Peirce's Philosophical Perspectives

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Charles Sanders Peirce: An Overview

His Life

Charles Sanders Peirce, philosopher, logician, scientist, father of American pragmatism, died of cancer on April 19, 1914, after five years of great suffering. He died an isolated old man of 75, still working on his manuscripts, without a publisher, without students or followers, practically unknown, penniless, and alone. This man, unappreciated in his lifetime, virtually ignored by the academic world of his day, is now recognized as perhaps America's most original philosopher and her greatest logician. Indeed, on the latter score, he is surely one of the logical giants of the nineteenth century, which produced such geniuses as Cantor, Frege, Boole, De Morgan, Russell, and Whitehead. Today, more than eighty years after his death, another generation of scholars is beginning to pay him the attention he deserves.

Who, then, was Charles Peirce? He was born on September 10, 1839, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the second son of Benjamin and Sarah Hunt Peirce. His father, a professor at Harvard and one of the greatest American mathematicians of his day, played a decisive role in Charles's upbringing and formal education, much in the way the elder Mill influenced his son, John Stuart. Charles's father early introduced him to mathematics, the physical sciences, and logic. At the age of eight Charles took up the study of chemistry on his own, and at twelve had set up his own small laboratory. About the same time he composed a short history of that science. At thirteen, he had read and mastered his elder brother's logic

An earlier version of this chapter was given as a lecture at Fairfield University in 1964 on the fiftieth anniversary of Peirce's death.
textbook. At fifteen, he entered Harvard College, and graduated four years later, in 1859, one of the youngest in his class. And yet, for all his genius, his scholastic record was poor. He describes himself as "a very insouciant student."

Peirce's interest in philosophy began during those undergraduate days. He read and expounded as best he could Schiller's *Aesthetische Briefe* to his friend and classmate Horatio Paine. He studied Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* so thoroughly that he knew whole passages of it almost by heart. Still, due in large measure to his father's influence, he chose to become a scientist. In 1863 he received from Harvard his Bachelor of Science in Chemistry *summa cum laude*. Meanwhile, in 1861, Peirce had joined the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, with which he was to be associated for thirty years, holding many important posts and doing much original research in photometry and gravitation. In fact, the only book he succeeded in getting published during his lifetime was entitled *Photometric Researches* (1878), and for it he won international recognition. Again, in connection with this research, he received the only official vote of confidence in his entire career when in 1877 he was elected a fellow of the National Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the National Academy of Science.

Despite his dedication to science, his interest in philosophy never diminished. In fact, it was strengthened and confirmed by his scientific work. His early efforts were concentrated in the fields of logic and the philosophy of science and in these areas anticipated much of present-day work. The technical papers he published between 1867 and 1885 established him as one of the greatest formal logicians of the day. He lectured at Harvard as an official member of the staff three times between 1864 and 1871, and it was about this time that the "Metaphysical Club," as Peirce later called it, was formed—an informal discussion group which met fortnightly to discuss philosophical problems. It numbered among its members some of the finest minds of the day—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., William James, Chauncey Wright, Francis Abbot, and Nicholas St. John Green, among others—and it was in this imposing intellectual milieu that "pragmatism first saw the light of day." About the same time, too, Peirce's interest in logic led him to read the great scholastics—Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham, Bacon—and to de-
clare unequivocally for "scholastic realism" against nominalism in every form. This exposure to the famous controversy over universals decisively influenced his brand of pragmatism, as we shall see.

Although it is certain that Peirce first discussed and formulated the pragmatic maxim in these informal meetings, the first definite statement of it did not appear until 1878, in a paper originally written in French while he was on his way to Europe in connection with his government employment, and published in *Popular Science Monthly*, under the title "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." It read as follows:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (5.402)

The statement is admittedly crude and led to misunderstanding and misinterpretation by other philosophers who called themselves pragmatists. Peirce would take great pains to clarify his real meaning.

Despite his eagerness to teach, despite his ability and originality, Peirce never had the opportunity to do so for more than eight years of his life. Apart from the early Harvard lectures, his only academic post was at The Johns Hopkins University, and this he held for only five years (1879–1884). After that he never mounted a university podium except to deliver an occasional series of lectures by invitation, despite the direct and personal intervention of William James to the President of Harvard to appoint Peirce to a chair. Yet he was an inspiring lecturer. Too advanced perhaps for the ordinary student, he challenged the more gifted and was respected and highly esteemed by all. He organized a second metaphysical club for his students at John Hopkins, among whom was John Dewey. His rejection by university administrations was due in part to his difficult personality and in part to domestic problems. Paul Weiss sums up his character this way: "he was always somewhat proud of his ancestry and connections, overbearing toward those who stood in his way, indifferent to the consequences of his acts, quick to take affront, highly emotional, easily duped, and with, as he puts it, 'a reputation for not finding things.'" His first marriage in 1862 to Harriet Melusina Fay (granddaughter of the prominent Episcopalian Bishop John Henry Hopkins) ended in
divorce in 1883 while Peirce was teaching in Baltimore. His career there ended the next year. He subsequently married Juliette Froissey of Nancy, France, to whom he was devoted the rest of his life, and who survived him. In 1887, having inherited a small legacy, Peirce, now 48, retired to a small farm near Milford, Pennsylvania, where he lived out his life studying and writing. He was continually in financial straits. Once he applied to the Carnegie Foundation for help in publishing a series of books, but he was turned down. He was all but in exile. Near the end, it was only the touching fidelity of his lifelong friend William James that sustained him. Upon his death his widow sold all his papers to Harvard, where they remain to this day.

