

RELIGIOUS INSTINCTS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF INQUIRY IN PEIRCE'S PRAGMATISM

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Between Peirce's 1898 lectures known as "Reasoning and the Logic of Things" and his last published essay in 1908 "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" he introduces an emphasis on instinct. In the briefest of terms, Peirce collects instinctive beliefs and sentiments, like those of Scottish Common Sense philosophy, in his extended argument for the quality and expansion of knowledge through inquiry. "Reasoning and the Logic of Things" focuses on the necessity of transformation of conceptual forms for the continuing expansion of scientific reasoning. In that exercise Peirce fails to find a suitable content or ground to sustain that transformation. However, in "A Neglected Argument" it appears that a religious instinct, the reality of God, constitutes a central role in grounding Peirce's logic and expansion of knowledge, and making a step toward validating the logic of pragmatism.

The development of Peirce's conception of pragmatism and pragmatism has captured the interest of many scholars, like Phillip Wiener, who tracks Peirce's evolutionary thinking in its Darwinian and Lamarckian forms.¹ Wiener concludes that Peirce's notion of inquiry does not consistently follow an evolutionary model, unlike Spencer. Wiener cites a 1909 letter from Peirce to Arthur Lovejoy because it reveals a "different mainspring to his evolutionism." Peirce writes,

To me there is an additional argument in the favor of objective chance – I say to me because the argument supposes the reality of God, the Absolute, which I think the majority of intellectual men do not very confidently believe. It is that the universe of Nature seems much grander and more worthy of its creator, when it is conceived of, not as completed at the outset, but as such that from the merest chaos with

nothing rational in it, it grows by an inevitable tendency more and more rational. It satisfies my religious instinct far better; and I have faith in the religious instinct. (Wiener, 350)

The consideration of a creator God discovered within the "universe of Nature" through inquiry follows a long trajectory in Peirce's thought, taking into account his early essay "The Place of Our Age in the History of Reason" (1863). The puzzle is fitting this trajectory together with the essays on cognition in 1868 and the logic of science essays such as "The Fixation of Belief" (1877) in which Peirce refines his critique of authority as a means of fixing belief, a method he explicitly associates with Church doctrine and discipline. The tension apparent in the essays from 1863 to 1878 concerns the recognition of a community's standards (belief in God, for example) and the philosophical challenges of avoiding the false closure of beliefs through tenacity, authority, or apriorism, arriving at inquiry modeled on the self-correcting movement of scientific reasoning.

Two questions appear central to Peirce's thinking. One is how our thinking overcomes a previous tradition without merely negating it, as he criticizes Descartes for doing. The other is handling the consequences of adopting Kant's critical philosophy, that all conceptions are in the mind, but taking it more thoroughly than Kant by excluding the noumenal realm as a limit to inquiry. Peirce's pragmatism, which he re-articulates as pragmatism from 1905, moves between scholastic realism and a completely critical philosophy. The move is not an *aufgehoben* producing a new model, but an inquiry into how these two traditions are dually constitutive of inquiry. I claim that occupying this space entails a transformation of inquiry and of the inquirer. Instincts, guiding ideas or principles that emerge in thought apart from desires or wishes, become the objects for inquiry and increasing self-control of thought and practice. Hence self-control, the act of discovering the "real" within one's own practice, is similar to the goal of scientific inquiry. Self-control of reason is possible only with this basis in instinct. Complete knowledge, Peirce says, is the condition of habits of thought in such close

¹ Philip Wiener "The Evolutionism of Peirce" *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 7, no. 3 (June 1946)

correspondence with the real that no further self-control is possible, wherethere remains no error or occasion for regret.² (EP2, 237) Instinctive beliefs, those ideas “we cannot help but believe” are the content for initiating the movement toward this kind of self-control. While Peirce and James are agreed that any belief, religious or otherwise, can only be described in terms of its potential expression in action, for Peirce this means a movement through inquiry to discover a normative character. James's pragmatism is problematic because its orientation is dependent on where the will arbitrarily locates itself.³ This will not satisfy Peirce because inquiry is only successful if it discovers an orienting teleology, and the only sign of this is the growth of self-controlled action.

In this essay I begin by tracking the transformation of Peirce's notion of inquiry from “The Place of Our Age” to “The Fixation of Belief” which lays the ground for pragmatism. I next trace the movement from pragmatism to pragmaticism via the role of instinct, and then conclude by showing how the content of Peirce's religious faith and his instinctive love for the church and the reality of God shapes the telos of inquiry, a telos that is evident in the transformation of the inquirer, most poignantly described in “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God.”

