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In Pursuit of Resistance: Pragmatic Recommendations for Doing Science within One's Means

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Abstract

Charles Peirce's model of inquiry is supposed to demarcate appropriate methods of inquiry from specious ones. Cheryl Misak points out that Peirce's explicit account fails, but can nevertheless be rescued by elements of his own system. While Misak's criticism is a propos, her own attempt to fortify Peirce's account does not succeed, as it falls prey to the same criticism she raises against Peirce's explicit account. The account provided in this paper—the 'open path' alternative—draws from Peirce's corollary to his "first rule of reason", that one should not block the road to inquiry. The 'open path' account is able to withstand Misak's objections, and when combined with other aspects of Peirce's work, shows us why the optimal way to conduct inquiry is to follow the path of greatest resistance. Inquiry, however, is rarely (if ever) conducted in optimal conditions. Actual, constrained conditions of inquiry require a measure of economy in terms of what can be reasonably pursued and how. The question, then, is how to conduct our inquiries so that they are as nearly optimal as possible given actual constraints. As a working scientist, Peirce was acutely aware of the need to economize in research. Nicholas Rescher has recognized this issue's significance for Peirce, and noted its neglect in discussions of Peirce's work. One issue that has been largely neglected in the literature on Peirce is what specifically he recommends, based on considerations of economy, for how to go about gathering evidence. Kronz & McLaughlin (2005) points out that Peirce's primary recommendation is that in gathering evidence relevant to a particular hypothesis we should test for empirical consequences that would not have been expected otherwise. The view that is developed in this paper is that economy in research, according to Peirce, follows the general line of his theory of inquiry. Peirce's theory of inquiry implies that pursuit of truth requires maximizing resistance. I argue that his considerations about how to navigate within the constraints introduced in the context of actual research (in terms of time, funding, available experimental apparatus, etc.) are also best understood as recommendations for maximizing resistance.

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