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“Evolution, Pragmatism, and Rhetoric: Exploring the  
Origin and Loci of Meaning”

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# Evolution, Pragmatism, and Rhetoric: Exploring the Origin and Loci of Meaning

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## 1. Introduction

C. S. Peirce bemoaned “the merciless way that words have to expect when they fall into literary clutches” (EP 2:334). In my hands, his texts have once again fallen into such clutches, at any rate, ones that he would judge to be closer the hands of a *litterateur* than those of a scientist. I intend to be not so much merciful as cherishing, thereby hoping to show that litterateurs and rhetoricians need not be abusive in their handling of the words of others, especially the texts of philosophers. And it is to Peirce’s own words, recalled here partly for a polemical purpose, that I most want to call your attention. This purpose is, at least, doubly polemical, for my intention is to read Peirce somewhat against the grain of even his most astute interpreters but also against himself. In reading Peirce to some extent against himself, however, I desire to aid him in achieving one of his deepest aspirations – the daunting challenge of articulating a truly general theory of signs. The constructive goal underlying this polemical purpose, however, is to trace out more fully a trajectory inherent in Peirce’s theory of signs, a trajectory bearing directly on the scope of this theory. The culmination of Peirce’s semeiotic in a truly comprehensive understanding of speculative rhetoric is often compromised by attending too exclusively to methodetic as the culminating branch of Peircean semeiotic. The evolution of his own reflections on signs, moreover, is intimately connected to his commitment to evolution. That is, his doctrine of signs is, to a remarkable degree, of a

piece with his commitment to evolution. Constructively, then, my task is to highlight these all too often neglected aspects of Peirce's mature position. The evolution of Peirce's semeiotic toward a truly comprehensive vision of rhetoric and the articulation of this theory from an evolutionary point of view define the topics of my concern.

## 2. Instituting a theory of signs: preliminary considerations

In "A Sketch of Logical Critics", a manuscript most likely composed in August of 1911, Peirce posed a rhetorical question:

Would it not, at any rate, in the present state of science, be good scientific policy, for those who have both a talent and passion for eliciting the truth about such matters, to institute a cooperative cenoscopic attack upon the nature, properties, and varieties of Signs, in the spirit of twentieth-century science? EP 2:462

He immediately added:

For my part, although I have had sundry universal propositions concerning Signs under anxious advisement for many years, I have been unable to satisfy myself as to a single one of them... This is not because of any definite reason for hesitation, but simply that having been unable to urge my argument upon any mind but my cautious self, I cannot help having a vague question whether a fresh intelligence, uncramped by long dwelling on the same questions, might not start objects that have escaped my fagged understanding on account of their very obviousness, just as in my fatigue I very frequently think I have mislaid some familiar instrument or utensil and lose the better part of an hour searching for it and finally discover it very prominently placed just where it always was and ought to be, but where the very absence of any feature to which I am not accustomed has preventing its attracting my attention.

These are virtually "paper doubts", but not fully so. Here too Peirce's own words are instructive: "I think it most likely that my doubts about all universal predications concerning signs are mostly quite gratuitous, but still my having no second person to whom to appeal as to the reasonableness of my doubts prevents their being laid to rest." You and I are among those to whom Peirce in such writings is appealing. In explicitly addressing the Reader in the second person (sometimes going so far say as to entitle this person as "Your Honor"), he is deliberately addressing "a real person, with all the instincts of which we human beings are so sublimely

and so responsibly endowed" (EP 2:464). In "What Pragmatism Is", Peirce stresses: "Among the things which the reader, as a rational person, does not doubt, is that he not merely has habits, but also can exert a measure of self-control over his future actions..." (EP 2:337).