² References to Peirce's writings use the following convention: *The Essential Peirce Vol. I and II* (Indiana University Press, 1992, 1998) are EP 1 and 2 followed by page. *Writings of C.S. Peirce A Chronological Edition* (Indiana University Press, 1982) is abbreviated CE followed by volume and page. *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, eds Ketner and Putnam (Harvard, 1992) is shown as RLT and page.

³ See Gail Kennedy “Pragmatism, Pragmaticism, and the Will to Believe - - A Reconsideration” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 55, No. 14 (July 1958). She points out the pre-pragmatic force of “The Will to Believe” and the connection between “the right to believe” and James's conviction of the indeterminate nature of reality. (581)

From “The Place of Our Age in Reasoning” to “The Fixation of Belief”

Peirce's Kantian and Christian convictions constitute the core of an essay he wrote in 1863 for a high school reunion in Cambridge. In this complex speech Peirce outlines his basic convictions as an intellectual and scientist. For later readers the element that is most striking is his recognition that Kant's great accomplishment was his methodic doubt, the key to his *Kritik*, searching for the more insoluble doubt in the questions of “Immortality, Freedom, and God.” (CE 1,104) Kant asks the Humean question “how do we know our innate ideas are true?” not in order to dismiss such skepticism, but to extract the greatest possible nourishment from it. Peirce claims that progress in modern thought has stagnated because it has separated itself from “its ancient mother,” the church. By rejecting the church, and hence awareness of its place in the larger story of reasoning, modern mind is floundering without real doubt to orient it. Peirce takes his stand: “The only cord which ever bound them, and which belonged to either [modern thought and the dark ages] is Christianity. Since the beginning of Christianity the growth of civilization has had six stages.” (CE1.105) Peirce dwells in these stages in order to rehabilitate modern mind in the context of the history of reason, which coalesces into two driving questions:

The first is, is Christianity a fact of consciousness merely, or one of the external world? And this shall be answered by the end of our own age. The second is, is this predicate true to the understanding merely, or also to the senses? And this, if we may look forward so far, will be answered by Christ's coming to rule his kingdom in person. And when that occurs, religion will no longer be presented objectively, but we shall receive it by direct communication with him. (CE 1.114)

This overt Christian idealism seems far removed from Peirce's later articles on the logic of science. Until, that is, we focus on the way Peirce portrays science as an exercise principally concerned with exploring the deepest doubt possible to the modern mind – its own

method. That method can be validated as a reliable and coherent means of raising itself to self-critical doubt only in light of its approach to an articulated end or telos. In "The Fixation of Belief" Peirce critiques inquiry that self-deceptively searches into false objects, making a show of unlocking doors it has surreptitiously hidden the keys to in its pocket, or exhibits the false trust that scattering interest like a broadcast sower will generate scientific progress. For science to progress it must engage its most elemental doubt, the doubt of its own method. This entails an overarching frame of reference, a guiding conviction. Bringing this guiding conviction, a vague truth, to further clarity is a goal of inquiry. This process would go some way to answering the first question above by illuminating the difference between inquiry enclosed within "consciousness merely," and inquiry oriented toward an "external world".

The concluding section in "Fixation" hones in on common methods of fixing belief and their attendant errors. Tenacity, holding a belief arbitrarily, is undone by the social impulse; authority, promulgating a set of beliefs for the good order of the community, fails when experience loosens the totalizing grip of enforced belief. Peirce writes "the willful adherence to a belief, and the arbitrary forcing of it upon others, must, therefore, both be given up." (EP1, 118) Peirce associates *apriorism* with intellectual taste, and these beliefs change rapidly demonstrating that "sentiments in their development will be very greatly determined by accidental causes." (EP1, 119) The arbitrary nature of these sentiments shows their ungrounded character, and he restates his conviction that our thought must be fixed "by some external permanency – by something upon which our thinking has no effect" to overcome such an accidental character. (EP1, 120)

It is important to note that in cataloguing the errors of each method of fixing belief Peirce does not challenge the content of the beliefs. Indeed, the description of instinctive beliefs developed in his later essays reflect

some aspect of each method. Instinctive beliefs guide the lives of most people (authority), carry their own credibility (apriorism), and are evidences of the real if followed out diligently despite the criticism of doubters (tenacity). The difference is that beliefs arising from the erroneous methods are mixed with the doubts of those methods, whereas *no doubts arise* from the method of scientific reasoning. Inquirers cannot pursue this method wrongly, making an essential step in the transformation of inquiry in two ways. First, since the method does not generate doubt it can be used to pursue occasions of doubt that arise from the content of beliefs; second, the framing character of teleological beliefs now becomes a part of the orienting fabric of scientific inquiry. Kant's questions of God, freedom, and immorality are in the offing, but these must arise as genuine doubts within the process of methodological and self-critical scientific inquiry.