Such was the brilliant and tragic career of Charles Peirce. Though he never published a book on philosophy, his articles and drafts fill volumes. It has only been since the publication of the Collected Papers in the 1930s that the philosophic community has begun to appreciate the scope and depth of his speculations. Peirce is beginning to find his place in American thought: a place in the first rank. A new chronological edition of his works is in progress at the Indianapolis Campus of Indiana University under the general direction of Nathan Houser. Of the projected twenty or twenty-five volumes, five have already appeared.

His Work

Realism vs. Nominalism

Why should Peirce be of interest to us? Because, I suggest, he is a very great thinker, and because he is a very great American thinker. But there is another reason why he is of particular interest to me. He knew, respected, and used the great tradition of Western thought, in particular the writings of the great Scholastic Doctors. He had a sense of continuity amid the dramatic changes in Western culture, and that sense saved him from being merely contemporary. It enabled him to address himself to an audience beyond his own time. He can speak to us whose world is perhaps even more dramatically different from his than his was from the Middle Ages. He was able to address himself to the relation of thought and action
so much a concern for us today in the areas of social adaptation and politics. I find it remarkable that a great scientist, logician, and philosopher of the nineteenth century not only spent a good deal of time reading the original texts of Aquinas and Scotus but also declared for them on the great issue of our day as well as theirs: nominalism vs. realism. He could say at the end of his career that although he had revised his system several times over and changed his mind about many things, he always held himself to be a "scholastic realist."

Peirce certainly was not uncritical of Scholastic thought. Though he was aware that much in it needed updating, he also recognized that much was to be learned from it.

The works of Duns Scotus have strongly influenced me. If his logic and metaphysics, not slavishly worshipped, but torn away from its medievalism, be adapted to modern culture, under continual wholesome reminders of nominalistic criticisms, I am convinced that it will go far toward supplying the philosophy which is best harmonized with physical science. (1.6)

In one of his early Harvard lectures he paid the Scholastic Doctors the highest compliment of which a man of science is capable. He likened their devotion to that discovering of the truth of the spirit which animates the scientific mind. And he contrasted it with the vanity of "those intellectual nomads, the modern metaphysicians, including the positivists," who seem to be more interested in the brilliant hypothesis than in the humble facts.

Above all it is the searching thoroughness of the schoolmen which affiliates them with men of science and separates them, world-wide, from modern so-called philosophers. The thoroughness I allude to consists in this, that in adopting any theory, they go about everywhere, they devote their whole energies and lives in putting it to the tests bona fide. (1.33)

And again:

Now this same unwearied interest in testing general propositions is what produced those long rows of folios of the schoolmen, and if the test which they employed is of only limited validity . . . yet the spirit, which is the most essential thing—the motive, was nearly the same. And how different this spirit is from that of the major part, though not all, of modern philosophers—even those who have
called themselves empirical, no man who is actuated by it can fail to perceive. (1.34)

What, then, was the issue at stake in the nominalist-realist controversy? It was not whether there was an external world, for nominalists and realists alike accepted that as but the requirement of common sense. It was, rather, whether "laws and general types are figments of the mind or are real." If they are figments of the mind, then the world is not in itself intelligible. It does not exhibit any rational structure; it is but a mad puzzle into which man must introduce order. If, on the other hand, they are real, then scientific inquiry seeks to discover the world's structure revealing itself in experience. In a word, because knowledge is always through general categories or universals, if it is to be knowledge of or about the world, the categories or universals must be grounded in that world: the world must exhibit itself as having a rational structure; that is, it must follow some kind of law. For this reason Peirce held that science always has been, and indeed must be, on the side of Scholastic realism, no matter how nominalistic the majority of philosophers who talk about science.

I need not mention that the realism of the scholastics admitted a variety of theories. Nor need I go into the differences between Scotus and Aquinas on this central issue. But I should say a word about why Peirce chose to follow John Duns rather than Thomas. The reason is simply this: Peirce saw in Scotus's plurality of forms and formalities a stronger type of realism than Thomas's stricter Aristotelianism. Thus, he called himself a scholastic realist of a rather extreme stripe. He even criticized Scotus for having been tinged with nominalism because he held onto a theory of the contraction of the universal to the singular through "haecceity" or "thisness." Thomists are fond of criticizing Scotists for a tendency toward extreme realism, while Peirce, oddly, criticizes them for not being extreme enough. Peirce seems to go as far as to make the individual nothing but a bundle of universals (or habits, as he calls them). This is perhaps a serious mistake, and he errs, if indeed he does, in the opposite direction to those nominalists whom he is combating and so, according to some of his critics, never quite satisfactorily accounts for the concrete singular.

