The Politics of Survival
Lara Trout

Published by Fordham University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63642

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2265012
Peirce’s *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* Cognition Series, published in the late 1860s, portrays synechistic individuals whose ongoing processes of cognition and habit-formation are inescapably shaped by personalized and socialized interests. Because of the inescapable bias of human cognition, humans do well to realize the value of communal inquiry into knowledge and to accept the limitations of their individual points of view. At the same time, humans are vulnerable in relation to the communities of which they are members. In particular, humans are vulnerable to internalizing growth-inhibiting habits because of their dependency—especially as children—on the testimony of others in their communities, testimony that articulates “reality” itself, especially for the young child. Growth-inhibiting habits include those that promote racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Peirce’s sensitivity to this vulnerability, I argue, indicates the value he implicitly (in this context) places on the uniqueness of each community member, which arises even amid inescapable communal influence. In other words, one’s unique perspective can be a
resource to the community, not merely a source of pernicious bias. In fact, in these essays Peirce plants a very small seed regarding the potential heroism of the synesthetic individual, a seed that grows steadily throughout his later writings.

I arrive at these conclusions by reading the Cognition Series through two lenses that mutually inform each other: a post-Darwinian affective lens and a social criticism lens. I present Peirce’s work in these essays in conversation with Antonio Damasio and with various insights provided by social criticism (focusing primarily on race theory and feminism). I incorporate points of intersection on the latter front, in order to give voice to the socio-political potential that is latent in these essays. Three interrelated issues emerge from the interplay among Peirce’s ideas, affectivity, and social criticism, which correspond to the three main sections of the chapter: (1) the uniqueness of an individual’s embodiment, cognition, and habit-taking; (2) the social, and therefore political, dimensions of reality, epistemology, and human survival; and (3) the politics of child development and habit-taking, in the midst of which children can internalize habits that promote racism, sexism, and/or other forms of discrimination.

Let me offer a point of clarification before continuing. For Peirce, beliefs are a type of habit, and habits are associations. And so I will be using the terms “habit” and “association” synonymously. When I think it is contextually helpful to remind the reader that beliefs are habits and/or that habits are associations, I will do so by using terms such as “belief-habit” or “belief/habit/association.”

Prelude: Seeds of Critical Common-sensism

Peirce’s doctrine of Critical Common-sensism (CCS), articulated in the 1900s, is foreshadowed in these early essays. In “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man” (1868), he explains that there is always already a fund of previous cognitions that informs our reasoning process (W 2:193–200). Critical Common-sensism involves taking a critical attitude toward these grounding beliefs, to determine whether any of them can be doubted. The Cognition Series gives clues as to
how personalized and socialized dimensions of experience can result in instinctive, and nonconscious, belief-habits that reside in the fund of common-sense beliefs from which a person or community reasons.

In “Questions Concerning,” Peirce denies that humans have a Cartesian-style intuition-detector faculty with which they can determine whether a given cognition is mediated by other cognitions or not (W 2:193 ff.). By “intuition” Peirce means “a cognition not determined by a previous cognition of the same object, and therefore so determined by something out of the consciousness” (W 2:193). In other words, an intuition is an unmediated cognition—that is, a cognition that “refers immediately to its object,” without being influenced by other cognitions (W 2:193–94). For example, if I (as a human) can tell whether my cognition, say, of a sunset is determined only by the sunset itself that exists outside of my thinking about it (and is not determined by any of my other cognitions—such as those relating to my spiritual attunement to nature), then I have the human faculty for distinguishing intuitions from other, mediated cognitions. Peirce rejects this intuitive ability with the following reasoning:

[T]here is no evidence that we have this faculty, except that we seem to feel that we have it. But the weight of that testimony depends entirely on our being supposed to have the power of distinguishing in this feeling whether the feeling be the result of education, old associations, etc., or whether it is an intuitive cognition. . . . (W 2:194, my emphasis)

The ability to make such a distinction, of course, assumes we have the very intuitive faculty in question. That is to say, the only evidence of the intuition-detector faculty is a feeling that such a faculty exists, yet this feeling itself could be mediated by other cognitions that reflect personal and social bias. So it would not be reliable evidence unless it could be shown to be an intuition, which would thus be uninfluenced by other factors and, presumably, shared by all humans. Making such a determination about the feeling in question (namely, whether it is an intuition or a mediated cognition) would require the very intuition-detector faculty whose existence has yet to be proved. Thus, since this
feeling evidence cannot be used without begging the question, Peirce rejects that humans possess this faculty. The remainder of his discussion of this issue focuses on examples of cognition that seem to be intuitive premises from which cognition proceeds but that, in fact, are themselves conclusions, or syntheses, which have brought about unity to a manifold in sensation or in thought (W 2:195 ff.).

Of particular interest for my project is Peirce’s point that our feelings may be “the result of education, old associations, etc.” (W 2:194). With this comment he makes room for both social influence (via education) and individual idiosyncrasy (via old associations) to influence our feelings. Moreover, since “old associations” are strongly influenced by social as well as individual factors, Peirce also sets the stage for personal uniqueness to arise within a social context. In addition, he also notes that these modes of influence can be virtually undetectable, because the felt sense of indubitability corresponding to each is so strong. What seem to be unmediated intuitions are, in fact, the result of unnoticed processes:

[J]ust as we are able to recognize our friends by certain appearances, although we cannot possibly say what those appearances are and are quite unconscious of any process of reasoning, so in any case when the reasoning is easy and natural to us, however complex may be the premises, they sink into insignificance and oblivion proportionately to the satisfactoriness of the theory based upon them. (W 2:199)

There are seeds of social critique here. The “indubitable” quality of some feelings can promote oppression by cultivating prejudice about oppressed groups in a society. The following is taken from the personal correspondence of Louis Agassiz, the famous nineteenth-century naturalist and proponent of polygenesis, the theory that human races are different species, each with its own origin (Gould 1981, 39):

It was in Philadelphia that I first found myself in prolonged contact with negroes; all the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type
In this passage, Agassiz appeals to the “truth” of “the feeling [the ‘negroes’] inspired in” him. The strength of his feeling is used to ground the “indubitability” of his prejudice. It also holds in place a personally idiosyncratic view of the world that is at the same time socio-politically informed. Agassiz’s reaction to “negroes” reflects the personal idiosyncrasy of a man who had never before seen someone whose phenotype reflected African descent. A native of Switzerland, he had recently taken up residence in the United States. His reaction also illustrates the socio-political influence of the discussions of polygeny in the nineteenth century in the United States, where the doctrine took root as a primarily American scientific theory (Gould 1981, 42). Stephen Jay Gould notes that polygeny occurred within a Euro-American scientific mainstream that took for granted the superiority of Caucasians (1981, 30–42). In addition, Agassiz was more specifically influenced by the work of Samuel Morton, whose skull-measuring experiments (which are now considered unsound) supported Caucasian superiority and the inferiority of non-Caucasian races (Menand 2001, 103–5). Thus Agassiz’s exclusionary thinking is informed by both idiosyncratic and socio-political factors.

Let us now examine the personalized embodiment issues that shape the idiosyncrasy of human associations, or habits. As socialized as one’s encounters with the external world are, he or she can only encounter this world from the perspective of his or her body, so it makes sense to start there.

Part 1: Individualized Embodiment, Cognition, and Habit-Taking

a. The Unique Human Body

Using our not so indubitable feelings as a starting point, we may recall that Peirce’s references to feelings take for granted that they occur
in a body. Antonio Damasio provides a contemporary scientific validation of the linkage between feelings and the body by highlighting the connection between mind and nerve cells, a connection that Peirce made himself:

[T]he mind arises from or in a brain situated within a body-proper with which it interacts; . . . due to the mediation of the brain, the mind is grounded in the body-proper; . . . the mind has prevailed in evolution because it helps maintain the body-proper; and . . . the mind arises from or in biological tissue—nerve cells—that share the same characteristics that define other living tissues in the body-proper. (2003, 191, my emphasis)

If we are to appreciate fully the individualized dimension of associations/habits, however, we cannot stop with the insight that mind implies body. We must emphasize that my mind implies my body. This point is implicit in Damasio’s comment that an organism’s body provides a boundary between it and the world outside:

Life is carried out inside a boundary that defines a body. Life and the life urge exist inside a boundary, the selectively permeable wall that separates the internal environment from the external environment. The idea of organism revolves around the existence of that boundary. . . . If there is no boundary, there is no body, and if there is no body, there is no organism. Life needs a boundary. (1999, 137)

My body encloses and includes the personal boundaries through which I interact with the external world. To simply discuss the body-in-general can eclipse the deeply individualized nature and perspective of human embodiment. For all the shared types of homeodynamic functioning among humans, the bodily functions that promote life also take on individualized permutations. With respect to nutrition alone, food allergies, metabolic rate, and bodily chemicals (such as adrenaline and hormones) are some of the factors that individualize a person’s nutritional needs and schedule. These factors are, in turn, influenced by external environmental factors such as the availability of food, difficulties in avoiding genetically and chemically
treated foods, pressures to conform to a feminine or masculine body type, and so on. In addition, men and women have different bodily experiences that are, in turn, individualized for each person: “Sexually differential biological processes—menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, and sexual maturation in women and phallic maturation, paternity, emissions, and so on in men . . .” (Grosz 1993, 202).

Another passage from Damasio puts a crowning touch on this personalized embodiment of mind. This is especially pertinent given Peirce’s stress, in the present essay series, on cognition as an ongoing semiotic process (W 2:209 ff., 223 ff.). Damasio says:

I believe that the foundational images in the stream of mind are images of some kind of body event, whether the event happens in the depth of the body or in some specialized sensory device near its periphery. The basis for those foundational images is a collection of brain maps, that is, a collection of patterns of neuron activity and inactivity . . . in a variety of sensory regions. Those brain maps represent, comprehensively, the structure and state of the body at any given time. Some maps relate to the world within, the organism’s interior. Other maps relate to the world outside, the physical world of objects that interact with the organism at specific regions of its shell. (2003, 197)

This passage illustrates the highly individualized nature of the ideas that flow through each human’s mind. It also highlights the semiotic nature of the mind’s relation to external objects. In order to survive, a human organism must be aware of the potential threat or benefit represented by objects in its vicinity. This awareness varies in its level of consciousness but is ever present. Recall Chapter 1’s discussion of the affective salience of virtually all objects (Damasio 2003, 93; cf. 309 n. 3). The external objects surrounding the individual are signs, and they affect her associations by virtue of the information they carry regarding her individualized experience with them. Colapietro addresses this point from a Peircian perspective: “[W]e are in continuous dialogue with the natural world,” so that we may effectively “read our potentially hazardous environment” (1989, 21, emphasis in original).
For Peirce this personalized information, the affective salience of objects, is relayed through feelings and associations, which are part of the cognition process itself. His discussions in “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” (1868)—of feeling, emotion, interest, and association—are particularly revelatory regarding homeodynamic-semiotic themes.