In Peirce's later essays "instinct" expands on the goods of the three methods he dismisses – fixing upon ideas and holding them despite challenges (tenacity), explicating communally orienting beliefs that change only very slowly (authority), and believing as one is inclined to believe as a guide to truth (apriorism). These virtues are brought within the scientific method by focusing on public criticism, the fallibility of all knowledge claims, and strictly excluding personal preference or willful belief for private (and hence opaque) reasons. This is further evidence that his method of inquiry is discovering an external permanency in thought, because even these errors are now instructive and positive examples for increasing self-controlled inquiry.

Instincts in the Development of Pragmatism

The historical appearance of "pragmatism" in the August 26, 1898 lecture by William James follows the remarkable success of Peirce's Cambridge lectures, "Reason and the Logic of Things" in March of that same year. Ketner and

Putnam, in their fine introduction to the published version of these lectures, note that the event also was pivotal for Royce. (RLT 36) Although auspicious, the happy birth of pragmatism was short lived if we consider that in the 1905 *Monist* essays Peirce distances himself from the doctrine of pragmatism found in "literary journals."⁴ In published essays, "What Pragmatism Is" and "Issues of Pragmatism", and unpublished work Peirce intended for a third essay, "The Basis of Pragmatism", Peirce expands on the role of instinct as a principle difference between his understanding of pragmatism and that which developed from James's popularizing work.

Instincts are prominent in "Reason and the Logic of Things". For example, in Lecture four, "The First Rule of Logic" Peirce says, "one thing is needful for learning the truth, and that is a hearty and active desire to learn what is true." (RLT 170) This is a sentiment, an acritical orientation to seeking "eternal verities." Science cannot provide this kind of orientation because there is no proposition in science that answers to the conception of belief. "[F]ull belief," Peirce says in the first lecture, "is willingness to act upon the proposition in vital crises . . . and matters of vital importance must be left to sentiment, that is, to instinct." (RLT 112) Reasoning begins with what we already think as the beginning of increasing self-control. Instincts provide the ground for this development since they are beyond the thinking of any individual, and also because they are not static. Peirce writes

Instinct is capable of development and growth, - though by a movement which is slow in the proportion to which it is vital; and this development takes place upon lines which are altogether parallel to those of reasoning. . . . Not only is it of the same nature as the development of cognition; but it chiefly takes place through the instrumentality of cognition. The soul's deeper parts can only be reached through its surface. (RLT 122)

⁴ John Dewey, "The Pragmatism of Peirce" *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. 13, No. 26 (Dec. 21, 1916) pg.710.

Inquiry into "vital" sentiments and inquiry in science is crucial for logic, which is seen only in its application within the self-critical refining of habits of action and belief. The vitality of instinct lies in its being an object of inquiry without being an arbitrary product of thought. Peirce's main insight in the paragraph above is the continuity between the development of instinct and cognition as the same that operates in scientific inquiry. In the context of both science and instinct inquiry seeks the law-like regularity subtending thought, that is, the real. The force of instinct leads to the desire for self-control as our practice that deviates from "what we cannot but believe" generates regret. Science does not carry this same motive force – we don't regret believing in a wrong hypothesis -- but science does exemplify the success of probabilistic inquiry and recognizing error. Time, the reality that inquiry is always destabilized toward the future, is the nearest corollary to the motivation to self-correction arising from instincts. The reality of time is the basis of all scientific explanation, but scientific inquiry alone cannot explain the impetus discovered in reasoning. Science, as an exercise in the method of cognition, has its place in the approach to "the soul's deeper parts" mentioned above, but science cannot supply the goal of inquiry, which is advancing self-control and discovering the real which is accessible through inquiry into what we cannot help but believe.⁵

Instinct in inquiry takes on a new character in Peirce's 1905 *Monist* essays. For Peirce "What pragmatism Is" is an occasion for the development of pragmatism. Only through the errors of pragmatism is this next level of precision possible. In fact, the undisciplined thought appearing in "literary journals" precipitates he says a "sort of cross between a dialogue and a catechism, but a good deal liker the latter". (EP 2, 338)

⁵ See Sandra Rosenthal "On the Epistemological Significance of What Peirce is Not" *Transactions of the C.S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Winter, 1979), especially page 24 where she writes that for Peirce "the objects within our world do not copy the independently real but rather emerge through our modes of grasping the independently real."

In response to the third question of this catechism, Peirce pronounces that his doctrine focuses on “a series of problems capable of investigation” by “its retention of a purified philosophy; secondly, its full acceptance of the main body of our instinctive beliefs; and thirdly, its strenuous insistence upon the truth of scholastic realism.” (EP 2, 338-9) Readers aware of the role of 2nds in Peirce’s triads will note the placement of instinctive beliefs in this description. Preserving philosophy for science turns on the content of instincts! In a crucial sentence he connects the product of instincts in self-controlled practice to the product of scientific inquiry:

Now, just as conduct controlled by ethical reason tends toward fixing certain habits of conduct, the nature of which does not depend upon an accidental circumstances, and in that sense may be said to be destined; so, thought, controlled by a rational experimental logic, tends to the fixation of certain opinions, equally destined, the nature of which will be the same in the end (EP2,342).