The importance of this to the original formulation and especially the eventual refinement of his pragmatic position cannot be exaggerated: "Now the theory of Pragmaticism was originally based, as anyone will see who examines the papers of November 1877 and January 1878 [i.e., "the Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear"], upon the study of that experience of the phenomena of self-control which is common to all grown men and women; and it seems evident that to some extent, at least, it must always be so based" (EP 2:348). The pragmatic clarification of meaning and the experimental fixation of belief are the results of the conscientious efforts of deliberate agents possessing a contrite sense of their ineradicable fallibility. It is based, above all else, on our experience of error (more fully, that of having error forced on our attention, but also having at least on occasion the experience of being able to correct our mistakes, i.e., modify our habits so that they are more finely and fully attuned with those of the cosmos itself).

The shaping of intellectual character, at the heart of which is intellectual conscience,<sup>1</sup> is arguably bound up with the articulation of Peircean pragmatism. The proof of pragmatism thus must be rhetorical as well as logical, one facilitating the *identification* with a certain form of community as well as exhibiting the unsuspected implications of our unavoidable acknowledgments (Colapietro, 2007). It is conceivably aimed at the reshaping of intellectual character, not solely the winning of cognitive assent. In this connection, the references to the effects upon persons are not "sops to Cerberus". The famous text in Peirce's private correspondence in which this metaphor appears needs to be set alongside other ones, not least of all:

In coming to Speculative Rhetoric, after the main conceptions of logic have been well settled, there can be no serious objection to relaxing the severity of our rule of excluding psychological matter, observations of how we think, and the like. The regulation has served its end; why should it be allowed now to hamper our endeavors to make methodic practically useful? But while the justice of this must be admitted, it is also to be borne in mind that there is a purely logical doctrine

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<sup>1</sup> It is certainly significant that one of Peirce's most important manuscripts, filling six notebooks and running to over 400 pages, is titled: "Reason's Conscience: A Practical Treatise on the Theory of Discovery; Wherein logic is conceived as Semeiotic" (MS 693).

of how discovery must take place, which, however great or little is its importance, it is my plain task and duty here to explore. In addition to this, there may be a psychological account of the matter, of the utmost importance and ever so extensive. With this, it is not my business to meddle, although I may here and there make such use of it as I can in aid of my own doctrine. CP 2.102

But methodeutic as a branch of semeiotic is the achievement of an autonomous agent striving, within the context of inquiry, to exert the necessary level of intellectual control over the use of signs and, of pivotal importance, the formulation, elaboration, and testing of hypotheses. In speculative grammar, a truly general conception of semiosis is derived by means of abstraction; in speculative rhetoric, a distinctively normative understanding of sign-use is obtained through recontextualization (taking sign-use in all of the contexts in which it is observable, not only in those that are paradigmatic or, at least, plausible instances of experimental inquiry).

This suggests that speculative rhetoric, rather than methodeutic, is the better name for the third branch of Peircean semeiotic. Within an intricate mapping of the divisions of speculative rhetoric, Peirce suggests, as one of the leading divisions of this branch of semeiotic (its most vital and important branch), this trichotomy: a rhetoric of fine arts, that of practical persuasion, and that of scientific discourse (“Ideas, Stray or Stolen, about Scientific Writing”; EP 2:329). The least developed part of Peirce’s semeiotic might just be the most important part. It is *neither* identifiable with methodeutic (methodeutic being but a part of a part of one of the main subdivisions of speculative or philosophical rhetoric) *nor* possible (let alone useful) to do so, except insofar as this branch concerns itself with the deliberate cultivation of logical interpretants in any sphere of sign-use (above all, *ultimate* logical interpretants – i.e., habits of imagining, questioning, and acting in various other ways). It is the branch of semeiotic most directly concerned with the evolution of interpretants. One important implication of this pragmatist doctrine regarding the ultimate interpretant is this: The question of meaning turns out to be one concerning the history – or evolution – of interpretants, ultimately the ongoing generation of ever more flexible, nuanced, and attuned habits. The historicist and evolutionary cast of Peirce’s semeiotic is, even at this late date, inadequately appreciated by many readers who are otherwise informed and insightful (Colapietro, 2004b).

