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- Author:** Mcauliffe, William H. B.
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- Abstract:** One of C. S. Peirce's most misunderstood ideas is his notion of abduction, the process of generating and selecting hypotheses to test. Contemporary philosophers of science have falsely cited Peirce's idea of abduction as a conceptual precursor to the modern notion of inference to the best explanation, a mode of inference used to decide which of competing explanations of a phenomenon to regard as true. Here, I examine how the misunderstanding originated by exploring influential discussions of inference to the best explanation in the works of Gilbert Harman, Bas van Fraassen, Paul Thagard, and Peter Lipton. While all these authors either failed to cite, or incorrectly cited, Peirce, I show that Thagard has noted a sense in which Peirce's early work provides a precursor to the modern notion of inference to the best explanation. However, a careful reading of Peirce shows that "abduction" has never been a proper synonym for "inference to the best explanation." So Peirce is not to blame for the misunderstanding. I conclude by defending the philosophic importance of abduction and demonstrating how applying Peirce's criteria for good abduction to debates in evolutionary theory can move the field forward.
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