The essence of thought is the convergence possible due to the reality of its object, a movement connected to a test of his cosmological theory to the point that it is either “sustained or exploded” by its outcome. The incarnational component in Peirce’s inquiry is most evident when he says “thirdness can have no concrete being without action; as a separate object on which to works its government, just as action cannot exist without the immediate being of feeling on which to act.” (EP2, 345) The spirit of discipline, self-control over thinking, is the goal of inquiry from the beginning of Peirce’s work. This is achieved only in objective thought that aims at an end of thirdness manifested materially in the lives of inquirers. Such concrete being that reflects a “destined” end is, I think for Peirce, immortality.

In the following *Monist* essay, “Issues of Pragmatism”, Peirce praises Thomas Reid as a philosopher well focused on the content of instinctive beliefs.⁶ (EP 2, 349)

⁶See Christopher Hookway, “Critical Common-Sensism

However, pragmatism has six distinguishing characters from the Philosophy of Common Sense, but it accepts the beginning point that “we have an occult nature of which and of its contents we can only judge by the conduct that it determines, and by phenomena of that conduct”. Inquiry touches this hidden character and changes it:

to say that determination affects our occult nature is to say that it is capable of affecting deliberate conduct; and since we are conscious of what we do deliberately, we are conscious habitualiter [by approximation] of whatever hides in the depths of our nature; and it is presumable . . . that a sufficiently energetic effort of attention would bring it out.

The object of reasoning resolves into relating all inferences to “one guiding principle.” (EP 2, 347-8) Translating acritical inferences (instincts) into products of logical argumentation, therefore, is a work of reasoning that alone manifests the affective influence on our occult nature from which we are able to discover the telos of reason by following the phenomena of self-control.

Transformation of Inquiry and the Reality of God

The third essay Peirce planned for the *Monist* on “The Basis of Pragmatism” was never completed. The six extant drafts show him casting around, at times wildly, for a platform for his logic. I think his effort to ground his logic issued in his last published work, “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God.” This essay tracks, in surprisingly existential terms, the transformation of the instinctive belief in God into a piece of logical argumentation.⁷ God, an “infinitely incomprehensible

and Rational Self-Control” *Nous*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (June 1990) for the claim that Peirce was an adherent of common-sense from the 1860s.

⁷ See Paul Forster *Peirce and the Threat of Nominalism* (Cambridge, 2011) for an excellent description of abduction. His point can be included to support the abductive claim that the instinctive belief in the reality of God is a test for the validity of his logic. 134ff.

object," provides an orienting character to inquiry by "supplying an ideal for life, and a "thoroughly satisfactory explanation of his whole threefold environment." (EP 2, 439) Telescoping the essay a bit, we read in section V that a "trained man of science" would accept that

an individual soul with its petty agitations and calamities is a zero except as filling its infinitesimal place and accepting its little utility as its entire treasure, . . . and bless God for the law of growth, with all the fighting it imposes upon him – Evil, i.e., what it is man's duty to fight, being one of the major perfections of the Universe. In that fight he will endeavor to perform just the duty laid upon him, and no more. Though his desperate struggles should issue in the horrors of his route, and he should see the innocents who are dearest to his heart exposed to torments, frenzy, and despair, destined to be smirched with filth, and stunted in their intelligence, still he may hope that it be best for them, and will tell himself that in any case the secret design of God will be perfected through their agency; and even while still hot from battle, will submit with adoration to His Holy will. He will not worry because the Universes were no constructed to fit the scheme of some silly scold. (EP 2, 445)

I conclude this essay with Peirce's words which, for me, are almost as puzzling as Phillip Wiener found his "faith in the religious instinct." I am convinced that Peirce is the trained man of science he refers to, and so agree with Anderson that the "[NA] is the fullest attempt he made to illustrate the continuity of religion and science, to show that they need not be fundamentally antagonistic tendencies in one's life, despite the tension between their spirits," and that Peirce's "critical common-sensism attempts to bring the full belief of instinct and practice to the provisional belief of critical inquiry; the two are not reduced one to the other but are seen as dimensions of a fuller system of belief – a life."⁸ (SOS 137) Peirce writes in MS L224 "the human intellect is of the kin of the Creative Spirit", and this kinship is discovered only through the transformation of inquiry into a growing, vital image of the reality of God expressed in human action and the obedient service of inquiry.

⁸ Douglas Anderson *Strands of System* (Purdue University Press, 1995)