### 3. An evolving theory and a thoroughgoing evolutionism

Peirce's reflections on signs manifest an evolving character. Moreover, they are more intimately connected with his carefully articulated accounts of evolution than many readers seem to notice (see, however, Short, 2007). It is, therefore, remarkable that Peirce's theory of evolution has not been used more fully by his expositors to illuminate his understanding of the interpretant, in particular, the complex processes by which interpretants are actually generated in such paradigmatic instances of anthroposemiosis as ordinary conversations, scientific investigations, moral deliberations, and artistic innovations. A number of commentators, including John Dewey in his review of the *Collected Papers* and Philip Wiener in *Evolution and the Founders of Pragmatism*, have indeed highlighted the fact Peirce's conception of logic is evolutionary (see, e.g., Alborn, 1989). In addition, some have been emphatic in claiming that Peirce viewed natural processes from a logical perspective as much as logical practices from an evolutionary viewpoint. While biological mutations are depicted by him as, in effect, random guesses having, at best, an uncertain future, the intense competition among scientific hypotheses to secure a niche for themselves in an environment full of predators and other antagonists is cast in an evolutionary light. So, on the one hand, Peirce insists, "the logic of evolution and of life need not be supposed to be of that wooden kind that absolutely constrains a given conclusion. The logic may be that of the inductive or hypothetic inference" (CP 6.218). On the other, he suggests: "The evolutionary theory in general throws great light upon history and especially the history of science – both its public history and the account of its development in an individual intellect" (CP 1.103). Thus, it seems no less accurate to assert that Peirce sought to explain evolution in terms of his logical conceptions than that he endeavored to illuminate logic (or semeiotic) in terms of evolutionary ideas (Burks, 1997).

This might however appear to be (to recall one of Peirce's most vivid metaphors) a case of two drunks trying to hold each up. Recall that he uses this trope in reference to anyone who proposes to explain the mutual dependency of logic and psychology (CP 8.167). But we can appeal to Peirce as underwriting our position concerning evolution and logic: "After all, any analogy, however fanciful, which serves to focus attention upon matters which might otherwise escape observation is valuable" (CP 3.370). And who can convincingly deny that the analogy of evolution invites us to discern what we might otherwise easily overlook? Is it even the case

that this analogy is *utterly* fanciful, especially since it is so unquestionably fruitful? Finally, is not the idea of growth, with which Peirce virtually identifies evolution (see, e.g., CP 1.174), itself capable of indefinite growth and, in addition, is not the cultivation of the growth of this idea, especially in the teeth of positions rendering life, mind, and consciousness completely inexplicable and cosmologically anomalous, worthy of our cherishing concern? Is not Peirce's vision of the cosmos one in which growth, including the growth of signs (especially symbols) and, thus, the growth of mind (indeed, the evolution of semiosis into mentality), is rendered not only central but also explicable? Peirce is explicit on most of these points:

The idea of growth – the stately tree springing from the tiny seed – was the key that Aristotle brought to be tried upon this intricate grim lock. In such trials he came upon those wonderful conceptions... This idea of Aristotle's has proved marvelously fecund; and in truth it is the only idea covering quite the whole area of cenoscopy that has shown any marked uberosity [security versus uberty (rich suggestiveness)]. Many and many a century is likely to sink in Time's flood, and be buried in the mud of Lethe, before the achievements of the nineteenth [century] shall get matched. But of all those achievements, the greatest in the eye of reason, that to bringing to light the supremacy of the element of *Growth*, was, after all, nothing but a special *application* of Aristotle's pure vision.

EP 2:373; emphasis added

It is hardly an exaggeration, then, to say that all of Peirce's efforts were directed toward facilitating the *growth* of meaning, knowledge, and understanding.

Although these points are almost certainly familiar to most readers of Peirce, their implications, not least of all their implications for *how* to carry forward the study of semiosis, are not likely appreciated by every student of Peirce's writings. But, just as Peirce's texts must be read in an evolutionary light, so Darwin's might be interpreted from a Peircean perspective. Doing so allows us to bring into sharp focus not only questions of rhetoric, above all, those pertaining to the rhetoric of science, but also questions about some of the most important rhetorical dimensions of Peirce's own philosophical authorship. The least complete, but most vital, part of Peirce's semeiotic (his speculative rhetoric) is arguably the one in which metaphors drawn from evolutionary biology have their least problematic, most promising applications.

