeed, they are *bound*

by their profession to make all sorts of assertions—even under conditions in which they do not so much as believe what they are saying”. Now, Goldberg has a point here when he claims that since lawyers asserts many things in the course of his argumentation *qua* professionals, they exemplify clear cases in which one asserts that p but one may not believe that p .

It is clear that assertion, as Peirce conceived it, usually expresses belief, for under normal circumstances one would not undertake a responsibility to vindicate a proposition one does not believe. However, one should grant that there are cases of insincere assertion, namely, cases in which one asserts that p but one does not believe that p . Peirce’s view explain these cases by noticing that one may not believe that p and still undertake a commitment to vindicate p .

This is not a high price to pay. On the contrary, it seems that such view is consistent with Peirce’s fallibilist approach. Although assertion usually expresses belief, it is not an act based on first-person authority. One may believe that one’s client is guilty and still commit to vindicate her innocence. Obviously, at this point, no one has established whether the client is innocent or guilty. In the course of building up one’s case, one may find irrefutable evidence determining that one’s client is innocent. Thus, at the beginning of a trial, bound by one’s profession as a lawyer, one can assert that one’s client is innocent and believe the

opposite. However, at the end of the trial, one can find out that one asserted correctly and thus the belief one entertained before was false.

In connection to this last point, let us return to the lawyer's case. Suppose that John's lawyer is at a family dinner. When dessert is served, she utters "John is guilty". Such utterance might be interpreted as equivalent to "I believe that John is guilty". It now becomes clear that her commitment to vindicate that John is innocent is simply a case of assertion and disbelief. There is a clear difference between honouring one's duty to defend that p and believing that p . For it is possible that one does not believe that p and still one undertakes a commitment to vindicate that p . Thus, *a fortiori*, John's lawyer can vindicate claims she does not believe. Evidently, she would violate the sincerity condition (i.e. one should assert that p only if one believes that p), but an insincere assertion is still an assertion.

In sum, if one understands the vindicatory commitment involved in the lawyer case in terms of Peirce's dialogical interpretation of "vindicatory commitment", the claim that the contract committing John's lawyer to vindicate that John is innocent should count as an assertion that he is innocent gains enough plausibility.

Conclusion

Peirce defended the following view of assertion:

(A) To assert a proposition p is to undertake a responsibility for the truth of p .

In this dissertation, I interpreted (A) and assessed Peirce's reasons for holding it.

I did this in two steps.

The first step was to reconstruct how Peirce came to (A) according to the textual evidence present in (EP 2.140), (EP 2.312-313), and (CP 5.546). As I showed in Chapter 1, this textual evidence suggests that Peirce's account of assertion might take the form of the following argument:

- (1) Ordinary assertions sufficiently resemble its paradigms (i.e. solemn assertions) (plausible assumption).
- (2) Whenever one solemnly asserts that p , one thereby undertakes an overt responsibility for the truth of p (by inspection of paradigmatic cases of assertion).

Therefore,

- (3) Whenever one asserts that p , one is responsible for the truth of p .

Here Peirce glossed "being responsible" as "being responsible to *do* something", namely, *giving reasons* for the proposition asserted.

In section 2.2., I examined (1). I motivated this assumption as follows: although there is a distinction between assertive verbs concerning the strength of their asserting, all assertive verbs constitute different ways of making assertions. Hence, it is plausible to assume that ordinary assertions sufficiently resemble its paradigms.

In section 2.3., I discussed Peirce's inspection of three cases of solemn assertion. The outcome of Peirce's inspection is precisely (2): since asserters are answerable for the direct consequences their acts of assertion have on their addressees, solemn asserters are agents that overtly undertake a responsibility for the truth of a proposition.

I made two qualifications concerning Peirce's argument. First, I noticed that this argument intends to establish the *plausibility* of the idea that performing an assertion has a normative effect on the speaker. Second, I noticed that the reconstructed argument accounts only for the claim that asserting has a normative effect on the speaker and not for the claim that one should *characterize* assertion in terms of such effect.

However, since either Peirce thought that the conclusion of the above argument provides good reasons to take this feature of assertion as what

qualifies it as a speech act or Peirce adopted the principle of pragmatism as a tacit methodological principle, I formulated Peirce's view of assertion as follows:

(A1) One asserts that p if and only if one is responsible for giving reason for p .

At this point, I moved to the second step, which was to interpret (A1). In order to accomplish this goal, I distinguished three aspects of (A1). These aspects determined the agenda for the subsequent chapters.

In chapter 2, I addressed the first aspect, which is the nature of assertion as the state of being responsible for the truth of a proposition. I defended that Peirce held a *moral* interpretation of the responsibility involved in assertion. Based mainly on (EP 2.278) and (CP 5.546), I showed that Peirce held that when speakers engage in assertoric speech, they should be treated as *moral agents*.