Recall that, for Peirce, the means of connection between the human organism and the external world are “feelings” or “sensations,” terms he uses synonymously in the Cognition Series. In “Questions Concerning,” for example, Peirce notes, “The pitch of a tone depends upon the rapidity of the succession of the vibrations which reach the ear. . . . These impressions must exist previously to any tone; hence, the sensation of pitch is determined by previous cognitions. Nevertheless, this would never have been discovered by the mere contemplation of that feeling” (W 2:197, my emphasis). This synonymous usage of “feeling”/“sensation” signals the inseparability of qualitative immediacy and environmental confrontation, even as the passage focuses on the synthesis involved. Feelings/sensations are continuously triggered by objects external to the human body, which stimulate nerve firings in the sense organs.

b. Peircean Homeodynamics

1. COGNITION

Peirce describes cognition as an ongoing semiotic process. It reflects his categories, exhibiting three dimensions: “material” (“how it feels”), “denotative” (how it is connected to external objects and/or internal associations), and “representative” of an object (W 2:227). “Thought” is used in two senses: first, as a synonym for cognition, and, second, as a cognition whose representative dimension is most prominent. In what follows, I will (for clarity) refer to thought only in this second sense, not as a synonym for cognition in general. Thought in this second sense, of having a prominent representative dimension, designates a cognition that is connected to preceding cognitions by “a relation of reason,” such that it has a “rational character” (W 2:230–31).
Before discussing the other two dimensions of cognition, I want to place this description of thought firmly within a Peircean context, so as to more easily trace its trajectories here and in later chapters. For Peirce, a rational/reasoned connection between cognitions draws on generalization(s) or aim(s) regarding human conduct and/or the other habits of the natural world. In the Cognition Series, Peirce’s focus is on grasping generalizations of nature that offer explanations. He describes this by contrast: “By there being no relation of reason to the determining thoughts, I mean that there is nothing in the content of the thought which explains why it should arise only on occasion of these determining thoughts” (W 2:230). The rationality of humans is demonstrated in their grasp of the generalizations/habits of nature, which account for why things occur as they do (cf. W 2:226, 229, 263–64, 272). For example, if one has the cognition “That is thunder,” it would be rational to have the subsequent cognition “Maybe it will rain.” The linkage of thunder and rain reflects a generalization about the natural world—namely, the meteorological patterns that explain why thunder and rain are connected. It would probably not be rational to have the cognition “That is thunder” followed by the subsequent cognition “Rocks are hard,” because this connection does not reflect a generalization about the natural world that explains why “Rocks are hard” is connected to a cognition about thunder.

Often connections that are rational are shared by others in one’s community, but with a significant qualification. Others in one’s community are likely to agree that thunder could lead to rain. In fact, when it comes to scientific inquiry into the workings of the natural and social world, communal verification of the regularities/generalizations/habits of nature is required, characterizing Peircean objectivity itself (W 2:270–71). Reality, on Peirce’s scheme, exists outside of humans but cannot be described without human communities giving it voice. The linkage between “rational” and “communal agreement,” however, needs to be temporarily suspended in contexts of creative insight. This qualification reflects Peirce’s fallibilism, the
view that knowledge is always open to future revision. The community that describes reality and often underwrites the rationality of cognition is, ultimately, “without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge” (W 2:239). It is an ideal community, which is “indefinitely” subject to future epistemological growth. An important source for this growth is the individual community member who has insight into generalities not (yet) grasped by the rest of the community. In this case, the individual is a source of creative hypotheses that can be tested scientifically and embraced to the extent they are verified. In these creative scenarios, the insightful individual herself is rational even though in disagreement with her community. Peirce himself models this maverick rationality in his Monist “Cosmology Series” of the 1890s, where he presents innovative scientific views that challenge the mechanistic cosmological models popular among his scientific peers.

In the present Cognition Series, Peirce’s focus is on rationality that does reflect communal agreement, with only subtle hints toward the maverick rationality that pushes a community toward epistemological growth. Here his concern with the rational flow of thought implies a community that agrees on how reality works. Disturbances to the rational flow of cognition—that is, disturbances to thought’s flow—are rooted in the feelings that underwrite each cognition. These feelings, fueled by one’s associations, can be the home of nonconscious prejudice.

Let us return to the other two dimensions of cognition, denotative and material. What Peirce calls “the pure denotative application” or “attention” refers to “the power by which thought [or cognition] at one time is connected with and made to relate to thought [or cognition] at another time . . .” (W 2:227, 232). It is the dimension of cognition whereby old associations, which are habits, are brought to bear on the current flow of one’s cognitions. For our cognitions relate not only to external objects but also to our past experience with external objects. This will be discussed more fully below. For Peirce, associations/habits occur in one’s nervous tissue and thus are embodied (W 2:232). The actual feel of the nerve firings specific to each association/
habit is what gives cognition its felt, or material, aspect. The ideas in our respective minds literally have a feel to them. Often it is so subtle as to escape notice, but not always. For example, think about the police. This idea probably has a discernible feltness to you based on encounters you, or people you care about, have had with the police. Let us examine more closely the role of feeling in cognition.

II. FEELING

In a passage leading up to a description of emotions as producing “large movements in the body,” Peirce makes three important comments about feeling (W 2:230). Each of these comments supports a homeodynamic account of the human organism:

- There is some reason to think that, [1] corresponding to every feeling within us, some motion takes place in our bodies. [2] This property of the thought-sign, since it has no rational dependence upon the meaning of the sign, may be compared with what I have called the material quality of the sign; [3] but it differs from that latter inasmuch as it is not essentially necessary that it should be felt in order that there should be any thought-sign. (W 2:230)

First, Peirce proposes that feelings involve bodily motion—that is, “corresponding to every feeling within us, some motion takes place in our bodies” (W 2:230, my emphasis). Since feeling is one of the elements of cognition itself, and cognition is an ongoing process, this means that our bodies are always in motion and that this motion corresponds, to some degree, to our cognition (W 2:211, 223–24, 227). Second, Peirce notes that the feltness of a sign has “no rational dependence upon the meaning of the sign” (W 2:230). This is compatible with the individualized, embodied reaction to an object, which serves as a sign to my own body-minded organism of its unique value to me, but not necessarily to anyone else. Think, for example, of your favorite childhood food. There is a feel to this object that is unique to you. My favorite food, for example, was macaroni and cheese. Some may argue that the feel of “macaroni and cheese” would be the same for anyone who also had this food as her or his childhood favorite.
Feelings, for Peirce, are not that simple, however. The feel of macaroni and cheese to me involves my personal associations, such as the kitchen of my childhood house, the plastic bowl with my favorite cartoon character on it, and my stirring extra milk into my helping to achieve that “just right” texture. This combination of associations informing my feeling is mine alone, involving the uniqueness of my embodied experience of the world. As I will continue to demonstrate below, the felt dimension of cognition lends uniqueness to all cognitions, even those that seem to evoke no bodily response. This brings us to the next point regarding the above passage.

Third, Peirce says that “it is not essentially necessary that [the bodily motion] should be felt in order that there should be any thought-sign” (W 2:230, my emphasis). What Peirce seems to suggest here is that it is not necessary that the bodily-motion aspect of a thought-sign be noticed in order that there should be any thought-sign. For example, barring extenuating circumstances, “The sky is blue” is unlikely to trigger a noticeable bodily response for many adults. Peirce notes that this felt dimension is less “prominent” compared to the feltness of other types of cognitions, such as emotions and “sensations proper” (W 2:230). This is because the “relation of reason” between the thought and other cognitions “detracts from the attention given to the mere feeling” (W 2:230). This supports my interpretation of the third point highlighted in the above passage. Our thoughts have a felt dimension, but it is inconspicuous and so can easily escape notice.

Damasio notes that the work done by the body to maintain its homeodynamic balance is often unnoticed by the human organism. He notes, “The background state of the body is monitored continuously” (Damasio 1994, 153). This is the quiet humming of homeodynamics, and it results in “background feelings,” which correspond to the background emotions discussed in Chapter 1 (Damasio 1994, 152–53). Background feelings are so named because the organism’s focus at any given time is usually turned outward:

But the fact that our focus of attention is usually elsewhere, where it is most needed for adaptive behavior, does not mean the body
representation [i.e., feeling] is absent, as you can easily confirm when the sudden onset of pain or minor discomfort shifts the focus back to it. The background body sense is continuous, although one may hardly notice it, since it represents not a specific part of anything in the body but rather an overall state of most everything in it. (Damasio 1994, 152)

Returning to the Peirce passage we are examining: He describes feeling/sensation in a manner compatible with Damasio’s background feeling, despite Peirce’s antiquated physiological account:

In the case of a [feeling or] sensation, the manifold of impressions which precede and determine it are not of a kind, the bodily motion corresponding to which comes from any large ganglion or from the brain, and probably for this reason the [feeling or] sensation produces no great commotion in the bodily organism; and the [feeling or] sensation itself is not a thought [i.e., cognition in general sense] which has a very strong influence upon the current of thought [i.e., cognition whose representative dimension is prominent] except by virtue of the information it may serve to afford. (W 2:230, my emphasis)

Note that Peirce says that “the [feeling or] sensation itself is not a thought which has a very strong influence upon the current of thought except by virtue of the information it may serve to afford” (W 2:230, my emphasis). This is a significant qualification, as it bookmarks (albeit with little elaboration) the possible influence of feeling on thought. I will demonstrate below that this influence is broader than it seems at first blush, since Peirce does not maintain the sharp distinction between feeling and emotion outlined at this point in “Some Consequences.” For now, however, let us examine how Peirce does distinguish between feeling and emotion.

Peirce says that the process of cognition has an embodied element of feeling or sensation. This element usually stays in the background, but it may affect the flow of cognition if the information it carries requires a disruption. If Peirce wanted to be more reader friendly at this point, he might have reminded us that, for all our powers of cognition, humans are still animal organisms whose survival is not guaranteed. Humans need food, shelter, etc., and live in a complex
environment that must be successfully navigated in order to secure individual and species survival. However sophisticated self-control becomes, it is still rooted in the physical survival of the human organism. When the information conveyed by feelings is of a disruptive nature, the affective state of emotion is triggered.

III. EMOTION

Contrasting emotion to feeling/sensation, Peirce says:

An emotion, on the other hand, comes much later in the development of thought—I mean, further from the first beginning of the cognition of its object—and the thoughts which determine it already have motions corresponding to them in the brain, or the chief ganglion; consequently, it produces large movements in the body, and independently of its representative value, strongly affects the current of thought. (W 2:230)

Peirce links emotion and instinct by specifically attributing animality and lack of self-control to the emotions. As he puts it:

The animal motions to which I allude, are, in the first place and obviously, blushing, blenching, staring, smiling, scowling, pouting, laughing, weeping, sobbing, wriggling, flinching, trembling, being petrified, sighing, sniffing, shrugging, groaning, heartsinking, trepidation, swelling of the heart, etc., etc. To these may, perhaps, be added, in the second place, other more complicated actions, which nevertheless spring from a direct impulse and not from deliberation. (W 2:230, my emphasis)

Emotion is not an episode that “happens” to an otherwise static body. Rather, in its paradigmatic occurrences, such as someone flinching in fear, emotion arises in an organism whose homeodynamics require a more pronounced bodily response than usual, because of environmental conditions. Moreover, Peirce links emotion to instinctive survival mechanisms, which makes sense. Disruptions in homeodynamics significant enough to disturb the flow of thought (as emotions do) should, in some contexts, be accompanied by an uncontrolled instinctive response. In his later work, such as his essay “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life” (1898), Peirce readily admits that
we should not trust “vitaly important” matters to reason, because of reason’s fallibility (RLT 105–22). The instinctive automatic response triggered by an emotion, then, need not be problematic. But it can be, which is Peirce’s concern in the Cognition Series, a concern that is compatible with social critical insights.

As survival-rich as emotions can be, in some contexts they can—to cite a familiar example—contribute to social oppression. Fear and anger can result in discrimination ranging from dirty looks to hate crimes to the courtroom. Legal scholar Patricia Williams notes, “[A]s long as they are not unlearned, the exclusionary power of free-floating emotions make their way into the gestalt of prosecutorial and jury disposition and into what the law sees as a crime, sees as relevant, justified, provoked, or excusable” (1991, 67).

Peirce’s description of the bodily commotion involved in emotion goes beyond the above list of specific “animal motions” to include “other more complicated actions, which nevertheless spring from a direct impulse and not from deliberation” (W 2:230, my emphasis). These other actions, I would argue, include socially derived instinctive prejudices that can manifest through an emotional response to a person, a response that could be either conscious or nonconscious. Recall the example, from Chapter 1, of the Euro-American white store clerk’s conscious refusal of entrance to Patricia Williams, based on the color of her skin (Williams 1991, 44–45). On the nonconscious front, recall (also from Chapter 1) that research in social psychology shows that emotions, attitudes, goals, and intentions can be activated without awareness, and . . . these can influence the way people think about and act in social situations. For example, physical features (like skin color or hair length) are enough to activate racial or gender stereotypes, regardless of whether the person possessing the feature expresses any of the behavioral characteristics of the stereotype. This kind of automatic activation of attitudes occurs in a variety of different situations and appears to constitute our first reaction to a person. And once activated, these attitudes can influence the way we then treat the person, and can even have influences over our behavior in other situations. (LeDoux 1996, 61–62, my emphasis)
These examples, both of conscious and nonconscious prejudice, indicate that emotional responses can be both complex and impulsive, overtaking the inclusiveness and self-control of reasonable behavior. Peirce’s attunement to the subtlety with which this emotional takeover can occur is reflected in his ultimate blurring between emotion and feeling, which he introduces later in “Some Consequences.”

c. Contextualizing the “Uselessness” of Emotions

In “Questions Concerning,” Peirce asserts the idiosyncratic dimension of emotions:

[A]ny emotion is a predication concerning some object, and the chief difference between this and an objective intellectual judgment is that while the latter is relative to human nature or to mind in general, the former is relative to the particular circumstances and disposition of a particular man at a particular time. (W2: 206).