In a perceptive review of the first six volumes of the *Collected Papers*, John Dewey noted: "Peirce lived when the idea of evolution was uppermost in the mind of his generation. He *applied* it everywhere. But to him

it meant, whether in the universe of nature, of science or of society, continual growth in the direction of interrelations, of what he called continuity" (LW 11:482–3; emphasis added). Dewey is especially perceptive in connecting Peirce's evolutionism with his synechism (or doctrine of continuity), an insight honoring the principle of continuity itself. For it connects what otherwise might seem to be disparate or disjointed. Dewey is also surprisingly appreciative of the fact that, given Peirce's concern with the generality of our shared practices, far more than with the uniqueness of our individual experiences, Peirce, precisely as a pragmatist, captured what James failed to appreciate. Shared human practices are irreducibly *general* modes of purposive exertion. In Dewey's judgment, at least, Peirce was *more of a pragmatist* than James precisely because of Peirce's characteristic emphasis on the generality of human practices and because such practices are *general* (LW 11:483).

As a younger man, Peirce went so far as to assert: "indeed, my opinion is only Darwinism analyzed, generalized, and brought into the realm of Ontology" (w 4:552). "This Darwinian principle is plainly capable of great generalization. Wherever there are large numbers of objects having a tendency to retain certain characters unaltered, this tendency, however, not being absolute being giving room for chance variations...there will be a gradual tendency to change in directions of departure from them" (Wiener, 1965, p. 81). But the first of these assertions, the one in which Peirce identifies his position as "only Darwinism" modified in several respects, needs to be carefully handled.

The main reason for this is that, while Peirce was a thoroughgoing evolutionist, he was only a half-hearted Darwinian. The nature and source of his reservations regarding Darwin's theory of evolution are matters of dispute. Too often, however, too much is made of Peirce's philosophical and even theological objections to Darwin's views, too little of the strictly scientific character of his misgivings. I, however, simply note these reservations. In Freudian terms, one might say that Peirce's mature position toward the Darwinian perspective was one of achieved ambivalence (Segal, 1992). He arrived at a nuanced, critical, yet appreciative attitude toward Darwin. In this, he proved himself to be able to throw off the influence of one of the most commanding thinkers in the early stage of his intellectual development (the close friend of his father and scientific tutor of Charles – Louis Agassiz).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> After his return from Louisiana (a scientific expedition including the recently graduated Peirce), Agassiz would debate with Asa Gray at Harvard about Darwinian evolution. For illuminating, informative accounts of this controversy, see Wilson (1967), also Russett (1976).



But it is other facets of Peirce's preoccupation with growth that I want to consider here. While *methodeutic* captures Peirce's focal preoccupation with offering a normative account of objective inquiry, in the context of an evolutionary cosmology, speculative rhetoric conveys the still largely unrealized potential of his philosophical imagination, inasmuch as this imagination is evident in his vision of a thoroughly generalized conception of rhetoric (see, however, Bird, 1959; also Santaella, 1999, esp. pp. 388–90). According to Peirce, "the woof and warp of all thought and all research is symbols, and the life of thought and science is the life inherent in symbols" (CP 2.220). Symbols cannot function apart from other modes of signification, so a detailed, nuanced, and comprehensive account of the various modes of signification is required for doing justice to scientific investigation (or objective inquiry). However, the execution of this task requires unblinking recognition of the vital character, the irrepressible life, inherent in our experimental practices (see, e.g., CP 1.234–5). But, from Peirce's perspective, the very forms of living beings grow (not just those organisms themselves): by complex processes involving chance and catastrophe, compulsive attractions and alluring radiance, fierce struggle and cherishing concern, the forms of life themselves evolve.

