

Truth Believer

By Jonathan Rauch

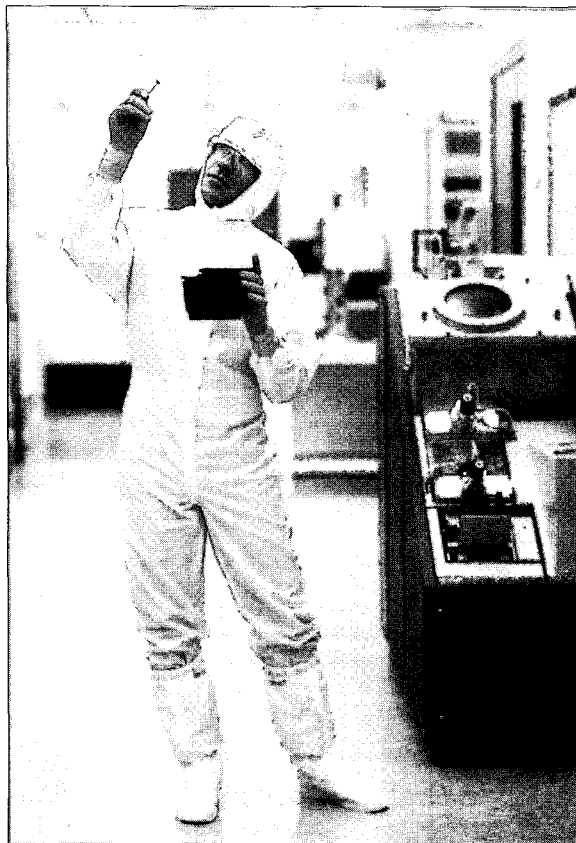
Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays, by Susan Haack, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 212 pages, \$22.50

When was the last time you heard from a professional philosopher who wanted to intervene in a public argument in order to say something sane? Today in Washington, where I live and work, it is not unusual for an economist—a Paul Krugman, a Herb Stein, a Robert Reich, a Jagdish Bhagwati—to step forward and say something sensible or informative or (even) useful. Sometimes political scientists also do it, although that is somewhat rarer; and certainly working scientists—Freeman Dyson or Edward O. Wilson or Stephen Jay Gould—are helpful. But philosophers? When we hear from them, whether “we” are in Washington or just in ordinary life, they come as aliens from outer space, depositing here or there a podlike idea whose esotericism or smugness puzzles or annoys us; and then the little green philosophical men climb back aboard their saucer and fly away.

Philosophy at its best can help save society, but today what needs saving is philosophy itself, from death by obscurity. To re-engage, philosophers must relearn that it is not enough merely to be clever or politically advanced. In fact, it is not anything, really, merely to be clever or politically advanced. What matters is being right, and this means, for the philosopher no less than for the scientist, testing one’s ideas honestly and carefully and in a spirit that puts truth ahead of cleverness or politics. Which brings us to Charles Sanders Peirce and his intellectual goddaughter, Susan Haack.

Peirce (1839–1914; pronounced “purse”) was a philosopher of science and knowledge, a working physicist and astronomer, a pioneer in semiotics and symbolic logic. His astonishingly broad interests ranged from aesthetics to photometrics,

and his writings were prolific and strikingly original. But because he was an irascible and eccentric character who managed to keep only one brief academic job, because his writings were fragmentary and his style often dense and thorny (though it could also be majestic and passionate), and because he never inspired a social movement or attracted a public following, his name has never been known outside of a fairly small circle of cognoscenti. He spent his last years in poverty and isolation, too poor even for a decent burial. This would have been a shame even if not for the fact that, as it happens, he was the greatest of all American philosophers.



Cleaning the Academic House: Philosopher Susan Haack is appalled by current notions of “politically adequate research and scholarship.” To politicize inquiry, she says, is to cut corners on all the hard, painful, frustrating work of figuring out what is actually the case, and to substitute foregone conclusions.

Peirce founded America’s signature philosophy, pragmatism, in its original, most refined vintage. To wit: A statement’s meaning is the sum of all the ways in which it might be tested in the real world (or in logical space). Or, as Peirce put it more picturesquely, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” If a proposition bears no pragmatic fruit, it has no proper meaning at all, and is nonsense (he called metaphysics a “puny, rickety and scrofulous science”). To have meaning, then, is to be testable, and to learn is to test.

