CAVEATS ON THE PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING
PEIRCE’S SEMIOTICS AND PRAGMATISM

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Abstract
“Caveats” is San Juan’s response to “Addendum” in which he praises Stecconi’s focus on Peirce’s theory of knowledge rather than merely on his linguistic paradigm. San Juan, however, disagrees with Stecconi for “conflating the various pragmatisms into one lump.” San Juan prefers to regard Peirce as “a moderate realist” and reiterates the potential relevance of Pierce’s semiotics to the global war on terrorism and the Sri Lankan civil war.

Originally drafted as notes for exploratory lectures on Peirce’s potential use for literary and cultural studies (presented at St. John’s University, University of Texas at San Antonio, and other venues), my paper does not claim to be a comprehensive introduction to its subject. In fact, it is merely a prolegomenon or propaedeutic to Peirce’s “pragmaticism.” Its original pretext (in the decade after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of “actually existing” communism) was the need to counter not simply the malaise of vulgar deconstruction, but also the phenomenal popularity of Richard Rorty and his brand of neoconservative pragmatism masquerading as chic neoleftism. Rorty’s visit to the Philippines and his idolization by Taiwanese colleagues provoked this reaction on my part. Terry Eagleton, among others, has already exposed Rorty’s neoliberal masquerade—“a brand of neo-Sophism for which, since all conventions are arbitrary anyway, one might as well conform to those of the Free World” (27). This “Free World” is what we know today as Bush’s bloody rampage in Iraq and Afghanistan (to cite only two locales), and his client Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s extrajudicial killings and abductions of over a thousand civil-society activists.

And so not only does a certain kind of neoliberal triumphalism today deploy the doctrines of “pragmatism” as a theoretical alibi if not evangelical weapon, but its invocation of Peirce, via William James and John Dewey, serves to muddle the history of ideas and their historical-political genealogy. My interest in Peirce therefore draws from this historical context and its ethico-political imperatives. It is not simply an academic exercise; rather, it is an attempt to discover if there is any possibility—“potential” is
Peirce’s more appropriate rubric—for harnessing it as an “antecedent” to a “consequent.” For there is certainly a world of difference between Peirce’s “pragmaticism,” based on a singular kind of scholastic realism and William James’s radical empiricism with its subjectivist/idealist implications. Peirce would also distance himself from John Dewey’s instrumentalism geared to that kind of utilitarian, value-free application so sharply criticized by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their numerous treatises, both polemical and scholastic.

A reading of Peirce’s Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism of 1903 easily bears this out, as well as Nathan Houser’s lucid exposition of Peirce’s “pragmatism” in the introduction to The Essential Peirce, Vol. 2 of the Peirce Edition Project. The pathbreaking “Letters to Lady Welby” (circa 1909-11) on semiotics also contain James’s dictum that “Realism is right and Nominalism is wrong” (Selected Writings 419). It might be useful to point out that despite attempts to demarcate the evolutionary stages of Peirce’s thought (see Manley Thompson’s The Pragmatic Philosophy of C. S. Peirce), the tendency to confound Pierce with James/Dewey’s “pragmatism” continues. One stark example is the chapter on pragmatism in Abraham Kaplan’s popular The New World of Philosophy. Meanwhile, the British W. B. Gallie and the American Cornel West, among others, have belabored the difference, while the German academics (Jurgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel) have tried to link Peirce with Kant and Hegel in accord with the crisis of the European Enlightenment in the aftermath of World War II. Clearly, the understanding and evaluation of Peirce’s achievement cannot be divorced from the sociopolitical vicissitudes of theory and the cultural sciences, as well as from the historical genealogy and fate of the institutions and communities surrounding these disciplines.

From this perspective, Ubaldo Stecconi is to be congratulated for focusing on Peirce’s semiotics not simply as a linguicentric paradigm, but as a theory of knowledge and its larger implications. Unfortunately, following the still dominant tradition, he falls into the common error of conflating the various pragmatisms into one lump. For example, he contends that, for Peirce, “forming deliberate habits is due to thought and to thought alone.” This is a common mistake of many and often arises from a highly biased selection of quotations from the massive archive of texts that Peirce produced without distinguishing the historical-theoretical stages of his philosophical evolution and the nuances he introduced as he negotiated the debates between realists and nominalists through several decades of intellectual peregrination.