The title of Darwin's book, *Origin of Species*, implicitly embodied a revolution, since it manifestly implied (contra the dominant tradition in Western ontology) that species have an origin in history. The very forms of being and thus intelligibility are irreducibly historical or temporal. I take this to mean (among countless other things) that Peirce's evolution is relevant to his semeiotic. The application of Peirce's understanding of evolution to his own doctrine of signs enhances the applicability of this doctrine, for it renders his semeiotic more flexible, adaptable, and fecund than it otherwise would be. It is however easy to misunderstand the ideal of applicability, one bound up with the insistence upon generality (cf. Wittgenstein, 1958, pp. 17–8). Indeed, the generality of this theory is practically established by the applicability of the definitions and distinctions to domains beyond those for which they were principally crafted. But the ordinary understanding of applicability is likely to endorse what might be called a theoreticist conception of practice, wherein the validity or the justification of a practice awaits the arguments and verdicts of theory. But, from a consistently pragmatist perspective, our practices are justified in the same manner as our lives. From this angle, theory is not undertaken for the sake of practice any more than practice appeals to a theory for its justification or foundation. Rather, theory is itself a form of practice or, more accurately,

a widely extended family of historically *evolved* practices. Our theoretical practices are, like all other ones, justified (insofar as they are truly justified) *practically*. Self-subsistent grounds are as superfluous here as are self-warranting cognitions, ahistoric foundations as irrelevant in this context as foundational intuitions. The ultimate appeal can only be to the fluency, efficacy, intensity, and disclosures reclaimed, in the face of inevitable crises, by improvisational actors caught up in historical dramas of an essentially contested character (see Gallie, 1964). Of course, such an ultimate appeal can never be anything more than a provisional appeal: it can never be ultimate. The historical emergence of experimental intelligence is, in one sense, contemporaneous with certain complex forms of animal life yet, in a more narrow sense, coextensive with a self-consciously *deliberative* approach to those experiential impasses by which mindful agents are thrown into doubt and confusion.

The *continuity* between the forms of intelligence displayed in everyday life and those exhibited in paradigmatically scientific investigations needs to be stressed, but not to the point where certain salient differences are effaced. The abiding relevance of Peirce's sentimental conservatism is likely, especially among intellectuals, to be ignored or dismissed. So much depends upon virtually unquestioning allegiance to traditions of civility, tolerance, and affection.

We craft a general theory of signs *for a purpose*. Peirce was a convinced pragmatist *in* even his seemingly most formal elaboration of semeiotic topics. This means, in part, that the governing purposes are of the utmost importance to identify and assess in reference to any development within his semeiotic theory. It also means that theories are not formulated prior to practice and, only then, applied. If we are Peirceans, we do not so much *apply* a theory of signs ready-made to a domain of practice as we articulate from within this domain a more nuanced, flexible, and experimental self-understanding of our participation in this practice (a participation not infrequently involving a sense of identification). This overstates the case, for (to take but one example) one can offer a semiotic account of religious conversion without being oneself a religious person (without identifying with the practice being investigated). As practitioners or, at least, as those who aim to attain an "interior understanding" of the actual participants in some human practice, we must provisionally grant the practice under consideration an integrity and autonomy of its own, although one hardly inseparable from countless other practices.

Applying Peirce's understanding of evolution to his own doctrine of signs renders this doctrine more applicable than it otherwise would be, not least of all by shifting the focus from the taxonomic to the genealogical. What Darwin wrote near the conclusion of *On the Origin of Species* I might say near the end of this talk: "How far more interesting" does our study become "when we regard every production of nature as one which has had a history". Just as Darwin drove biology in the direction of historical questions, so Peirce devoted himself to logic with a deliberately cultivated historical consciousness of its long history. We ought never to forget that Peirce was, *in his role as a logician*, a historian of logic. Nathan Houser, Don Roberts, and James van Evra, the editors of *Studies in the Logic of Charles Sanders Peirce* (1997), were wise in using a text from Augustus De Morgan as the epigram for this collection of essays: "All the men who are now called discoverers, in every matter [field] ruled by thought, have been men versed in the minds of their predecessors, and learned in what had been [thought] before them" (*A Budget of Paradoxes*, volume 1, p. 5). Whether this truly applies to every logician who has made significant contributions to logic, it certainly applies to Peirce. He was in his role as a scientist and philosopher of science a *historian* of science. Critical attention to what has been called the pragmatics of explanation helps us to appreciate the irreducible plurality of explanatory strategies (see, e.g., Dray, 1954). Of most immediate relevance here, there are historical modes of explanation not reducible to the dominant strategies in science. These are scientific modes of explanation, if not always recognized as such.

