When is a Fallacy Valid?
Reflections on Backward Reasoning

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I catch the glint of light on metal through the trees by the drive, remark that I see the family car is there, and go on to infer my son is home. It may be said that taken literally I have misdescribed things. What I see, it may be said, is a flash of light through the trees. Strictly I infer, but do not see, that the car is there. C. S. Peirce was a philosopher who would have characterized it in this way. *All perception*, he thought, is inferential.[1]

I do not want to challenge Peirce in this, although I think it false. (Whatever the truth of the matter, the issue is complex, trading as it does on implicit views of the relation of sensation to perception, and on the relation between seeing things and seeing what is the case.) Let us suppose here that Peirce is right. A natural question then is this: What sort of inference is it when I say I see, but strictly I infer, the car is there? And what are the conditions of its validity and its soundness?

Peirce had an articulate answer. The inference is an *abduction*. Consider our example. It seems surely true that if indeed I infer, rather than see, that the car is there, this inference is very different from the inference that my son is home. The inference that my son is home has, presumably, a classical deductive form. It moves from the tacit, unspoken assumption: If the car is there, then my son is home; and the perceptual premise: the car is there; to the evident conclusion.

But my inference that the car is there cannot be like that. For in this instance I reason backward from what I see, the flash of light on metal, and my seeing it, to a cause the presence of which I believe to be sufficient to