I argued that since Peirce thought that asserters are punishable and blamable in virtue of performing acts of assertion, it follows that Peirce was committed to the view that asserters are moral agents. In turn, since moral agency implies moral responsibility, I concluded that the responsibility involved in asserting is a moral responsibility. As such, one can evaluate speakers' assertions as correct or incorrect. Thus, speakers are subject to blame and praise. This is the moral dimension of communication and speech.

Accordingly, if one integrates this qualification into (A1), one can reformulate Peirce's view of assertion as follows:

(A2) One asserts that p if and only if one is morally responsible for giving reasons for p .

In Chapter 3, I addressed the second aspect, which is the nature of propositions as what can be asserted. I tackled this aspect by interpreting Peirce's view that a proposition is an assertable sign. Following Peirce's use of the term "sign", I discussed what means for a proposition to be a sign. Then, I proposed to interpret Peircean propositions as types. This interpretation hinges on (EP 2.311-312). Since Peirce claimed that all types require tokens, propositions have no existence. Their ontological status is plain: occurrences of sentences as used in speech.

After considering Peirce's view of the relation of aboutness (i.e. how it is possible for us to say something about something by using propositions), in which context-sensitivity plays a major role (CP 2.357), I spelled out in a more precise way the criterion of identity of propositions, which is different from that of utterances and speech acts. The relation between assertions and propositions bears on this criterion. The utterance of sentences such as "The actual prime minister of Curitiba is left-handed", which according to Peirce are not assertable

(since this sentence says nothing and there is no possible way to give reasons in such case), are not proposition-tokens. By contrast, if one asserts by means of uttering sentence such as "The moon is made of cheese", which is an assertable sentence, one tokens a proposition. Evidently, in this example one asserted incorrectly, for such proposition is false, but meaningful.

Accordingly, I concluded that propositions are assertable types in the sense that their criteria of identity depends on the possibility of its assertion. Indeed, Peirce thought that if one says that a proposition is not assertable, one is contradicting oneself. The reason for this contradiction is that if a proposition is not assertable, then it would not be tokened, and, since all types require tokens, it would not be a proposition.

In Chapter 4, I addressed the third and final aspect of Peirce's view of assertion, which is the nature of the responsibility for truth as a commitment to give reasons. I argued that Peirce was committed to a dialogical interpretation of vindicatory commitment. I did this by drawing from Peirce's dialogical semantics for quantifiers, as it is presented in (CP 2.523), (CP 2.453), and (EP 2.168), the view that a dialogical interpersonal structure should embed assertoric practice.

According to this interpersonal structure, one understands the practice of giving and asking for reasons, so to speak, as a dialogical interplay of deontic statuses: the speaker's duty to defend and the interpreter's right to attack are essential and irreducible elements of the practice of assertion. In other words, I supported two claims based on Peirce's dialogical semantics for the quantifiers. First, that Peirce construed the relation between the asserter and addressee as a symmetrical relation. Second, that Peirce construed the perspectives of the asserter and the listener as those of a first-person and a second-person respectively.

From these two claims, it follows that Peirce interpreted "vindicatory commitment" in terms of a dialogical responsibility to give reasons upon challenge. This means that if one is responsible for the truth of p , one's listener acquires the *right* to challenge p by asking for reasons while one undertakes the *duty* to defend p by giving reasons. A corollary of this interpretation is that by "reasons", Peirce meant *good* reasons. Accordingly, I reformulated (A2) as follows:

(A3) A speaker S asserts that p if and only if S has the moral duty to defend p by giving good reasons to a listener L and L has the right to challenge p by asking for reasons.

I noted that a first consequence of (A3) is that asserting a proposition is quite a different action from telling that it is true. If one endorses (A3), one is committed to the view that one can assert a proposition and fail to give reasons for it or one's listener may prove one wrong. The right thing to do in such cases is to retract oneself. According to (A3), assertion is not an all-or-nothing business. The possibility of retraction is part of assertoric practice.

In addition, a second consequence of (A3) is that the relation between assertion and truth originates at the boundary between language and the world, which is *action*. Accordingly, asserting a proposition-token relates to certain actions concerning the object signified by the proposition that would lead to evaluate its correctness. The proposition asserted is true if these actions show that it fits the world or, in other words, if these actions show that the proposition asserted is not challengeable by an opponent in the long run.

Finally, in chapter 5, I introduced two objections to Peirce's view of assertion. In replying to the first objection, the inferential integration test, Peirce's view of propositions as types and their criteria of identity in terms of the possibility of its assertion proved to be fruitful. In turn, the above two consequences of (A3) paved the way for a reply to the second objection, the lawyer case, in terms of the difference between asserting and believing.

I would like to end by remarking that in expounding Peirce's account of assertion, I attempted to achieve a modest aim. To be sure, exploring further implications and objections to Peirce's view of assertion, and fleshing out the relation between assertion and the key concepts of Peirce's logic are much more intricate projects. Here I hope only to have taken a step forward in the task of clarifying Peirce's view of assertion and to have offered some reasons to believe that this view sheds light on the distinctive character of assertion.

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