One of the principal tasks of practical rhetoric is to win a hearing – nothing more, but also nothing less than a wider, fairer hearing – for some position, perspective, or methodology that is at odds with the self-understanding of exemplary or authoritative practitioners (cf. Darwin, 2000, pp. 209–10). Proof unquestionably has its place in such an effort, but the point of such an endeavor – the purpose of this deployment of rhetoric – is less to prove anything conclusively than it is to widen the field of inquiry to include what is systematically, even unreflectively, pooh-poohed. Peirce was a physicist who argued for tychism in the teeth of the physics of his day. Only a universe in which there is chance is one in which there could be evolution. Only a universe in which there is a fantastic proliferation of living forms and the radical transformation of biological niches partly resulting from the perfusion of (and competition among) such forms, could there be in time consciousness and mind having the degree of complexity and recursivity so manifest in the historical practices of the human animal.

Peirce's mature theory of signs is thoroughly pragmatic, just as his mature articulation of pragmatism is formally semiotic. This implies that deliberative agents passionately identifying with historically evolving communities of self-critical inquirers are not only the authors of such doctrines but also their objects. Peircean pragmatism is, at the very least, a commonsensical yet critical theory of deliberative agency in which the controlling or defining purposes of the doctrines framed by such agency are themselves made explicit objects of rational assessment.

In a letter to James, dated March 7th, 1904, Peirce wrote: "The effect of pragmatism here is simply to open our minds to receiving any kind of evidence, not to furnish the evidence" (CP 8.259). Earlier, in the *Lectures on Pragmatism*, he asserted: "What the true nature of Pragmatism may be, I find it very hard to say; but in my nature it is a sort of instinctive attraction for *living facts*" (CP 5.64; or EP 2:158; emphasis added). What he means by living facts is made manifest when he goes on to claim:

All nature abounds in proofs of other influences than merely mechanical action even in the physical world. They crowd in upon us at the rate of several every minute. And my observation of men has led me to this little generalization. Speaking only of men who really think for themselves and not of mere reporters, I have not found that it is the men whose lives are mostly passed within the four walls of a physical laboratory who are most inclined to be satisfied with a purely mechanical metaphysics. On the contrary, the more clearly they understand how physical forces work the more incredible it seems to them that such action should explain what happens out of doors.

CP 5.65; EP 2:158

And what we need, more than anything else, is a philosophy possessing the wherewithal to explain what happens out of doors, beyond the walls of the laboratory as much as those of the library. But only a philosophy attuned to the vagaries, varieties, and intricacies of living beings holds the promise of carrying out this task.

#### 4. Toward a pragmaticist reclamation of *living* reason

Peirce's philosophical authorship might itself be read as an indefatigable effort to win a hearing for an evolutionary cosmology in which living beings, both as they manifest themselves in our everyday experience and as they have been theorized in evolutionary biology, are accorded pride of place. However, this substantive position is to some extent always subor-

minated by Peirce to methodological preoccupations. The growth of experimental intelligence, as a dramatic episode in the evolution of the natural world, involves the transformation of blind groping into intelligent guessing. The evolution of concrete reasonableness encompasses the growth of such intelligence – and the self-understanding of deliberative agents as mortal beings conscientiously devoted to the realization of transcendent ideals signifies a very different relationship to nature than the one encountered in so many philosophers from Peirce’s time to our own. An abiding, penetrating and sustaining sense of attunement, rather than a lacerating, defiant, and ultimately delusional sense of alienation, characterizes this relationship.

“How bleak a climate America with its vitally important topics is for vitally unimportant but cosmically vital ideas” (MS 436 [Lecture I, 1898]; reproduced in Stuhr, 1987, p. 46). What we need, however, are not “sporadic ideas on vitally important topics”, but rather the systematic articulation of cosmically vital ideas.