Recall the above description of thought, as a cognition that is connected to preceding cognitions rationally or reasonably. Peirce’s reference to an “objective intellectual judgment” is based on the same idea, such that “intellectual” is synonymous with “rational” and “reasonable” in this context. An “intellectual” judgment draws on generalizations/habits of the natural world or human conduct and thus offers explanation regarding the object (cf. W2: 226–27, 229). And others would agree with this judgment, such that it is “objective.” An emotion is not focused on generalizations that others would agree with but is uniquely individual, “relative to the particular circumstances and disposition of a particular man at a particular time” (W2: 206).

The apparent worthlessness of an emotion’s idiosyncratic connection to the cognitions that precede it is asserted in the next essay, “Some Consequences”:

That which makes us look upon the emotions more as affections of self than other cognitions, is that we have found them more
dependent upon our accidental situation at the moment than other cognitions; but that is only to say that they are cognitions too narrow to be useful. The emotions, as a little observation will show, arise when our attention is strongly drawn to complex and inconceivable circumstances. (W2: 229, my emphasis)

Peirce, I would argue, is not trying to deny the usefulness of the emotions insofar as they promote the human organism’s survival in the present. The two passages just quoted imply that emotions are compatible with the homeodynamics of the human organism. Peirce says that emotions are “relative to the particular circumstances and disposition of a particular man at a particular time” and are “more dependent upon our accidental situation at the moment than other cognitions” (W2: 206, 229). I think Peirce is aware that we need, at times, privately tailored emotions to protect our well-being as animal organisms. “[C]omplex and inconceivable circumstances” can be dangerous and thus may call for tailored emotional responses to ensure survival, even and especially if an intellectual judgment is not ready to hand (W2: 229).

His exaggerated wording in this context—that emotions “are cognitions too narrow to be useful” (W2: 229)—stresses a logical point, which is made in the third and final essay of the Cognition Series, “Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic.” In “Grounds,” Peirce argues for taking a socialized stance in our reasonings when we do have time to deliberate. Ever the logician of science, he aspires after a communal pursuit of knowledge. From the standpoint of science, he cannot abide the self-centered immaturity of emotions or any other type of cognition that excludes the perspectives of others. This brings us to another important affectivity issue.

Peirce explicitly acknowledges the affectivity characterizing all cognitions, including thought. This should not come as a surprise, since feeling is the material dimension of any thought. It is still a point worth highlighting, in order to more easily trace its implications here and in later chapters, in conjunction with the semiotic nature of human experience and Peirce’s theory of association. The following
passage from “Some Consequences” was cited above. I include it again with different emphases:

That which makes us look upon the emotions more as affections of self than other cognitions, is that we have found them more dependent upon our accidental situation at the moment than other cognitions; but that is only to say that they are cognitions too narrow to be useful. (W 2:229, my emphasis)

This passage tells us that thoughts are “affections of the self” (although less so than emotions are) and that thoughts are “dependent upon our accidental situation at the moment” (although less so than emotions are). Peirce says, as noted above, that a thought differs from an emotion because its material quality, or feltness, falls into the background, because attention is focused on the rational relation between the present thought and the cognitions that determine it (W 2:230). Nonetheless, our thoughts are personalized, reflecting the idiosyncrasies of our embodiment at the moment, our surrounding environments, and our unique associations.

Peirce’s eventual blurring of the distinction between feeling and emotion underscores the affective dimension of all cognition, such that emotions are not the only cognitions that are too idiosyncratic to be of use logically. This blurring occurs in the context of Peirce’s examination of the denotative aspect of cognition, where the affective-semiotic character of human experience comes more clearly into focus.

d. Affective-Semiotic Experience: Attention, Association, Habit

Attention, or the denotative aspect of cognition, is affective, reflecting ongoing communication between the human organism and the external world. All thoughts are “affections of the self” because of the personalized associations that each person has with the objects in her world (W 2:229). Humans do not simply represent external objects to themselves; they also represent their experience with these objects. Thus, objects are signs for each human privately in addition to being
signs in public senses—that is, regarding meanings shared with others in one’s community. Red licorice, for example, is a sign for me of my brother (because it is his favorite candy), in addition to its other more public meanings (as, say, a type of candy of a particular color).

The formation of “nervous associations” (“associations” for short) is made possible by attention, which Peirce describes as “the power by which thought at one time is connected with and made to relate to thought at another time” (W 2:232). Attention allows humans to focus on particular objects in their world and to “produc[e] an effect upon memory,” which is a habit or association (W 2:232). Attention not only creates new associations/habits to guide future behavior; it also draws on past associations/habits to guide present behavior. Peirce gives the following description of habit-formation:

A habit arises, when, having had the sensation [or feeling] of performing a certain act, \( m \), on several occasions \( a, b, c \), we come to do it upon every occurrence of the general event, \( l \), of which \( a, b \), and \( c \) are special cases.

That is to say, by the cognition that

Every case of \( a, b, \) or \( c \), is a case of \( m \),

is determined the cognition that

Every case of \( l \) is a case of \( m \). (W 2:232)

Peirce is talking about the felt regularity, the “groove,” that humans fall into when they perform or avoid a particular action on numerous occasions. When I was a teenager, for example, I took up year-round distance running. I learned that, if I ran in cold weather, I would develop severe chills shortly after finishing. I also learned—the hard way—that I was very susceptible to illness if I did not take a hot shower immediately after these runs. Mapping this onto Peirce’s formula, the “sensation [or feeling] of performing a certain act, \( m \), on several occasions \( a, b, c \)” involved the feltness of how effective the hot showers were after a few particular runs on particular occasions. This feltness/sensation went significantly beyond the feel of hot water. It was a gestalt feeling/sensation that included the felt effectiveness of the shower for preventing illness. This sensation led me to generalize that “running in the cold”—in other words, “the general event,
Phenomenologically speaking, the habit I formed (thirdness) mediates between my bodily equanimity (firstness) and the environmental resistance of cold weather (secondness). Attention allows us to track the regularities of our world, as I did regarding my bodily responses to weather conditions, so we can adjust our behavior accordingly. It shapes our memory, via habit-formation, regarding future behaviors (W 2:232). Attention accomplishes its tracking by means of the information provided by feelings, which detail the success, or lack thereof, of the organism’s interaction with the external world.

Attention also guides present activity by drawing on one’s preexisting habits, such as those that, to this day, help keep me healthy after I run in the cold. Thus attention allows us to continually form new habits while also drawing on old ones. My running example, because it focuses on my physical health, hints at the survival value of both paying attention and attention’s relationship, via feelings, to habit/association and memory. This survival connection will be discussed more fully below, in the context of child development, and in Chapter 3, in the context of scientific investigations.

The running example, premised on my own body-temperature issues, also hints at the personalized associations/habits that attention produces, in addition to more conventional ones. Peirce focuses on these personalized associations/habits toward the end of “Some Consequences” and, in the process, introduces a fruitful terminological ambiguity between feeling and emotion. Recall that in “Questions Concerning,” Peirce says that “old associations” may be factors that shape our feelings (W 2:194). Here in “Some Consequences,” Peirce briefly elaborates on this issue, highlighting the semiotic dimension of human affectivity. Note the change from the term “feeling” to the term “emotion”:

Everything in which we take the least interest creates in us its own particular emotion, however slight this may be. This emotion is a
sign and a predicate of the thing. Now, when a thing resembling this thing is presented to us, a similar emotion arises; hence, we immediately infer that the latter is like the former. (W 2:237, my emphasis)

And,

All association is by signs. Everything has its subjective or emotional qualities. . . . (W 2:238)

Recall the red licorice–brother example. Also, I take “slight interest” in kelly-green Volkswagen “bugs,” because they remind me of my childhood, as this was the kind of car my mother drove. This kind of car is a sign to me, representing not only rational ideas like “these cars were popular in the United States in the 1970s.” It is also a sign of mother-daughter love, thus having its own particular emotion for me. If my mother had driven this car only one day during my childhood, I probably would not have a memory of it. The repeated exposure to my mother driving me around in this car, however, led to an association or habit, by which I learned to connect this type of car with my mother and the related feeling/emotion.

Peirce’s change in terminology from feeling to emotion, I would argue, reflects his insight into the unique affectivity that characterizes the associations each person makes. He uses “emotion” in the above passages to convey a subtle affective resonance he earlier ascribed to “feeling.” This blurring underscores that objects have differing affective, or felt/emotional, resonances depending on one’s personal and socially mediated experience. Since my embodiment and homeodynamics are highly individualized, so are the affective semiotics that inform my associations. For example, some people associate airplanes with the pleasant, subtle feeling of convenient travel. Others associate airplanes with the unpleasant, not so subtle emotion of fear—say, of crashing or of a claustrophobia attack. Still others may associate airplanes with prohibitive monetary expense or environmental expense (that is, a large carbon footprint). We are, once again, reminded of Damasio’s account of affectivity, semiotics, and homeodynamics, discussed last chapter. All objects have a personalized affective salience
for the human organism, who is constantly monitoring her environment to promote the survival of her unique body (Damasio 2003, 93). Our survival is promoted through attention to external objects, in order to pursue those that promote our survival and to avoid those that threaten it. This, in turn, buttresses planning for the future and creative decision-making.

Attention and association/habit are linked to the secondness of our environments, physical and social. I am interested in the socio-political implications of this connection. Note in this regard that the affective associations people have with objects can be negative, as the airplane example indicates. They can also involve cues by which the avoidance of environmental resistance or danger is habitualized. Social critic bell hooks describes the experience of being black in the United States. Notice her use of attention for self-protection, in the effort to avoid what I would call racist secondness:

Living in a world of racial apartheid where custom and conventions invented to separate black and white lasted long past an end to legal racial discrimination, those who are powerless—black folks—must be overly aware of small details as we go about our lives to be sure we do not enter forbidden territory—to be sure we will not be hurt. You learn to notice things. You learn where not to walk, the stores you don’t want to go in. . . . You cannot live the way other people live. (hooks 1997, 97)

Hooks’s observations as a black woman underscore the power differential involved in socio-political secondness—in this case, racist secondness. Because U.S. society remains white-dominant, despite work done in the civil rights movement, black people must “learn to notice things.” In Peircean vocabulary, they learn to make associations/habits whereby they can avoid racist secondness. Moreover, since white people, insofar as they are white, are supported by these mainstream societal habits of race, they are often unaware that other people “cannot live the way” that they themselves do (97). Thus white people often do not have the associations/habits that can identify racist secondness, because they so seldom experience or witness such secondness themselves. This phenomenological blindness that people in
hegemonic groups (such as the economic middle class, heterosexuals, men, whites, and others) often have regarding those in the corresponding non-hegemonic groups (the poor, GLBTQs, women, people of color, and others) will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.

Another example of how the power differentials between hegemonic and non-hegemonic groups shape associations/habits is the stereotyping of those in non-hegemonic groups by those in hegemonic groups. Using racism once again to draw examples, in the United States negative stereotypes abound regarding people of color. For example, Helen Zia notes that

Geishas, gooks, and geeks have been the staples of the main characters of [U.S.] mass culture’s Asian universe: the subservient, passive female; the untrustworthy, evil male; the ineffectual, emasculated nerd. As each stereotype gained a foothold in the popular culture, it brought on new prejudices that real-life Asian Americans would have to contend with. (2000, 119)

These stereotypical associations play out in one-on-one encounters. Linda Alcoff relates the following:

When I was much younger, I remember finding out with a shock that a white lover, my first serious relationship, had pursued me because I was Latina, which no doubt stimulated his vision of exoticism. We had grown up in the same neighborhood, attended the same schools . . . and shared similar ambitions. . . . Yet our first encounters, our first dates, which I had naively believed were dominated by a powerful emotional and intellectual connection, were experienced by him as a fascinating crossing over to the forbidden, to the Other in that reified, racializing sense. (2006, 193)

She clarifies: “I learned this because he has written a novel based on his experience of our relationship” (298 n. 11).