Anyone can test ideas according to his own lights, of course, and can demonstrate to his own satisfaction that 47 angels can dance on the head of a pin. But scientific testing is different, because it happens only when a network of people test each other. “Individualism and falsity are one and the same,” Peirce wrote; “one man’s experience is nothing if it stands alone.” He pushed far out ahead of his time, and in some ways even of our time, in seeing the profoundly communitarian nature of scientific inquiry. Science, he said, must be a public, communal process in which all assume that each may be wrong, and each constantly checks for his own and other mistakes (thus the Peircean doctrine of “fallibilism”). And this social process of inquiry, he further saw, could work only if most inquirers, most of the time, maintained what he called the scientific attitude: a genuine desire to learn, a genuine humility before the difficulty of learning, and above all a determination to follow the search wherever it leads.

In a thousand ways, on a thousand battlements, Peirce defended that ethic. The rule which deserves to be inscribed on every wall of the city of philosophy, he said, is: Do not block the way of inquiry. When he spoke of rescuing “the good ship Philosophy for the service of Science from the hands of the lawless rovers of the sea of literature,” he might have been talking about preserving the scientific attitude from today’s deconstructionists and subjectivists and radical feminists and egalitarians, who regard science as little more than one way people

talk—and as a sexist, white-male, oppressive way at that.

With *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, a modern-day Peircean—the genuine article—wades into today's debate. Now, a Peircean is an odd bird in 1998. I am one, Haack is another, and out there somewhere may be a third (drop me a line). I should say that, although Haack and I are not personal friends, some years ago she favorably reviewed a book that I wrote, and we are intellectual allies. So take my reaction with a grain of salt, if you like. Still, I'll be surprised if other readers are not as refreshed and invigorated as I was by Haack's no-nonsense defense of uncorrupt inquiry—in other words, of intellectual integrity.

Her book takes the form of 11 loosely related essays, which vary a good deal not only in subject but in accessibility to amateurs. Haack is a forthright and opinionated writer, and often witty (“better ostracism than ostrich-ism!”); but she is also a no-kidding philosopher (at the University of Miami) who does no-kidding philosophy right here in this book. The lay reader can always follow her discussion of, say, the epistemology of metaphor, but at a bit of a distance.

On the other hand, she also writes trenchantly on feminism, affirmative action, multiculturalism, academic life, and other staples of the culture wars. She places herself in the political center, extreme only in her dislike of extremes, and from there she makes some telling observations: against the “this-or-nothingism” implicit in the current affirmative action debate, for instance, and against feminist epistemologists whose claims about “women's ways of knowing” dress up old stereotypes as new theories. But I think the more important reason her book is of general interest is that she understands the Peircean precept that how you think matters at least as much as what you think, and in her book she provides a bracing real-life demonstration.

On the first page of the first essay, “Confessions of an Old-Fashioned Prig,” Haack announces what turns out to be the project common to all these essays: “I shall try in what follows to articulate what it means to care about truth, what intellectual integrity is and why we value it, and

what has gone wrong in the thinking of those who deny its importance.” She addresses herself, she declares, to all those who, troubled by the trendy irrationalist tendencies of postmodernist academia, are ready to listen to “the still small voice that whispers, ‘bosh!’”

A scholar's job is first and foremost to inquire in order to know, not in order to advance some political agenda or other. Haack is appalled by the notion, advanced by a feminist philosopher, of “politically adequate research and scholarship.” To politicize inquiry is to cut corners on all the hard, painful, frustrating work of figuring out what is actually the case, and instead

“It is true that scientific knowledge is socially constructed,” writes Susan Haack in her *Manifesto*. But not all processes of social construction are equal. Science is distinct precisely because it is a social process that is *not* merely a matter of social negotiation, or of political domination by one faction.

to substitute what Peirce called sham reasoning, which goes through the motions of inquiry in order to demonstrate some foregone conclusion. And “the sham reasoner is not really engaged in inquiry at all,” says Haack, sounding very much like her mentor. “This should remind us that those who despair of honest inquiry cannot be in the truth-seeking business (as they should say, ‘the “truth” racket’); they are in the propaganda business.”

Now, to write in this way, in 1998 as opposed to 1898, is to court two kinds of dismissal: first, as a naïf, who fails to appreciate the inherent subjectivity and social malleability of science; second, as a curmudgeon, who just crosses her arms and says “harrumph.” Haack, however, is not

the right person to accuse of epistemological naiveté. She understands that science is a social process which is inevitably influenced by society (and, yes, by politics). She knows that objectivity is in the eye of the beholder, and that most theories are “underdetermined” by evidence, meaning that scientists have lots of wiggle room, and lots of room for bias and emotion, in deciding what to believe. To all of this she adds a further understanding which her opponents mainly lack: that, despite all of the above, science and the scientific attitude are still better, much better, than the alternatives.