On this point, I disagree with Stecconi that “Peirce was neither a realist nor a nominalist.” I prefer to side with Edward C. Moore’s position, cogently argued in his
“Introduction” to Peirce’s *The Essential Writings*, that Pierce was indeed a moderate realist. That is to say, the central doctrine of Peirce’s metaphysics inhered in the belief that there are “real generals.” Moore is correct in choosing this passage as epitomizing Peirce’s ultimate view vis-à-vis nominalists, logical empiricists/Vienna-school positivists, and freewheeling deconstructionists:

No collection of facts can constitute a law; for the law goes beyond any accomplished facts and determines how facts that *may be*, but all of which never can have happened, shall be characterized. There is no objection to saying that a law is a general fact, provided that it be understood that the general has an admixture of potentiality, so that no congeries of actions here and now can ever make a general fact. (1.420; see also *The Collected Papers* 25)

Given this fundamental schism in our view of Peirce’s thought, it seems pointless to carry on the argument further. It also explains why I do not subscribe to Stecconi’s supposition that Peirce used “esthetic” primarily “as a logical category.” While the philosopher Richard Shusterman, the leading exponent of Deweyan-style aesthetics, will certainly demur from Stecconi’s reductive view, I prefer to join Floyd Merrell, John Sheriff, Anne Freadman and others who uphold Peirce’s thinking as a more totalizing epistemology or metaphysics, if you like, that can applied to diverse regions of human thought and practice. This explains the orientation and modest intent of my essay.

Indeed, Peirce relaxed the traditionally rigid distinction between theory and practice, as Freadman points out in her insightful commentary on Peirce’s theory of communication. She discovered the following passage from Peirce’s hitherto unpublished papers: “An art is, in one sense the practice, and in another, the theory or doctrine of the practice, of any kind of work that is so difficult as to require, for any distinction in it, the devotion of a person’s best energies to it for many years” (qtd. in Freadman 273). Peirce’s semiotics is part of the architectonics of theory construction. It assumes that the discovery of meaning is a continuous process performed in communities of inquiry, and that “thinking is normative” (Searle 562) with ethical and political ramifications if it aims to be scientific in terms of the fixing and unfixing of belief.

It is definitely wrong to assert, as Stecconi unequivocally does, that Peirce stuck doggedly to a mathematical path. Scientific, yes, if by that we mean adhering to the theory of meaning embodied in Peirce’s pragmaticist maxim: “In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception, one should consider what practical consequences
might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception” (The Collected Papers 5.9). This follows if, in the process of scientific inquiry, concepts or universals are regarded as real, that is, they have real external counterparts outside of the mind or human consciousness. Peirce’s semiotics is a scientific method, as shown by Merrell (see, among his numerous demonstrations of the applicability of Peirce’s semiotics to the human and social sciences, his books Peirce, Signs, and Meaning, and Change through Signs of Body, Mind, and Language), James Hoopes, and especially Peter Wollen (see his Signs and Meaning in the Cinema). For its application to the social sciences, I recommend Eugene Rochberg-Halton’s Meaning and Modernity.

Before concluding this brief remark, I would like to focus on the frequent and habitual mistake of confusing Peirce’s semiotics (based on the categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness) with Saussurean semiology (based on a binary logic whose ambiguity has made Derrida’s career possible, and that of his epigones profitable). Peirce’s semiotics cannot be reduced to the dualism of body/mind, as Stecconi does when he states, for example, that “for Peirce, it is the object that determines the sign.” In the stages of the semiotic process carefully charted by Merrell which encompass diverse modalities of the interpretant, the production of the sign goes through a long complex and intricate process in which the semiotic “object” is not identical or equivalent to the real “empirical” object. The tripartite relation between sign, semiotic object, and interpretant (not to be confused with the actual interpreter), goes through at least ten processes of abduction and induction, inferences that finally produce the sign. And so it is not the “empirical” object that determines the sign but a process of inferences affected and shaped by contingent contents, pressures and circumstances (see Merrell’s Change). A perceptual judgment or the “final interpretant” is not the final stage of inference. Rather, it is a hypothesis that is open to test and confirmation, hence Peirce’s belief in fallibilism and in the community of inquirers whose experience, induced by the testing of concepts and hypothesis, converge in a knowable notion of truth and of reality.