Another example is provided by Cornel West, who recalls:

Years ago, while driving from New York to teach at Williams College, I was stopped on fake charges of trafficking cocaine. When I told the police officer I was a professor of religion, he replied, “Yeh, and I’m the Flying Nun. Let’s go, nigger!” I was stopped three times in my first ten days in Princeton for driving too slowly
on a residential street with a speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour. (And my son, Clifton, already has similar memories at the tender age of fifteen.) (2001, xxv)

These examples demonstrate how easily stereotypical associations can lead to socio-political secondness for people of color. Unfortunately the testimony of people of color, and of others in non-hegemonic groups, is often dismissed regarding the socio-political secondness they experience—a dismissal rooted in the same power differentials that create the socio-political secondness in the first place. This theme will be discussed more fully in subsequent chapters.

I end this section by explaining how affective-semiotics can influence the flow of cognition. Recall Peirce’s comment that the information carried by feelings can influence the (rationally connected) flow of thought (W 2:230). His discussion of attention and personalized association/habit are revelatory in this respect. As we have just seen, feeling and emotion can shade into one another, converging into a personalized affective salience that applies to the objects in our environment. Thus, the information conveyed by the (often backgrounded) felt dimension of cognition can trigger a personalized affective response that disturbs thought’s rational flow. For example, I used to serve as a grief-support person for college students who had had a family member die. Many of them reported that, in the months following their loss, they had trouble focusing consistently during lectures. Everything would be going fine during, say, a history lecture: note-taking, understanding, etc. Then the professor would refer to something associated with the loved one who had died—she might mention, say, France. As a result, the rational connectedness of the student’s thought would be interrupted. France would be associated with the loved one, and the felt dimension of “loved one”—the “information” conveyed by the feeling—would be intense grief. Students in scenarios like this would often experience a debilitating surge of emotion that would derail their formerly rational thought flow.

This is not to imply that this affective response is purely personal; it reflects numerous social factors, including the cultural norms shaping the relationship with the family member, as well as norms dictating the appropriate expression of grief for men and for women. In
cases like the police officer’s prejudice against West, this point is especially clear. We cannot simply refer to “personalized” affectivity overriding rational thought flow. “Socialized” affectivity needs to be invoked as well. Racism and other types of discrimination in the United States are bigger affective issues than merely the exclusionary habits of an individual here or there. Thus we need to invoke “personalized/socialized affectivity” regarding the unique affective-semiotic salience of the objects in our respective experiences. This is ultimately a Peircean reminder that the personal is inescapably socially shaped.

Part 2: Reality, Survival, and Sociality

a. The Politics of Reality

Near the end of “Some Consequences,” Peirce unveils his conception of reality, the real, as communally articulated and affirmed. The implications of this view of reality are significant when paired with Peirce’s conviction that humans must be social in their reasoning if they are to reason well.

Let us begin with the passage detailing Peirce’s description of reality. The real is the product of a communal human, scientific investigation of nature, and the community involved is infinitely large and extends indefinitely into the future. Peirce contrasts this communal human articulation of reality to the idiosyncrasy of the individual human organism’s perspective:

[W]hat do we mean by the real? It is a conception which we must first have had when we discovered that there was an unreal, an illusion; that is, when we first corrected ourselves. Now the distinction for which alone this fact logically called, was between an ens relative to private inward determinations, to the negations belonging to idiosyncrasy, and an ens such as would stand in the long run. The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a community, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge. (W 2:239)
The real, then, does not revolve around one’s private, idiosyncratic ideas, a lesson that humans learn as children—that is, “when we first corrected ourselves.” Instead, the real is what is discovered by a community of humans inquiring about the world outside them. Reality consists, for Peirce, in the regularities—or habits—that give form to the cosmos itself, including nature and human conduct.

In this context, Peirce does not emphasize the secondness characterizing human interaction with the external world, although he does acknowledge that “things which are relative to the mind doubtless are, apart from that relation” (W 2:239, my emphasis). That is to say, humans do not simply “make up” reality whimsically, without grounding in the external world. It is the secondness of the external world, in fact, that—through the mediation of thirdness—teaches humans about reality. Peirce hints at this secondness (mediated by thirdness) in the above passage in his reference, again, to “when we first corrected ourselves” in relationship to external physical and social environments (W 2:239). This points to his discussion of child development in the essay “Questions Concerning,” where the child experiences the natural and social secondness involved in learning about the world and coming to self-consciousness (W 2:202–3). I examine child development in Part 3 below.

The real is based on communal human inquiry into nature and requires input from an infinite number of perspectives (in conjunction with the scientific testing of hypotheses). It is like the metaphor of the blind people standing, in place, around an elephant. While they cannot see the elephant, they ideally pool their observations from their various perspectives (from the respective vantage points of trunk, ears, tail, legs, etc.), thereby gaining as accurate a description as possible, given their limitations. Humans are prevented from gaining a complete grasp of the external world because of the bodily semiotic filters through which they communicate with it. Humans can only perceive the external world according to the limitations of their sense organs. If our sense organs were different, our reality would be different. Moreover, an individual human is also limited in time and space. One of the truisms of phenomenology is that I only encounter
the world through the limited spatio-temporal perspective of my body. Finally, in his later writings, Peirce also elaborates on the fact that nature grows. Thus we have a third dimension of the impossibility of a complete human grasp of the external world. Thus to achieve the best, even if fallible, articulation of reality requires a communal effort.

There is a fruitful tension in Peirce’s account of reality, one that is more explicitly taken up in the Logic of Science essays of the late 1870s. The tension is this: This communal real is, in fact, ideal, since it is based on an infinitely large community extending its inquiry indefinitely into the future. This means that, in the here and now, reality can only be articulated by a finite community. Thus any particular articulation of reality is fallible and subject to future modifications. As Ann Margaret Sharp notes, regarding Peirce’s thought, “the world captured in human inquiry and designated as factual is always something one can question” (1994, 202). Moreover, this socialized account of reality allows a political dimension of reality to be addressed. Since reality at any particular point in time is articulated by a finite group of people, it can reflect exclusionary biases that are shared by these people and/or power imbalances that result in excluding certain individuals or groups from the communal articulation of reality. Ideally such discrimination would not happen, but any particular articulation of reality occurs within a historical human community and is thus vulnerable to discriminatory biases.

It may be objected that my points about politics and power render Peirce’s account of reality untenable, because to be really real, so to speak, is to be free from any bias. Such an objection begs the question of reality existing separately from human articulation in the first place. Peirce’s fallibilist articulation is, in fact, innovative just because it presents reality as capable of growth and change, as well as subject to oppressive takeover by powerful groups. Peirce is ahead of his time in presenting a conception of reality that is humanly articulated as well as scientifically grounded and thus amenable to social critique, reform, and revolution. In the history of Western culture, for example, articulations of reality have reflected the exclusionary biases
shared by Euro-American white, propertied men, who often excluded others from the community of inquiry. Unduly limited accounts of reality were a result. Marilyn Frye and Adrienne Rich discuss how women in general and lesbians in particular have historically suffered erasure at the hands of patriarchal power structures (Frye 1983, 152–74; Rich 1986, 23–75). Charles Mills makes an analogous observation from the perspective of African Americans living within the structures of white privilege in the United States:

The peculiar features of the African-American experience—racial slavery, which linked biological phenotype to social subordination, and which is chronologically located in the modern epoch, ironically coincident with the emergence of liberalism’s proclamation of universal human equality—are not part of the experience represented in the abstractions of European or Euro-American philosophers. And those who have grown up in such a [African-American] universe, asked to pretend that they are living in the other [Euro-American universe], will be cynically knowing, exchanging glances that signify “There the white folks go again.” (1998, 4)

In terms of our discussion here, we can say that Mills is discussing a particular segment of reality—namely, human experience. He is highlighting that “human experience” as described from a Euro-American white perspective that excludes African American experience is inaccurate as an abstraction that is applicable to any human’s experience. When Mills notes that African Americans are “asked to pretend they are living in the other [Euro-American universe],” this highlights the power differential between Euro-Americans and African Americans, such that Euro-Americans have historically been in a position to impose their articulation of reality as the reality.

Whether or not it includes imposed exclusionary biases like racism, sexism, or other forms of exclusion, reality affects habit-taking by means of physical and social secondness. The habit of stopping my car at red lights, for example, is shaped by the threat of both physical and social environmental resistance: I do not want to be hit by another car, and I do not want to receive a ticket. My focus in this project is on habits that are ultimately shaped by the presence or absence
of socio-political secondness that is rooted in racist, sexist, and/or other discriminatory articulations of reality. I have lived my entire life in the United States and have never been pulled over by the police for driving too slowly or on trumped-up drug charges. This absence of socio-political secondness has everything to do with my race (Euro-American white) and, arguably, my sex (female).


In “Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic” (1869), Peirce argues that “the social principle”\textsuperscript{24} is the logical underpinning for synthetic reasoning (W 2:271).\textsuperscript{25} Since synthetic reasoning is the only kind of reasoning that can increase human knowledge, social reasoning is all the more important. Peirce is not just talking about abstract learning here. He is addressing knowledge of the external world, knowledge that human organisms need for survival—that is, knowledge about what to expect in the future (inductions) and why (hypotheses).\textsuperscript{26}

Peirce says that the human organism is illogical to the extent that she reasons synthetically based only on her own perspective. To do so is to put most of one’s eggs in the same basket. Peirce compares the individual human to an insurance company. The wise insurance company does not put the bulk of its risk into only one client, because, if that client incurs devastating loss, the insurance company cannot survive the blow to its own security. Instead the insurance company needs to spread its risk among many clients, so that, if any particular client is wiped out, this loss is counterbalanced by the security spread among the many other clients. The human is like an insurance company in the risks she takes in reasoning about the external world. If she places the bulk of her risk in her own perspective by considering her own interests as the primary source of truth, she is like the unwise insurance company. If she is wrong about how the world works, she has little to fall back on (W 2:270–71).\textsuperscript{27} From the standpoint of animal survival, she could die. Recall Peirce’s oft-quoted line, “to make single individuals absolute judges of truth is most pernicious” (W 2:212)
Jon Krakauer’s book *Into the Wild* provides a contemporary example of Peirce’s point (1996). Krakauer details the true story of Chris McCandless, a Euro-American, middle-class man in his twenties, who in 1992 traveled alone to Alaska with virtually no knowledge of how to live off the land, except for ongoing reference to an Alaskan field guide on edible plants (160). McCandless was otherwise a very bright, well-educated, conscientious person with a deep reverence toward nature. His story is an inspiring narrative of commitment to one’s inner spirit and to leading an authentic life without false dependencies on material things or other people. Except for one thing. McCandless died alone in the wilderness, after about four months, because of gaps in his knowledge that his field guide could not fill. McCandless did not spread his risk evenly. He depended almost exclusively on his own intelligence, and then on his field guide. He did not solicit the input of others, especially those who knew the Alaskan wild. He also lacked a topographical map of the area, which would have shown him that the impassable, bulging spring river that prevented his leaving the wild when he had planned to would have been straightforwardly crossed had he merely walked a half mile downstream (173–74). Had he left according to schedule, it is likely he would have avoided the food-poisoning accident that cost him his life (174, 189–95).