“In one sense, it is true that scientific knowledge is socially constructed,” she says. But this has no radical consequences at all, since it does not follow either that science's model of reality is arbitrary or that the truth-seeking spirit is unhelpful in guiding our model building. In any case, not all processes of social construction are equal. Science is distinct precisely because it is a social process that is *not* merely a matter of social negotiation between groups, or of political domination by one faction. In fact, in a scientific community of real, imperfect human beings, “individual idiosyncracies or weaknesses may compensate for each other.” And so, a bit paradoxically, “a real community of imperfect inquirers can be a tolerable ersatz of an ideal community.”

For the community to work requires a commitment to intellectual integrity, which is of moral as well as social value. Commitment to disinterested inquiry, at least as a goal, is a mark of good character, not just of sound practice. “That is why,” Haack says, “it seems almost indecent when an academic whose job is to inquire denies the intelligibility or denigrates the desirability of the ideal of honest inquiry.”

Well, she does sound a bit curmudgeonly. “Harrumph,” indeed. And to this complaint Haack finds a liberating answer: You bet! If philosophers who think of themselves as seeking truth are, in Richard Rorty's patronizing phrase, “lovably old-fashioned prigs,” then sign her up. She is among those who, she says, “find Peirce's curmudgeonliness refreshing.” Many, I think, will in turn be refreshed by her own treatment of what she calls “foam-rubber language,” of “preposterism,” of “fake

reasoning" (a.k.a. "bullshitting"—spinning theories without really caring whether they're true). Narcissistic cleverness, to Haack, is positively immoral.

Therein lies what I think is most important in her book: not her (often shrewd) observations on the culture wars, nor her (usually convincing) philosophical demonstrations, but the attitude she embodies. She talks in a voice that echoes from the age of William James, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, and Peirce himself, an age when Anglo-American philosophy was not just a literary game or a café argument about politics. Rather, philosophy was *about* something: how to conduct personal and social inquiry, and thus how to learn, and thus how to live. The best way to convey what I mean about the air-clearing quality of this voice is to quote it:

"'Diversity' has become one of those foam-rubber, public-relations words which muffles the otherwise obvious: that

a philosophy department as varied as you like with respect to sex, race, ethnicity, and all that, all of [whose members] were students of Professor Davidson's working on adverbs ending in 'ingly' (or all of whom were students of Professor Harding's tracking down rape and torture metaphors in Newton—or whatever) would not, for all its diversity in one sense, be diverse in the sense that matters."

So the virtue of Haack's book, and I mean *virtue* in the ethical sense, is that it embodies the attitude that it exalts. Good teachers give us not just the right idea but the right frame of mind. Haack's voice is urbane, sensible, passionate—the voice of philosophy that matters. How good to hear it again. ♦

Jonathan Rauch is national correspondent of National Journal and author of Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought (University of Chicago Press).

The Advantages of Ownership

By John V.C. Nye

The Noblest Triumph: Property and Prosperity Through the Ages, by Tom Bethell, New York: St. Martin's Press, 378 pages, \$29.95

If told that Country X had a large population, abundant natural resources, a highly educated labor force, access to the latest science and technology, vast tracts of undeveloped land, cheap wages, decent urban infrastructure, and preferential treatment by world trading partners, most people would see no clear obstacles to rapid economic growth. Yet Russia has had all these advantages for the last decade, and so did the Soviet Union for several decades before. They were not sufficient to produce a high standard of living.

In *The Noblest Triumph*, Tom Bethell shows that such puzzles can be understood by examining the institutions that determine how property is held and transferred. Bethell, *The American Spectator's* Washington correspondent and a visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, traces the intellectual fall and rise of private property, taking pains to expand our understanding

of this complicated and sometimes arcane topic by incorporating digressions into political and social history. Drawing on examples from ancient Rome, early modern Europe, and colonial America, he shows that conflict and stagnation are the predictable results when property is insecure or poorly defined.

It is sobering to consider that Karl Marx had a deeper and more sincere appreciation of private property's virtues than most of the scholars who dominated academia during the early and middle parts of this century. Economists at the leading graduate schools could (and still can) go through life without hearing more than a throw-away remark about the significance of property for economic development. Until very recently, the study of economics was institution-free, and one could say little about the choice between capitalism and socialism on the basis of the abstract mathematical theories that characterized the

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