Formal, abstract reason is an integral phase, or justified guise, of concrete, *living* reason (Smith, 1995, chap. IV). Whatever else pragmatic intelligence might be, however, it always ultimately returns to assuming the unmistakable guise of living reason. Formal, abstract reason is only an intermediate phase, or temporary (dis)guise, of living human rationality. The emphatic insistence on living reason is found in James as well as in Peirce. In the concluding chapter of his *Pragmatism*, James proclaims:

But if one talks of rationality and the reason of things, and insists that they can’t just come in spots, what *kind* of reason can there ultimately be why anything should come at all? Talk of logic and necessity and categories and the absolute and the contents of the whole philosophical machine shop as you will, the only *real* reason I can think of why anything should ever come is that *someone wishes it to be there*. It is *demand*ed, demanded, it may be, to give relief to no matter how small a fraction of the world’s mass. This is [James announces] *living reason*, and compared with it material causes and logical necessities are spectral things.

James, 1978, p. 138

In one of his most detailed classification of ultimate ends, Peirce notes “*finally*, he [i.e., any rational or deliberative agent] may be filled with the idea that the only reason that can reasonably be admitted as ultimate is that living reason for the sake of which the psychical and physical universe is in process of creation (religionism)” (CP 8.138). I hope to have an opportunity at some point to develop the contrast between the Peircean and Jamesian

understanding of living reason, but this must for now be postponed. As pragmatists, both reveal a thoroughgoing commitment to living reason, however differently they might come to spell out the meaning of this form of rationality.

Peirce was acutely aware of how quickly the most sophisticated intellectuals of his day were likely to dismiss, out of hand, such claims. He himself was prone to do so, even with regard to his categories (“This sort of notion is as distasteful to me as to anybody; and, for years, I endeavored to pooh-pooh and refute it; but it long ago conquered me completely” [CP 8.328].) Whereas many of his scientific brethren were fixated on the finality of scientific truth, Peirce was fascinated by the life – thus, the fluidity and mutability – inherent in the pursuit of such truth. Given the typical reaction to so many of his most cherished ideas, then, it is no surprise that he once confessed: “I wish I had the leisure to place before those gentlemen a work to be entitled *The History of Pooh-pooh-ing*. I think it would do them good” (CP 2.111). There are, at least for Peirce, ideas possessing “inherent, incorruptible *vitality*” (CP 2.217; emphasis added). The idea of growth itself is arguably one such idea. The Peircean idea of symbol is inseparable from his evolutionary understanding of growth, just as his vision of thoroughgoing evolutionism is inseparable from that of the living symbol. “[W]hatever be the kind and degree of our logical assurance that there is any real world, external or internal, that same kind and degree of assurance we certainly have that there not only may be a living symbol, realizing the full idea of a symbol, but [also] even that there actually is one” (CP 2.114; cf. Colapietro, 1989, p. 113).

The growth of signs and especially symbols has reached the point in the actual evolution of human beings of providing us with the rhetorical resources to win a fairer hearing for some of the seemingly more untenable ideas to be harvested from Peirce’s writings. Darwin was pooh-poohed in his own day and is still quickly, contemptuously dismissed in our own. Peirce’s fate is, if anything, to have suffered such dismissal to an even greater degree. In the monumental book he rushed to complete, Darwin’s rhetorical achievement is a stunning one. In the monumental works he envisioned but never finished, Peirce’s rhetorical achievement is no less remarkable. For, like his scientific kin, he did much to win a hearing for a view all too readily dismissed in his own day and indeed our own. But this gathering<sup>3</sup> is a vibrant sign of that vital truth. The signs of growth mani-

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<sup>3</sup> The reference is to the meeting at which an earlier draft of this paper was presented.

festing themselves at every turn are not irrelevant to formulating the case for the growth of symbols. The life inherent in signs however requires for its articulation an instinctive attraction to living facts, a theoretical imagination attuned to the signs indicative of life and all that life implies. In this as in so many other respects, C. S. Peirce's philosophical ideas appear capable of indefinite growth.