Peirce puts it this way:

> If a man has a transcendent personal interest infinitely outweighing all others, then, . . . he is devoid of all security, and can make no valid inference whatever. What follows? That logic rigidly requires, before all else that no determinate fact, nothing which can happen to a man’s self, should be of more consequence to him than everything else. He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is illogical in all his inferences, collectively. So the social principle is rooted intrinsically in logic. (W 2:270–71)

As McCandless’s story illustrates, the individual human organism’s own survival is promoted by embracing the interests of others. To be self-centered in one’s reasoning is not only to be illogical; it is to put
oneself at risk unnecessarily (W 2:270–71). This is because the interests of others are rooted in their perspectives on the external world, which can better inform the limited perspective of the solitary human being. One of the men who picked up the hitchhiking McCandless and delivered him to his point of departure into the Alaskan wild tried to convince him to take proper gear with him, even offering to buy him the gear. He was worried about him. This man’s interest in McCandless’s safety was attached to a perspective on the Alaskan wild that McCandless did not have and from which he would have benefited. McCandless refused most of the man’s help, accepting only a pair of rubber boots and a sack lunch (Krakauer 1996, 3–7).

Why does Peirce state the case for the social principle so strongly as to speak of “sacrificing [one’s] own soul to save the whole world” (W 2:270)? There are at least two reasons. First of all, as detailed above, the human organism’s individual perspective involves affective-semiotic communication with the external world, which is fueled by her interest in survival. To the extent that one’s interests are linked to heightened affective response, it may be difficult to accommodate the interests of others. Clinical psychologist Harriet Lerner notes that—thanks to the fight/flight response in humans—when anxiety is present, even in small doses, dichotomous thinking can dominate, whereby interests different from one’s own appear threatening, even when they might in fact be complementary (2004, 58, 60; 1995). When this occurs, it may well feel like sacrifice or surrender to allow other interests to hold sway along with one’s own. Second, while Peirce pays his dues to evolution and animal survival, his primary concern is for the ongoing growth of scientific knowledge beyond survival interests. This kind of growth is not served by egoistic interests that block the road of inquiry. He wants team players, not Cartesian intuitionists who assume they have the corner on the market of truth. Team players sacrifice individual ego for the good of communal inquiry.

Both of these reasons highlight Peirce’s emphasis on self-control, which in the present essay series is explicitly referenced only in a footnote, in “Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic.” As noted in
Chapter 1, he says that a hallmark of self-control is the ability to take a perspective that is broader than one’s personal immediate interest: “Self-control seems to be the capacity for rising to an extended view of a practical subject instead of seeing only temporary urgency. . . . [A]nd . . . love of what is good for all on the whole . . . is the widest possible consideration . . .” (W 2:261 n. 6). This generous love, which is manifest in agape, “is the essence of Christianity” (W 2:261 n. 6). Self-control involves an inhibition of exclusionary affective reactions that could be triggered because of an inappropriate sense of “temporary urgency,” when one is confronted with a perspective different from her own. As this passage also indicates, self-control is at its best when enhanced by a loving embrace of “what is good for all on the whole.” Agapic love, as an ideal, reflects one’s sincere concern for other community members, such that she wants to hold their feedback in place so that she can both learn from it and promote their well-being and thus the growth of the community as a whole (EP 1:352–71). Agape will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 4.

c. The Politics of the Social Principle

We cannot leave the story of the social principle here, however. To do so would neglect the politics of reality discussed above. On the one hand, Peirce tells us that “the social principle is rooted intrinsically in logic”—namely, the logic of spreading one’s risk by pooling one’s perspective with those of others, regarding knowledge of the external world (W 2:271). On the other hand, what if the others in one’s social milieu are part of an oppressive power structure, whereas he or she is a member of an oppressed group? That is to say, what if powerful and oppressive others are the primary “articulators” of reality, so to speak? What if the interests and perspective of these hegemonic others involve the subservience of one’s social group, since that is what “nature” supposedly dictates? What if, since the day a person was born, she has been inundated with messages of her subservience to another social group, such that her self-interest becomes linked with playing a subservient role within her
culture? Marilyn Frye would call this a double-bind, a signal characteristic of being oppressed (1983, 2).

In a double-bind, all of one’s options involve “penalty, censure or deprivation,” thus imposing disempowering limits on one’s movement and growth (Frye 1983, 2 ff.). On the one hand, a person needs to embrace the interests and perspectives of others in order to promote her own survival, to protect against fatal lacunae in her knowledge of the external world, both physical and social. On the other hand, if she is a member of an oppressed group, embracing the interests of others can involve embracing perspectives on herself and the world that undermine her growth and sense of self-worth. Frye explores the ubiquity of patriarchal messages females receive, from childhood on, regarding their “proper” comportment and behavior. They are censured if they fail to adopt “appropriate” behavior. Yet meeting standards of femininity subjects them to condescending and/or disrespectful treatment (2 ff., 15). Moreover, since pressures to act feminine begin so early in a girl’s life, she is likely to internalize feminine behavior and standards. This internalization fuels arguments, by some, that feminine conduct—for example, shaving body parts that men do not shave—results from inborn tendencies, when it is really a product of deeply ingrained habits that have been socially enforced. Such arguments confuse with inborn habits the firstness habits that result from socialization.

Those belonging to privileged groups can also internalize growth-inhibiting habits, albeit different ones (cf. McIntosh 1988). To this extent we must move beyond Frye’s conception of double-bind, since this applies only to the oppressed, in order to describe the coercion faced by all children in hegemonic communities, regardless of their race, sex, etc. I call this broader conception a “coercive survival dilemma,” because small children are too vulnerable to challenge the perspective of their caretakers and larger community or society. Such a challenge would threaten their survival. This being the case, children are coerced regarding many belief-habits passed on to them by their caretakers and/or society. More on this shortly.
Peirce gives mixed messages regarding his sensitivity to the politics of reality and the social principle. In his defense of the latter, he argues against those who attribute an inescapable selfishness to human actions. He gives, however, a puzzling example of human “selflessness”:

[T]he constant use of the word “we”—as when we speak of our possessions on the Pacific—our destiny as a republic—in cases in which no personal interests at all are involved, show conclusively that men do not make their personal interests their only ones, and therefore may, at least, subordinate them to the interest of the community. (W 2:271, Peirce’s emphasis)

Peirce argues here that humans do, in many cases, take other interests besides their own into account. They are not merely solipsistically focused on their idiosyncratic interests. His example is troubling, however, since “speak[ing] of our possessions on the Pacific” can involve the idiosyncratic interest of financial investments made by individuals who have a vested interest in calling another land and its people “our possessions.” The colonization of what became the United States of America involved just such individualized interests, as did the African slave trade. While his later writings are more amenable to addressing this concern, in the present context Peirce does not seem aware of the oppressive interests that can be hidden within a professed socially inclusive stance.

Nonetheless, in the above passage, Peirce does say that people “do not make their personal interests their only ones, and therefore may, at least, subordinate them to the interest of the community” (W 2:271, my emphasis). My focus here is this subordination of individual interests to the community. The influence of others on one’s reasoning is not a factor over which one has complete control, especially if one is in a position of dependence on and/or subordination to others. Sociality is not merely an epistemological goal of mature adults, although it is that. The social principle is also developed by each person, from childhood on, as she matures within a community on which she is dependent. In fact, social influence can so override a person’s idiosyncratic interests and perspective that her community
could convince her that she is “mad” (W 2:202). Thus social influence can enhance and undermine growth, the latter which becomes clearer when the “coercive survival dilemma” is examined in the context of child development within hegemonic communities.

Part 3: The Politics of Child Development

Belief-habit formation begins in childhood. An examination of child development shines light on the socialization that shapes the growth of the human organism from infancy into adulthood. The idiosyncratic filter of individualized embodiment is inescapably shaped by social factors. Peirce argues, in fact, that self-consciousness arises amid the environmental clashes through which the child comes to the awareness that she must trust the testimony of others. We see, coupled with his arguments for cultivating the social principle, that the human child depends for her survival on the testimony of others. Given that reality reflects a communal articulation of the how the world works, the internalized socialization that characterizes child development is formidable. The adoption of socially derived instinctive beliefs by the child is perfectly understandable in this context. Moreover, in a hegemonic culture that continually reinforces racist, sexist, and other exclusionary beliefs, such beliefs can easily remain intact into adulthood, operating nonconsciously and resisting rational attempts to challenge them. Peirce does not explicitly address this danger in the present Cognition Series, but he does give an important hint in this regard, noting that testimony from others is so powerful it can convince someone that she is “mad” (W 2:202).

Peirce addresses child development in order to answer the question of whether humans have “an intuitive self-consciousness” (W 2:200). By “intuitive,” as noted earlier, Peirce means unmediated by other cognitions (W 2:193–94). By “self-consciousness,” he means a personal “knowledge of ourselves,” “the recognition of my private self” (W 2:200–201, Peirce’s emphasis). Is self-consciousness intuitive—that is, is my knowledge of my unique existence independent of previous cognitions (such as those representing external experience)?
Peirce answers this question negatively, asserting that self-consciousness is social in its origin, arising through the conflicts children experience with others and the physical environment. Self-consciousness involves a “feeling . . . of our personal selves” (firstness) and an inference made by the child (thirdness) based on the evidence she gains from conflicts (secondness) experienced within her social and physical world (W 2:201). While Peirce’s account of child development was written long before his mature phenomenology, I find it helpful to read this account through a phenomenological lens to help foreground the belief-habit formation involved.

In what follows, I thus frame Peirce’s argumentation phenomenologically, showing how the thirdness of self-consciousness is reached after stages characterized by the primacy of firstness and secondness, respectively. The idiosyncratic bodily interests that were discussed in Part 1 of this chapter are subsumed under a developmental stage of firstness, in which the human infant is absorbed in the world of her body and what it reveals to her. The emergence of self-consciousness results from the next stage, which is characterized by secondness. And the child’s conscious adoption of habits is a stage characterized by thirdness. After discussing these stages, I address the many socio-political implications of Peirce’s brief hint about the power of testimony to convince someone of being “mad” (W 2:202). My goal here is to highlight the socio-political dimension of the secondness experienced by the child and how this affects the habits she adopts and internalizes. I end by noting that, despite the power of testimony and internalization, children (and adults) are never fully determined by their communities/societies, and thus there is always hope for growth beyond instinctive belief-habits.

a. Firstness

Firstness is a stage that reflects the natural immaturity of the human infant, the immaturity that comes from being a human animal at a certain age and stage of body-mind development (cf. CP 7.375). The infant demonstrates solipsistic absorption with her or his body and oblivion to anything outside of this purview:
A very young child may always be observed to watch its own body with great attention. There is every reason why this should be so, for from the child’s point of view this body is the most important thing in the universe. Only what it touches has any actual and present feeling; only what it faces has any actual color; only what is on its tongue has any actual taste. (W 2:201)

For the child, the sensory qualities that she experiences are all there is. This stage in development is prior to self-consciousness. While the adult may observe the child “watch[ing] its own body with great attention,” the child has no awareness of herself as watching. There is no separation between the subject perceiving and the quality perceived. As Peirce notes, “No one questions that, when a sound is heard by a child, he thinks, not of himself as hearing, but of the bell or other object as sounding” (W 2:201). From a phenomenological perspective, this nonreflective bodily absorption in sense qualities is firstness.32

This is not to say that the firstness reflected in child development is pure and exclusive of the other categories. Phenomenological richness is present. The same children who for the most part are fully absorbed in their world still meet with conflict from their environment (secondness). These encounters are all the more likely because of the absorption of firstness characterizing this early phase of development. The younger the child, the more naive she is in the face of the potential harms or benefits in her environment. As for thirdness, Peirce notes that thinking in some form seems to always be present in children:

Indeed, it is almost impossible to assign a period at which children do not already exhibit decided intellectual activity in directions in which thought is indispensable to their well-being. The complicated trigonometry of vision, and the delicate adjustments of coördinated movement, are plainly mastered very early. (W 2:201)

Prior to self-conscious thinking, and later alongside such thinking, the developing human organism’s body-mind thinks at instinctive levels, ensuring optimal communication with the external world.33
Language development also falls under this early thirdness. Peirce notes the seemingly instinctive efforts of children to learn language in order to communicate with “bodies somewhat similar” to their own (W 2:202). Such efforts are so automatic for children that they are unaware of having undertaken them: “In many cases, [a child] will tell you that he never learned his mother-tongue; he always knew it, or he knew it as soon as he came to have sense” (W 2:196). In this context Peirce does not pause to specify the social influence present at different points all along the spectrum. Obviously, however, language development is dependent upon social factors. Coordination of movement also involves social influence, such as caretaker responses to a child’s learning how to explore the environment, learning how to walk, and so on.

b. Secondness

Language development provides a transition between the self-absorption of firstness and the secondness-prominent phase of a child’s development, where she comes into more explicit communication with others and the external world. Conflict is prevalent, as the child comes to the awareness that she is not coextensive with the world outside her but rather clashes repeatedly with it.

