



## Cracks and flaws

### Description

I enjoy Keith Olbermann's weekly YouTube tirades against the US presidential incumbent, who he describes as "f\*cking crazy." See [The Resistance with Keith Olbermann](#). *Crazy* is what you say about old ships "Full of cracks or flaws; damaged, impaired, unsound; liable to break or fall to pieces; frail, "shaky" (OED).



The metaphor translates to a state of mind: "of unsound mind." *Crazy* is a dreadful cartoonish term exaggerating the self-destructive aspects of mental and emotional distress. Arguably, the term dismisses and insults people with mental illness, though it is hardly an insult to Trump, who apparently has described himself as a *crazy* negotiator. See [MailOnline article](#).

There are better words than *crazy* that put what we mean to the test. Wrapped up in the current [post truth](#) maelstrom we have the issue of *rationality*, and the challenge to identify, understand, and deal with the apparent *irrationality* in others, in processes, and in ourselves.

### Meaning and rationality

For Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) the American pragmatist, meaningful statements are those that it makes some practical difference to assert. Peirce later refined this *pragmatic maxim* such that it could act as a guide for action. If I have a practical need A, and B meets that need then I am bound to adopt or implement B (according to Albert Atkin's reading, pp.66-67). That's being rational - not irrational (or *crazy*).

Here's an example: Olbermann, a liberal media guru who used to live in a Trump condominium, has a need to insult Trump the property dealer turned president. There are words in language (like *crazy*) that accomplish this more or less, and so Olbermann may as well resort to those words.

Believe it or not, this is Peirce's [maxim of pragmatism](#) in action. Arguably, it works in the case of practical science: I need a soft metal, gold is soft, so I use gold. But needs are nearly always in dispute, and there are bound to be conflicting practical outcomes. (The insult offered by *crazy* strays way beyond its target.) But I think Peirce had even smarter things to say about rationality.

## Evidence

Peirce also proposed a method of inference that draws on evidence. Like a detective or a diagnostician, you are confronted with a circumstance that you are trying to make sense of. You formulate a series of hypotheses about it. Then you gather and sift evidence in support of the hypothesis, and perhaps adjust your hypothesis in light of the evidence.

Here's another case study: the suspected scandal of collusion between Trump's election campaign and the Russian government. Did Russian operatives contribute to oppositional research on Hilary Clinton? The latest hypothesis doing the rounds is that inexperienced, naive and disorganised campaign officials were approached by Russian agents who offered supposedly damning information on Clinton. The overtures may or may not have been successful, in either delivering the goods or hooking the attention of the big fish in the organisation (the presidential candidate).

If you want an explanation for all of the circumstantial evidence of collusion, then perhaps Trump and his associates had engaged in suspicious and compromising property deals with Russian and Ukrainian oligarchs prior to the election. Some of that may be illegal. That puts the presidential incumbent and his team in a compromising position. So the president has to keep sweet with Russia who will otherwise spill the beans.

So, there's a series of hypotheses in circulation, and several investigations in train sifting and sorting evidence, and actively looking for it, with others confounding and confusing the evidence, and counteracting with rival hypotheses, about other individuals, and contrary evidence. It sounds like a mess, but within it all there's a thread of collective and communal rationality. Peirce called the reasoning process *evidential* or [abductive reasoning](#). I think it also sounds like the process of interpretation, or [hermeneutics](#).

Another word for *crazy* or *irrational* is someone who plays fast and loose with evidence. Their commitment to their particular theory of deflected blame blinds them to the evidence, or they seek wilfully to deny or confuse it. Some have characterised this as *blind prejudice*, a better term than *crazy*. See post: [What does it all mean?](#)

## Bibliography

- Atkin, Albert. 2016. *Peirce*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge
- Earl, Geoff. 2017. "This guy's so crazy!" What Trump told his own trade negotiator to say about him during talks in "Art of the Deal" coaching session. *Mail Online*, 2 October. Available online: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4941764/Trump-coached-trade-negotiator-say-s-crazy.html> (accessed 3 November 2017).
- Olberman, Keith. 2017. *Trump Is F\*cking Crazy: (This Is Not a Joke)*. New York: Penguin
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1998. The maxim of Pragmatism. In Nathan Houser (ed.), *The Essential Peirce, Selected Philosophical Writings Volume 2 (1893-1913)*: 133-144. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

## Note

- To contrast Peirce with the positivists: the verification principle of the logical positivists asserts that a proposition is only meaningful if we can imagine or conjecture a means of verifying it. So to be rational is to work through the logic of a series of sensible and meaningful propositions, as if a logical deduction. I think Peirce offers a different account of rationality.

## Category

1. Ethics

## Tags

1. hermeneutics
2. interpretation
3. Peirce
4. pragmatism

## Date Created

November 4, 2017

## Author

rcoyne99