Such growth holds the secret to the question of meaning. Indeed, meaning traces its *origin* to the evolution of relations to a certain minimal degree of complexity, a degree at least making possible (but at certain junctures making likely if not inevitable) ever more complex relations, including intensely and explicitly reflexive ones. In this context, the meaning of evolution virtually coincides with that of emergence.

From Peirce's perspective, however, the origin of meaning is far less important than the development of meaning – and this development is identifiable with the series of interpretants generated by the dynamism between a sign and its object. One of the tropes for understanding this process is evolution, especially as envisioned by Peirce. The meaning of meaning is unintelligible apart from the growth of meaning (especially the growth – or evolution – of symbols) and, in turn, the growth of meaning is unintelligible apart from a vision of the cosmos in which evolution is primordial and pervasive.

## 5. Conclusion: arts other than those of inquiry

Peirce of course paid closest attention to the actual evolution of our scientific practices. In this regard, he traced the origin of science itself to the arts. "The art of medicine grew", he suggests, "from the Egyptian book of formulas into physiology. The study of the steam engine gave birth to modern thermodynamics. Such is the historical fact. The steam engine made mechanical precisions possible and needful [necessary]. Mechanical precision [in turn] rendered modern observational precision possible, and developed it. Now every scientific development is due to some new means of improved observation. So much for the tendency of the arts" (EP 2:38–9). The destiny of the most immediately practical arts lies beyond the domain of practice in any narrow or anthropocentric sense.

Hence, at this point in his account of the emergence of scientific inquiry as a theoretical pursuit, Peirce poses a rhetorical question: "Can any man with a soul deny that the development of pure science is the great end of the arts?" He is quick to point out, "Not indeed for the individual man.

He uses them, just as [he] uses the deer, which I yesterday saw out of my window; and just as in writing this lecture I am burning great logs in a fireplace. But we are barbarians to treat the deer and the forest trees in this fashion. They have ends of their own, not related to my individual stomach or skin. So, too, man looks upon the arts from a selfish [i.e., barbaric] point of view. But they, too, like the beasts and the trees, are living organisms, none the less so for being parasitic to man's mind; and their manifest internal destiny is to grow into pure science" (EP 2:38-9).

It is likely that there is here a fatal ambiguity regarding the arts (e.g., the arts in their broadest significance and the arts in a narrower sense, one referring to the fine arts), also one regarding selfishness (i.e., exclusive or inordinate self-regard, on the one hand, and self-regard without qualification, on the other). However this may be, I am inclined to warn against the merciless way the arts are treated when they fall into scientific clutches, for they are not taken in their own right – they are not considered in their firstness – but exclusively in their service of bringing into being what is other than art. The fecundity of Peirce's theoretical imagination, especially as embodied in his fragmentary writings on sundry matters concerning signs, issued in an array of conceptions enabling us to take the arts on their own terms, not simply as transitional phases in the evolution of pure science. Peirce's text implies a pragmatic clarification of the term *barbarian*: any individual who habitually fails to approach phenomena and all else in their firstness, who fails to consider what things are *in themselves*, apart from their use to this or that individual. As he stresses elsewhere, however, the capacity to discern what stares us in the face is, in the first instance, nowhere more available for phenomenological study than in the perceptual acuity of the artistic sensibility. Peirce in effect invites us to read him against himself, offering us correctives to his occasionally one-sided assertions. This is but one of countless such instances. The task of interpretation imposes on us the necessity of evolving interpretants that enable us to take a text on its own terms. Only thus can we avoid hermeneutic barbarity. This task also imposes on us the need to be bold, to think beyond – and even against – what Peirce asserted and argued (see Short, 2007). Only thus can we escape hermeneutic sterility. My hope is that, in having fallen into the hands of one more attuned to the broadly rhetorical dimensions (rather than the narrowly logical ones) of Peirce's philosophical authorship, I have avoided not only such barbarity and sterility, but also the merciless treatment of philosophical texts when such a fate befalls them.



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