Once children are capable of communicating, they are capable of learning from the testimony of others, finding that the latter provides a more certain account of reality than “reality” itself (cf. Colapietro 1989, 71 ff.). In other words, through the testimony of others, children learn that what seem to be “facts” are actually “appearances” (W 2:202). Peirce explains what happens as the child “learns to understand the language” and “begins to converse” (W 2:202):

> It must be about this time that he begins to find that what these people about him say is the very best evidence of fact. So much so, that testimony is even a stronger mark of fact than the facts themselves, or rather than what must now be thought of as the appearances themselves. (I may remark, by the way, that this remains so through life; testimony will convince a man that he himself is mad). A child hears it said that the stove is hot. But it is
not, he says; and, indeed, that central body is not touching it, and only what that touches is hot or cold. But he touches it, and finds the testimony confirmed in a striking way. (W 2:202, Peirce’s emphasis)

A child who has never been burned by something hot is likely enough to ignore or take lightly warnings by adults—that is, their testimony about not touching a hot stove: “But it is not [hot], he says; and, indeed, that central body is not touching [the stove], and only what that touches is hot or cold. But he touches it, and finds the testimony confirmed in a striking way.” This shocking and, from the child’s perspective, traumatic encounter with his environment is an instance of secondness. It promotes the internalization not only of avoiding hot stoves but of trusting the testimony of others. The child is made unequivocally aware that his world does not revolve around his limited conceptions of it. In other words, “testimony [from other people] is even a stronger mark of fact than the facts themselves, or rather than what must now be thought of as the appearances themselves.” Self-consciousness begins to emerge alongside the harsh experiences of secondness through which children learn of their ignorance of the workings of their environment, ignorance that is highlighted by the accuracy of the testimony of others.

What Colapietro calls the “second moment in the early emergence of self-consciousness” is the child’s awareness of her world as private (1989, 72). The awareness of privacy, in this context, differs from awareness of ignorance, the latter involving the absence of knowledge about, say, hot stoves. The awareness of the privacy of one’s world involves how the uniqueness of one’s judgments can signal the incorrectness of these judgments. This new awareness comes about as the child realizes that “there is a certain remarkable class of appearances which are continually contradicted by testimony” (W 2:202–3). These appearances are those that are based on idiosyncratically “emotional” judgments (W 2:203). The child’s judgment, for example, that it is appropriate to smear her dinner on the kitchen wall does not meet with automatic validation by others. In fact, such a judgment is likely to be denied, not just in the case of the child but in the case of anyone
who proclaims judgments based solely on private interests. In this second dawning, then, the child adds to the insight about the importance of testimony the “conception of [appearance] as something private and valid only for one body” (W 2:203). The child is now aware of herself as capable of error, an awareness that “can be explained only by supposing a self which is fallible” (W 2:203, Peirce’s emphasis).

Peirce concludes his presentation of child development into self-consciousness by saying, “Ignorance and error are all that distinguish our private selves from the absolute ego of pure apperception” (W 2:203). “Ignorance” refers to gaps in the child’s knowledge. The child’s isolated perspective cannot provide her with all she needs to know, such that trusting testimony is crucial to keeping herself safe from dangerous environmental objects (such as hot stoves). “Error” in this context refers not to gaps in knowledge but rather to personal judgments so unique they are not corroborated by others, such as the judgment that it is acceptable to smear one’s dinner on the kitchen wall. Both ignorance and error are evidence the child uses to draw the inference that a private self must exist (W 2:203).

Thus Peirce has answered negatively the original question of whether humans have an unmediated or intuitive self-consciousness. First, self-consciousness is not initially present in young children, as evidenced by their absorption and lack of self-awareness (firstness stage) (W 2:201–2). Second, the development of self-consciousness is clearly mediated through encounters of secondness that reveal to the child her separateness and uniqueness in respect to the world outside her. This revelation is grounded in her language development, which enables her to experience the power of testimony to reveal the insufficiency of her solitary perspective on the world (W 2:202–3).

The phenomenological richness of the secondness stage of child development is reflected in the transition from the child’s oblivion about her separateness from the outside world, to her conclusion that she must, indeed, be separate from this world. The clashes with the outside world (secondness) experienced by the child imply the presence of firstness in at least two ways. First, secondness is experienced
as clash, because of the felt equanimity (firstness) that it disturbs. The shock of burning one’s hand on the hot stove, for example, ruptures the calm functioning of her everyday movement in the world. Second, the secondness is experienced by the child as happening to her as an embodied organism. This implies the presence of firstness as the felt embodiment that each one of us brings to our experiences.

The thirdness within the secondness stage reflects a growth beyond (but still inclusive of) learning and thinking instinctively, as the child forms new habits based on the secondness she encounters. I call this “reactionary” thirdness, as it is triggered externally via secondness. The child who burns her hand on the stove (secondness) exhibits thirdness as she concludes that she should not touch a stove if told that it is hot, which probably leads to an internalized habit whereby she avoids touching hot stoves. Thirdness is also reflected in the inference, of a “self which is fallible,” drawn by the child at the close of the “ignorance” and “error” movements of the secondness stage (W 2:203, Peirce’s emphasis). In this case the conclusion that a unique self exists (thirdness) mediates between the secondness resulting from ignorance and error, on the one hand, and the equanimity of firstness that this secondness disturbs. Self-consciousness is the transition between the secondness and thirdness stages of child development, as self-consciousness makes possible the active pursuit of self-controlled habit-taking.

c. Thirdness

Self-consciousness brings children into a stage of thirdness, which builds on and is inclusive of the types of thirdness found in the firstness and secondness stages of child development. In addition to instinctive thirdness and reactionary thirdness, self-consciousness makes possible proactive reasoning and proactively self-controlled habit-formation. I use the term “proactive” to capture the child’s ability to intentionally make use of thirdness in order to learn, to form habits, and to set goals for herself. In other words, the self-aware
child in the thirdness stage is what Colapietro calls “a center of pur-
pose and power” (1989, 74). In this stage children ask questions, ini-
tiating the learning process. They also initiate the formation of habits.
I have seen this many times in small children who want to do for
themselves a task that the caretaker has been doing for them, such as
putting on clothes or fixing food. Goal-setting is also present. A child
who wants to accomplish a task by herself has a goal of independent
behavior regarding that task. My four-year-old niece’s experiment,
mentioned in Chapter 1, to see what would happen to water if it were
left overnight in the freezer reflected her goal of learning about water
and freezing temperatures.

The thirdness stage never ends. Proactive thirdness remains a
prominent feature of human experience as children grow into adults
who proactively learn about the world, form habits, and set goals.
This is not to imply that reaching the thirdness stage means that all
subsequent experiences will have proactive thirdness as the most
prominent element, with secondness and firstness always playing
lesser roles. Rather, reaching the thirdness stage means that proactive
thirdness is now an option, not fully available in the earlier two stages,
for conscious and controlled interaction with the world, interaction
that is directed by the child or adult for herself.

In circumstances where they have a choice, humans can opt not to
learn, to form new habits, or to set goals for themselves. The habits
of privilege that I am examining in this book often involve just such
a refusal of growth. Peggy McIntosh, describing how her white privi-
lege manifests in her experience in the United States, notes: “I can
remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color
who constitute the world’s majority without feeling in my culture any
penalty for such oblivion. . . . I can choose to ignore developments in
With these observations, McIntosh highlights not only certain types
of refusal to learn but also the fact that refusing to learn can be a
function of privilege. People in non-hegemonic groups often cannot
afford not to know the hegemonic culture’s belief-habits, including
language, communication style, dress code, politeness code, and so
If they are to survive within the dominant culture, they often do not have the luxury to consider learning such norms as optional; it is often a requirement.

The thirdness stage of child development must be understood in its deeply communal and post-Darwinian contexts. Infants and young children are vulnerable and dependent animal organisms. Their self-controlled habit-taking could not develop if they died in either the firstness or secondness stage, which would most likely happen without the nurturing of caretakers (Dewey [1922] 1988, 43–53, 65–68). The infant’s survival and language development both depend on the presence of caretakers; so do her other learning experiences. The community in general also helps teach the child about how reality works. Thus the child’s habits are socially shaped.

As the child enters into the thirdness stage, to the extent that her outer environments remain relatively stable, she relies on linguistic, cultural, and other habits taught to her in the firstness and secondness stages. And testimony still plays a key role. As Lorraine Code notes:

Developmentally, children learn to negotiate the world through processes of establishing reasonably fixed, constant expectations about the behaviors and “natures” of the people and things around them. Could they not do so, their survival would be in constant jeopardy; could they do so only erratically, their sanity would be similarly in jeopardy. Most of what people come to know, from the language into which they are born and educated, to the manners, customs, and cultural expectations they ingest, are items and ways of being that they learn from other people; sometimes by example, sometimes from being told—from testimony. (1995, 71, my emphasis)

Code is highlighting the ubiquity of social influence on the learning process of children. In Peircean terms, their “learn[ing] to negotiate the world” involves thirdness, through which belief-habits about the world are established and revised as necessary (71). Yet even as thirdness becomes more and more self-controlled, the communal matrix is still present, requiring a dependence on testimony even as children
grow into mature adults. Code notes how often adults trust the testimony of others—in life-and-death issues such as “[e]ating what others have prepared, trusting the labels on packages, stepping into a car or an airplane” (72). This dependency of adults on testimony underlines the increased dependency of children on testimony, given the latter’s heightened reliance on others for survival and for rudimentary learning. Children belonging to hegemonic communities thus face the coercive survival dilemma. Needing to trust communal testimony coerces children into adopting growth-inhibiting habits alongside empowering ones.

In the Cognition Series Peirce gives only a slight hint of the coercive survival dilemma faced by children in hegemonic communities, focusing instead on the epistemological security communities provide. He presents the community of inquiry as a team whose members corroborate their perspectives in order both to eliminate the emotional or idiosyncratic and to elucidate the common—that is, the rational or intellectual—patterns grasped by all. His account of child development supports this corroborative picture by portraying the privacy of the child’s perspective as a source of error (W 2:203). As noted earlier, in this series Peirce does not explicitly give an account of the maverick rationality by which an individual may have a unique insight that is correct even though different from the community’s perspective. He does, however, note—in the passage quoted above in the secondness stage—that “testimony will convince a man that he himself is mad” (W 2:202, Peirce’s emphasis). This comment, I would argue, is a very subtle hint that opens the door to the coercive survival dilemma and the possibility that disagreeing with one’s community can reflect epistemological insight (versus error). In what follows, I use this hint as a springboard for examining Peirce’s account of child development in light of the politics of reality, the social principle, and the coercive survival dilemma, drawing out implications regarding the internalization of socialized belief-habits. My examples focus on the individual in relationship to a hegemonic community whose habits are racist and sexist.
d. Testimony’s Darker Side: The Coercive Survival Dilemma

Peirce troubles the waters of testimony considerably when he makes a parenthetical comment about the child’s discovery of its importance. As noted in the secondness stage discussed above, he states:

> It must be about this time [of comprehending language and starting to converse] that [the child] begins to find that what these people about him say is the very best evidence of fact. So much so, that testimony is even a stronger mark of fact than the facts themselves, or rather than what must now be thought of as the appearances themselves. (I may remark, by the way, that this remains so through life; testimony will convince a man that he himself is mad.) (W 2:202, Peirce’s emphasis)

Peirce does not elaborate on his comment that testimony can convince someone of being “mad.” Presumably he has in mind the negative potential of the social principle. Each person needs to depend on testimony from others to supplement her limited perspective on the world. Ignoring the testimony of others can be life-threatening, as the tragic story of Chris McCandless illustrates. Yet testimony can be used maliciously, to exclude a community member from the community, rendering her epistemological input “mad.” Because testimony is so powerful to human organisms, the excluded individual could become convinced of her or his “madness.” This point is all the more important since “madness” is a far-reaching term. For the purposes of my project, I limit my treatment to how “madness” relates to the sociopolitical issues that are my project’s focus. Two interrelated types of “madness” I want to highlight are, first, “madness” linked to speaking out against communal norms and, second, “madness” linked to simply being different from communal norms in the first place. This second type of madness is associated with presumed cognitive inferiority.