Stecconi seems aware of this when he alludes to the importance of community, an element in which historical and political factors begin to play. Nor is this community infinite, nor is reality “detached from the notion of existence,” for Peirce believes in the interplay of chance (his “tychism” and lawfulness (his “synechism”). Signs (and its various categories and their combinations as icon, index, and symbol) can never be detached from human experience, the mechanics of (to borrow Merrell’s classification) feeling, imaging, sensing, and awaring, up to the higher stages of inferring--scheming, impressing-saying,
acknowledging-saying, identifying-saying, perceiving-saying, and realizing (argument/text).

Hoopes is on target when he contends that Peirce’s semiotics is a more powerful instrument or methodology than Saussure’s when he states that “the meaning of the sign is not necessarily arbitrary but may be as logical as the thought that interprets it…. By explaining how thought is action, Peirce’s semiotic makes it possible to understand why thinking, language, and culture are real historical forces” (12). I think this is a valid formulation because Peirce’s architectonic of knowledge-production has a notion of potentiality (Thirdness) that makes actuality (Secondness) and possibility (Firstness) that is able to resolve the many paradoxes, conundrums, and antinomies, both social and individual, that have bedeviled and continue to beset humans from the time tools were invented. And, I need to emphasize, for Peirce language is only one of the tools, not the only equipment or faculty, that distinguish the human community.

As for Peirce’s relevance to urgent social issues like the semantics of terrorism (see Herman), I would simply point to his involvement in many socially-determined scientific projects with which he was engaged in his lifetime. In 1904, Peirce held that “thinking is a kind of action and reasoning is a kind of deliberate action” (Hoopes 247). Thought and action, like body and mind, cannot really be separated; thought, for Peirce, is a process of sign interpretation and sign production, a process of intelligence involving institutions (political or cultural) conceived as semiotic syntheses capable of objective verification or falsification. Although not familiar with the topic of political economy (there is no reference to any socialist thinker in the Peircean scholarship), Peirce showed a profound acquaintance with the flaws of classical political economy that Marx and Engels so acutely expounded. Peirce satirically noted the “formula of redemption” of bourgeois economics: “Intelligence in the service of greed ensures the justest prices … [T]he great attention paid to economical questions during our century has induced an exaggeration of the beneficial effects of greed” (Philosophical Writings 363).

Given his close friendship to William James, Peirce could not but be influenced by the circle of public intellectuals in New England grappling with collective predicaments, such as the European plunder of Africa, the US colonization of the Philippines, and other global developments. Together with William Dean Howells and Mark Twain, James was active in the anti-imperialist movement. What Peirce’s attitude to the French Commune (the major historical event of his European sojourn) was, remains an intriguing topic of investigation, given his contemporary Henry James’s response to it in the novel of anarchist manners, The Princess Casamassima (1886).
As far as I know, based on the biographical accounts of James Brent, Roberta Kevelson, and others, Peirce was not manifestly active in the now historically precedent-setting Anti-Imperialist League. However, in May 1898, he joked about his cousin’s Henry Cabot Lodge’s unabashed imperialism; and in 1900, he criticized the imperialist hysteria in syllogistic form: “All men are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. No Philippine [sic] is entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Hence, No Philippine is a man” (Brent 266). To apply Peirce’s unique vision of pragmaticism, we may ask: what effects with practical bearings will such a conception of the “Philippino” engender? My essay on the potential interface between Peirce’s semiotics, the global war on terrorism, and the Sri Lankan civil war narrativized in Ondaatje’s novel is my rather oblique, succinct and experimental response. A longer and more intensive elaboration of its premises has been deferred in view of the profound political crisis sweeping the world that has engaged, for now at least, the present author’s time and energy, negotiating the tortuous passage between the homeland and his diasporic station of exile.
WORKS CITED