First of all, as Naomi Scheman notes, “It is frequently by ‘disagreeing’ about things the rest of us take for granted that one is counted as mad, ignorant, or otherwise not possessed of reason” (1993, 146). Scheman’s comment highlights the hegemony that communal “common-sense” can take on, such that diverging from what is supposedly
obvious to everyone can result in being classified as crazy. This connection relates to a comment Peirce makes when, in his essay “Fixation of Belief” (1877), he describes the authority method by which a state attempts to force its people to adopt only officially sanctioned belief-habits. As belief-habit formation is an affective venture, the authoritative state not only perpetually teaches and reinforces acceptable beliefs; it also appeals to the “passions” of the people, “so that they may regard private and unusual opinions with hatred and horror” (W 3:250). Peirce is saying that the state can manipulate the belief-habits of the people so that they will embrace the state’s belief-habits and shun belief-habits that differ from these. It is only a small step from viewing dissenting voices “with hatred and horror” to viewing such voices as mad, abnormal, or inferior because they challenge the status quo.

Second, the term “mad” can have the sense, according to an older definition of the term, of being “uncontrolled by reason or judgement; foolish, unwise” (OED Online 2009). In this sense, “mad” can be linked to the hegemonically enforced classification of groups of people as cognitively inferior because not fully human. “Mad” in this sense reflects being “abnormal” or “inferior” because of one’s hegemonically presumed difference from the human norm. This linkage between madness, abnormality, and inferiority has occurred historically for people of color and women, who were presumed to differ from the “proper” Euro-American, white, male “human” type. Both groups were considered defective rationally and morally.

For example, Charles Mills uses the term “subpersonhood” to capture the multiplex ways people of color have been historically viewed from the perspective of white hegemony (1997, 53–62). Subpersons have been seen through a racist lens that imposes on them an inferior ontology, viewing them as “incapable of autonomy and self-rule”: “Historically the paradigm indicator of subpersonhood has been deficient rationality, the inability to exercise in full the characteristic classically thought of as distinguishing us from animals” (57, 59–60; cf. Tunstall 2007, 160–65). Focusing on women, Nancy Tuana notes that, from the standpoint of the most influential philosophers of the
Western canon, the paradigmatic human was, in fact, a man. Thus “woman is seen as lacking in just those areas judged as distinctively human: the rational and moral faculties” (1992, 13). In these cases of people of color and women, a type of intrinsic “madness” has been attributed to them because of their rational and moral “abnormality” and “inferiority” in relationship to what has been considered “properly human.”

Clearly these two types of “madness/abnormality/inferiority”—based in challenging communal norms and differing from communal norms—are closely related, as it is often people of color and/or women, and others in non-hegemonic groups, who resist hegemonic messages about their inferiority. This resistance, however, can be harder to achieve because of the power of testimony to convince someone of her “madness/abnormality/inferiority,” such that it is difficult to feel sufficient worthiness to fight the hegemony (Mills 1997, 118–19). Charles Mills explains, for example, that people of color who wish to fight the subpersonhood imposed on them by “global white supremacy” must “fight an internal battle before even advancing onto the ground of external combat. One has to overcome the internalization of subpersonhood . . .” (1997, 3, 118). This overcoming takes considerable work, Mills argues, in order to “learn . . . basic self-respect” and to claim cognitive authority and aesthetic value (118–20). To articulate Mills’s points in Peircean terms: The “internalization of subpersonhood” signals that belief in one’s inferiority has become part of one’s firstness. To change such a belief-habit (via thirdness) takes concerted effort. This change is possible, however, which signals the hopeful note with which I conclude the chapter. For now, I turn to how the internalization of disempowering hegemonic messages can begin in childhood.

The power of testimony creates the coercive survival dilemma for all children in hegemonic communities. In this context, when post-Darwinian concerns are taken seriously, it makes sense that such children could internalize testimony-driven, growth-inhibiting habits, such as a belief in their inherent madness/abnormality/inferiority or superiority based on their membership in a particular group (such as
females, males, people of color, and/or whites). First of all, implicit in Peirce’s comment about the strength of testimony is the vulnerability of the individual human organism in respect to testimony. The child needs to embrace the interests of others for survival. She is very unlikely to survive if left only to her own epistemological perspective. This is even more the case for the very young child, since she is physically weak and very naive about how the world works. In this respect, the stove example discussed above illustrates not only how ignorant a child is compared to her adult caretakers. It also implies how dependent the child is on the testimony of her caretakers. If, for example, a young child’s caretakers tell her not to go into the street by herself and she disregards the warning, she could be killed by an oncoming car. Children are unlikely to survive without trusting what they are told.

A child ignores her caretakers at her own peril, and they are likely the bearers of many enabling habits. Nonetheless, these caretakers—and the community in general—can also be the bearers of growth-inhibiting belief-habits. These are the two sides of the coercive survival dilemma. A child learns that her world is private and thus a source of error in relation to the testimony of her caretakers and community. Yet the testimony in question may involve pressures to believe and behave “correctly” in order to preserve an oppressive societal status quo. Fear of abandonment by their caretakers or community may make children reluctant to question their testimony, since being abandoned would signal death almost as surely as would a child’s refusing to look both ways before crossing a busy street. Psychologist Joan Borysenko notes that, when a small child is reprimanded by her caretakers, it shakes her world to the core:

At the moment of reprimand, the world stops working according to the rules. The interpersonal bridge is severed. Feeling scared and isolated, the child wonders what she did to bring this disaster about. Does it mean she will be abandoned? Does it mean that Mommy will stay angry forever? Does it mean that she will never be loved again? To a small child who knows so little about the world, a fragile being whose life is totally dependent on parental care, broken bridges are as frightening as death. (1990, 53, my emphasis)
The small child is not in a position to take on the world by herself without the support of her caretakers and, I would add, community. In Peircean terms, the reprimand is an experience of secondness that ruptures her sense of security. In this respect, secondness is a theme connecting Borysenko’s comments and Peirce’s account of the child who defies caretaker testimony by touching the hot stove. In the latter case, the child “touches it, and finds the testimony confirmed in a striking way” (W 2:202). Both getting burned by the stove and being scolded are instances of secondness, to which the child responds with thirdness on some level.

In relation to caretaker-secondness, the smaller the child, the greater the likelihood that her thirdness will work to adapt to this type of secondness without trying to challenge it, because caretakers are the primary arbiters and teachers of reality for the child. From a post-Darwinian point of view, the child’s caretakers not only explain reality to the child; they also continually mediate and protect the child from environmental secondness. Thus the child’s adoption of her caretakers’ belief-habits, in many respects, fosters her survival (cf. A. Rorty 1980, 122). The social principle is integral to the young child’s development through the testimony of caretakers and, by implication, the larger community that has shaped the caretakers’ habits. The child is continually exposed to this larger community indirectly (via caretaker habits) and/or directly, through day care, school, neighborhood, and the media. In terms of Peirce’s phenomenology, the adaptation to secondness ranges from nonconscious to conscious. For children who have not achieved self-consciousness (thirdness stage), thirdness would be functioning instinctively or merely in reaction to the caretaker- or community-secondness, without (yet) reflecting intentional habit-taking. For children who have reached self-consciousness, the younger they are, the more likely they are to acquiesce to, without challenging, the demands of reality as articulated by their caretakers/community/society, even if these demands foster the internalization of disempowering or exclusionary habits.

To grasp how this internalization can occur, we can examine the process of habit-formation (thirdness) that occurs in response to experiences of secondness that disrupt the harmonious equilibrium
(firstness) of the child. Recall that internalization, for my purposes, is the incorporation, by means of reinforcement or trauma, of a belief-habit into one’s personal comportment and worldview such that the belief-habit is difficult to eradicate rationally (cf. A. Rorty 1980; Bartky 1990, 63–82). In terms of Peircean phenomenology, internalization results from secondness that is continually reinforced and/or traumatizing, to the extent that the belief-habit formed in response becomes so deeply rooted in firstness that it is difficult to subject it to self-control (self-control being thirdness, in a critical self-reflection mode).

The reality that children, and adults, confront does not consist merely of hot stoves to be avoided. It also consists of a vast array of socio-political habits and norms. When these social structures are violated, sanctions are incurred. This is the domain of socio-political secondness, which, to the developing child, is every bit as real as burning her hand on the stove. Socio-political secondness influences the habit-taking of the child, just as “natural” secondness does. Take, for example, a little boy who is scolded regularly when he cries, because crying is “unacceptable” for boys. When I was around twelve years old, I was shocked to see one of the boys in my neighborhood, who was between five and ten years old, being harshly reprimanded by his father. The boy was crying at the time and his father was “in his face,” so to speak, angrily telling him how inappropriate and girl-like this behavior was. My guess is that my young neighbor eventually formed a habit (via thirdness) of not crying when upset about something, a habit he is likely to have internalized by now (into firstness). Bell hooks notes, “Patriarchal mores teach a form of emotional stoicism to men that says they are more manly if they do not feel, but if by chance they should feel and the feelings hurt, the manly response is to stuff them down, to forget about them, to hope they go away” (2004, 5–6). Societal rules in mainstream U.S. culture repeatedly tell boys (and men) that it is inappropriate to cry. Messages of this sort can come from family, friends, other community members, and the media. In response to this socio-political secondness, boys and men often develop a habit (via thirdness) of avoiding crying when upset.
the affectivity of cognition

about something. In my own childhood experience, in contrast, I was not scolded for crying. I was repeatedly taught that sitting with my legs open was “unladylike,” which was another form of socio-political secondness. I developed a corresponding habit (via thirdness) of sitting with my legs close together or crossed, “like a lady.”

With consistent reinforcement through socio-political secondness, the corresponding habits—such as avoiding crying or sitting with legs crossed—can become internalized. Recall that the habits one develops through thirdness, when practiced sufficiently, often become part of one’s firstness. In other words, internalized habits function so automatically as to be like “second nature.” They are part of the firstness of one’s implicit sense of embodied functioning in the world, so much so that they are resistant to rational appeal. Marilyn Frye notes that, regarding socialization as feminine or masculine, culture becomes biology by means of habits that are shaped from childhood (1983, 34–38). Changing these habits is possible, but this change cannot be accomplished through “just will[ing] it to happen” (38). Instead one needs “constant practice and deliberate regimens designed to remap and rebuild nerve and tissue” (37). Speaking from personal experience, I can say that sitting with my legs crossed was a habit of femininity that, as an adult, took me about two or three years to break. While I knew that it is better for my back and the circulation in my legs if I did not cross them, it was so deep seated for me that it resisted rational appeal.

As part of a human organism’s firstness, internalized habits present a challenge to subsequent thirdness-efforts to change them. I wanted, as just mentioned, to stop crossing my legs and, by means of thirdness, set the goal of eliminating this habit. Merely setting this goal, however, did not automatically result in habit change, because crossing my legs was internalized, deeply part of my firstness and resistant to my own efforts to change. I did eventually change the habit, but it took a lot of work through reinforcing new patterns of posture, which eventually became habitualized into my firstness.

Let us return to Peirce’s comment that testimony can convince a person that she is “mad,” which I have expanded to “mad/abnormal/
inferior.” Internalized habits include beliefs, since for Peirce beliefs are habits. When one’s “inferiority” is continually reinforced by caretakers or community, this belief-habit can become internalized (part of one’s firstness) and be difficult to change through efforts of thirdness. This is to say that the internalization of inferiority is not a permanent condition but rather one that takes significant effort to change.

It should be noted that, for the child in a hegemonic community, messages from caretakers and community can be in tension with each other. Hence caretakers may teach their child that all people are inherently valuable and worthy of respect regardless of the color of their skin. Yet these efforts can be undermined by wider mainstream societal messages that project a white norm as the human norm or that portray people of color as more likely to commit crimes. Patricia Williams, speaking as an African American parent, writes about how her son had to cope with arguments among children at his nursery school “about whether black people could play ‘good guys’” (1997, 3–4). In addition, bell hooks makes the point that people of color can themselves unwittingly pass along the message to their children that nonwhite is inferior:

[B]lack mothers frequently come to me to ask what they can do when their children come home from school saying they want to be “made white.” Often these women will share that they have done everything to instill love of blackness. However, in every case the woman seeks to change her appearance to look lighter or to make her hair straighter. (2003b, 37)

Hooks is pointing out that, in these cases, trying to aspire to a white beauty ideal, through lightening efforts and/or hair-straightening, sends the message that white beauty is superior, which undermines efforts “to instill love of blackness.” Consistent testimony, whether intentional or unintentional, explicit or implied, that reinforces the “inferiority” people of color can result in the internalization of this belief-habit, even when this negative testimony is offset by empowering testimony.
For children belonging to hegemonic groups—in this case, whites—I consider it obvious that explicit and intentional caretaker-prejudice against people of color can result in internalized prejudice. I therefore prefer to focus on the more subtle point that, even when caretakers explicitly teach the worthiness and value of all people, white children can still internalize belief-habits that perpetuate racism. This is all the more likely when the wider societal and community messages often perpetuate racism.

Sociologists Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin include the following example in their book *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* (2001). It was given to them by a young mother whose race, given the context, is presumably white:

This woman, whom we will call Maria, had two children, a toddler aged two and a half and a seven-year-old. Since she and her family lived in the heart of New York City, one of the preferred methods for getting around town was to bundle the toddler into his stroller and maneuver the city sidewalks that way. . . . In the family’s neighborhood there were usually several panhandlers on the street, almost all of them Black men who solicited change from passersby. Maria made it a habit to sidestep the area that these men frequented, giving them a wide berth. She was not fearful of the men, she said, for they were invariably polite and never demanded money. However, she usually was not able to offer them change and did not wish her children to think that she was not kind. Over time her practice of avoiding the men became routine. . . .

One afternoon, her two-year-old bounced down beside her on the couch and announced, “Black men are bad.” Maria was horrified: Where did this come from? She had never told him anything like this. His older sister, sitting alongside them, was equally stunned. . . . Maria’s husband was queried along with friends and other family members who had access to the little boy; all were shocked. (204–5)

In this example, the parents and family have not consciously taught the child to hold racist beliefs, yet the toddler has clearly formed one, namely the belief that “Black men are bad.”
How can this racist belief be accounted for? The mother hypothesizes that her young son formed this belief by observing her own behavior of avoiding the panhandlers on the street, alongside the parental admonitions he regularly received to avoid “bad” things, like “stray dogs, electric outlets, stuff like that” (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001, 205). She suggests that the racist belief is an unintentional by-product of the child’s synthesis of her own behavior pattern with the stroller and the more general lesson about avoiding “bad” things. I would suggest an additional influencing factor in the formation of the racist belief. The toddler might have picked up on his mother’s discomfort about not wanting to give money to the panhandlers (because she did not want to seem uncharitable) and/or any additional nonconscious discomfort she may have felt toward the panhandlers due to their race. Shannon Sullivan discusses how messages can be sent to children through strong feelings that convey racial messages, even when no words are spoken (2006, 63–93, esp. 64–65). I fully acknowledge I am speculating regarding the mother’s discomfort, but I think it is realistic speculation, especially in light of Van Ausdale and Feagin’s challenge to her hypothesis about the racist belief in question. They suggest that the toddler may have formed his racist belief from general observations of his social world, where African American men are treated unfairly by the U.S. criminal-justice system and are unduly represented as committing, along with Latinos, the most crimes (Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001, 203–6).

I would argue that the toddler’s racist belief involved a complex interplay of many or all of the caretaker and societal habits just suggested. The parents’ inclusive conscious beliefs about race were probably contradicted by societal messages. The parents’ own internalization of these societal messages, which associate African and Latino Americans with committing crimes, could lead to mixed messages the parents are unaware of sending. Moreover, society itself—apart from parental messages—can be a very effective teacher. Van Ausdale and Feagin’s research with preschool children (three to five years old) suggests that the toddler’s racist belief reflects a common tendency for very young white children to engage in racist behaviors, against
the express teachings of parents and teachers. In the case of the children they observed, Van Ausdale and Feagin note, “It is likely here that no adult has actively taught most of these three-, four-, and five-year-olds about white power, racial self-identification, racial-ethnic exclusion, and racial-ethnic discrimination” (2001, 200). They go on to point to the societal ubiquity of racist messages: “[The children] are surrounded with racial imagery, thinking, discourse, and behavior. They observe it, experience it, and absorb it in different places and from the people they encounter” (200–201). The various “social settings” that influence children are interwoven, and “[c]hildren are not ordinarily disconnected from the larger social worlds” (206). In terms of Peircean child development, we can say childhood thirdness, whereby children learn to adapt to the habits of their caretakers and community, involves learning habits implicitly and explicitly taught by parents, teachers, and other adults, as well as more general habits portrayed by society at large. These more general communal habits are portrayed through the media and through countless other social encounters.

In my own white, middle-class childhood, I received consistent societal messages that racism was primarily over in the United States. My parents routinely taught me that racism was wrong and that all people are equal and deserving of respect. I do not remember receiving messages that people of color were in any way inferior to me. (Since my family lived in virtually all-white suburbs, I do not recall seeing my parents’ behavior toward people of color, because our social communities were so white-dominant.) Clearly, however, societal messages of white-dominance got through to me, as reflected in an unflattering example from my high school years. I attended a predominantly white, middle-class public high school in Omaha, Nebraska, where my graduating class of 480 was roughly 1 percent African American. I clearly remember hearing one day that an African American classmate of mine said he was experiencing racism at school. I completely disbelieved him. I did not express my disbelief to his face, as I hardly knew him, and I learned of his grievance only
second- or thirdhand. Nonetheless, I did not believe racism was possible at my school, and I felt completely confident in my disbelief. It did not even occur to me to investigate this report of injustice, either on my own or with the help of my parents. Clearly racist thinking was at play here, as I so easily discounted an African American person’s testimony about a very serious issue. Why did I not feel immediate and deep concern for him, especially given how incredibly outnumbered he was, given the roughly 100-to-1 ratio of whites to people of color in my class? Why was I so confident about my knowledge of something—namely, racism—that I had never experienced myself? I would argue that I internalized racist beliefs in my childhood, despite my parents’ best efforts, due to what they did not know to tell me about the persistence of institutional racism in the United States. I also received consistent societal messages proclaiming that racism is largely over in the United States, as well as messages that people of color cannot be trusted. Where these latter messages about trustworthiness came from I cannot pinpoint. As I watched a fair amount of television and had other regular exposure to U.S. mainstream culture, it is not a stretch to hypothesize that I picked these messages up from my society without consciously being aware of it, forming stereotypical associations/beliefs/habits about people of color.

As a high school student I was not aware that I was being racist in my knee-jerk assumption that my classmate was wrong. Far from it. The stereotypical associations that undermined my classmate’s trustworthiness in my eyes were functioning nonconsciously alongside my conscious beliefs that racism is wrong. My work in the following chapters offers further explanation of how the credulity of children to the testimony of caretakers and society can result, for those in hegemonic communities, in the internalization of discriminatory habits by those in hegemonic groups—habits that thereby become instinctive beliefs that function nonconsciously in adulthood.

e. The Seed of Hope

I conclude this chapter by giving a hopeful reframing of Peirce’s comment that “testimony will convince a man that he himself is mad” (W
Hidden in this observation is the potential for the individual community member to be at odds with what her community tells her about reality, despite the strength of the social principle and the coercive survival dilemma. Indeed an older child, or adult, may begin to question reality as articulated by her parents and community. She may also face strong opposition in doing so. This opposition can take the form of being told she is crazy for questioning the way things work, and hence Peirce’s dismal reference to madness. Recall Scheiman’s observation that “[i]t is frequently by ‘disagreeing’ about things the rest of us take for granted that one is counted as mad, ignorant, or otherwise not possessed of reason” (1993, 146).

Yet Peirce’s very acknowledgment of the potential conflict between an individual and her community is a hint that there is hope for growth, even in the context of intense hegemonic pressure to conform. For all the likelihood that children may internalize the growth-inhibiting beliefs of hegemonic communities, there is room for resistance. Bell hooks’s life is a paradigmatic example of resistance in the face of familial and cultural hegemony. Her comments on the challenges of being African American in the United States were cited earlier. Hooks also describes the pressures, which she faced during her childhood, to conform to feminine standards. Growing up in the South, hooks found herself in repeated conflict with her parents’ patriarchal values, which they tried to instill in their family. Speaking of herself in the third person, she describes how unfit for marriage her parents found her:

[S]he was too smart, men did not like smart women, men did not like a woman whose head was always in a book. And even more importantly men did not like a woman who talked back. She had been hit, whipped, punished again and again for talking back. They had said they were determined to break her—to silence her, to turn her into one of them. (hooks 1996, 99)

Hooks’s life speaks boldly of her resilience to both familial and cultural pressures. She is an influential, successful social critic, teacher, and writer. She exemplifies the possibility of the human organism’s
affective resilience in the face of the coercive survival dilemma faced by children in hegemonic communities. 49

In addition, for children and adults belonging to hegemonic groups, affective resilience is also possible, by which they can resist the exclusionary belief-habits that promote their privilege at the expense of others. Peggy McIntosh, in her article “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” addresses—with a view toward changing—exclusionary belief-habits that accompany racism, sexism, and heterosexism (1988). As McIntosh herself is white and heterosexual, her work demonstrates the ability of those in hegemonic groups to work against the societal belief-habits that advantage them unfairly. These habits can be hard to identify, often remaining “invisible” to those who benefit from them, and hence the importance of efforts to bring these habits to conscious awareness (291).

Last chapter, we examined habits of heterosexual privilege that McIntosh identifies. Her list of white privilege, addressed briefly above, also includes such habits of expectation as “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time,” “I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed,” and “My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races” (293–94). As prevalent as these expectations are, they can be hard—but not impossible—to grasp. McIntosh notes:

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, cloths, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks. (291)

Bringing such elements of privilege to consciousness is a crucial first step to working for change, which includes using privilege against itself. McIntosh uses her own racial and heterosexual privileges to undermine those very privileges, by calling out the often elusive
mechanisms that support them (292, 294, 298, 299). Thus McIntosh exemplifies the Peircean potential for self-controlled critique to promote habit change at individual and societal levels.\footnote{50}

By way of transition into the following chapters, let us expand from the Cognition Series to view Peirce’s work as a whole, in order to articulate two themes. The first is hope in the midst of oppression. As vulnerable as a child is to the habit systems of caretakers and society, these habit systems cannot fully stifle the organic spontaneity of the human person.\footnote{51} For Peirce the community itself is a person on the macroscopic scale, and each of its members is a source of homeodynamic spontaneity and fruitful disruption that can foster communal growth by challenging stagnant communal habits. While in the present 1860s series this theme is far from explicit, he has planted a seed by allowing for the possibility that a mature community member may be at odds with her community’s beliefs. This possibility is fortified by Peirce’s portrayal of the uniquely embodied affective-salience that colors each person’s experience of the world, even in the midst of inescapable socialization. Being at odds with communal beliefs can reflect maverick rationality that can foster communal growth.

The second theme is communal habit-formation. The present chapter points beyond itself by raising the question of how habit-formation should occur in communities, so that the coercive survival dilemma can be minimized. While the hopefulness of individual resiliency is always a possibility, surely individual and communal growth are better served by communal articulations of reality that are inclusive and fallible in the first place. We are at the doorstep of Peirce’s Illustrations of the Logic of Science series of the 1870s, where he argues for the scientific method of communal habit-formation in contrast to the method of authority that characterizes hegemonic communities. His valuation of the synechistic individual is more explicit in this series. So too is the potential tension that can arise between this individual and a hegemonic community.