If Peirce may have been on the wrong track in his handling of
the concrete individual, it seems clear to me that he was on the right one in his insistence on the reality of the general. And it is in this that he made his peculiar contribution to American pragmatism, which, unfortunately, has since developed in a decidedly nominalistic way.

**His Pragmaticism**

Peirce's pragmatism cannot be adequately discussed without an acquaintance with his general categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Now, the names Peirce gave to the categories are not very informative, and he chose them precisely for that reason. Because they are universal categories, cutting across all reality in much the same way as Scholastic transcendentalists do, Peirce felt that no more specific terms would do them justice. He himself likened them to various trios of more familiar categories as a help to his readers, while reminding those readers that the more familiar terms only approximated what he had in mind. For our purposes we can use the more familiar terms. Thus, Firstness approximates the quality peculiar to each thing taken in itself, independent of its relation to anything else. This is close to pure possibility. Secondness approximates the notion of brute, irrational action-reaction, clash, struggle, opposition. This brute aspect characterizes the concrete singular as such. Thirdness approximates the notion of law, rationality, objective thought, real generality or potentiality. Thus, we have: quality, reaction, law; pure possibility, actuality, potentiality; feeling, volition, thought; and so on.

Let us take James's version of pragmatism as typical of the position from which Peirce was to take care to dissociate himself. James once defined his pragmatism as the idea that "the effective meaning of any philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence in our future practical experience, whether active or passive; the point lying rather in the fact that the experience must be particular, than in the fact that it must be active." It looks for the "cash-value" of particular concrete experience and makes it the ultimate interpretant of thought.

Thus, when in 1896 William James's *Will to Believe* appeared, Peirce complained that James had pushed the pragmatic maxim "to such extremes as must tend to give us pause." Peirce inter-
interpreted his old friend to hold that man's end is action, and, in his article "Pragmatic and Pragmatism," in Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (1902), criticized him for not seeing that, far from action's being man's end, action itself supposes an end.

If it be admitted, on the contrary, that action wants an end, and that that end must be something of a general description, then the spirit of the maxim itself, which is that we must look to the upshot of our concepts in order rightly to apprehend them, would direct us towards something different from practical facts, namely, to general ideas, as the true interpreters of our thought. (5.3)

Action cannot be the final logical interpretant of thought because it is not general, but thought is. Thought can be interpreted only in terms of thought; the general can be understood only in terms of the general. The meaning of a conception can be found, not in action, but in the end for which the action (resulting from the conception) is done. The pragmatic maxim should be applied in a thoroughgoing way, Peirce tells us, but,

when that has been done, and not before, a still higher grade of clearness of thought can be attained by remembering that the only ultimate good which the practical facts to which it directs attention can subserve is to further the development of concrete reasonableness; so that the meaning to the concept does not lie in any individual reactions at all, but in the manner in which those reactions contribute to that development. (5.3)

The meaning of a concept, therefore, is judged in terms of the contribution that the reactions it evokes make toward the realization of the ultimate end of thought. In other words, Peirce introduces a normative function into the pragmatic maxim. The pragmatic maxim, then, seems to be a way of recognizing the reality of the objects of general ideas in their generality. But general ideas "govern" action; they are really laws of growth; they are really final causes; they are really normative.

Peirce himself in his *Dictionary* article admits that his early formulation of the pragmatic maxim might be interpreted in the way in which James, for one, did, but implies that he never meant, even in 1878, his doctrine to be the "stoical axiom" that man's end is action. He explains:
Indeed, in the article of 1878, . . . the writer practised better than he preached; for he applied the stoical maxim most unstoically, in such a sense as to insist upon the reality of the objects of general ideas in their generality. (5.3)

Now, if one rereads carefully "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" in the light of Peirce's subsequent doctrine concerning the nature of habit (as a third or a general), it will become clear that his estimation of his intent and meaning in that article is correct. He did not make action man's end; nor did he make action the end of man's thinking. Action, no doubt, is involved in thinking both in the sense that thinking is a form of action and in the sense that thinking normally results in action and action is a criterion of thought. Peirce does not say that action is the purpose of thinking; he says, rather, that "the establishment of a belief, a rule of action, a habit of action is thought's purpose." But a habit is not an action; it is of an entirely different category. A habit is general; an action is singular. (A habit is a third, while an action is a second.) Still, though this is what Peirce meant and what he strictly said, a superficial reading of the paper could easily lead to misinterpretation.

In any case, in 1903, Peirce decided to make pragmatism the subject of his lectures at Harvard. It would give him an opportunity to compare his doctrine with rivals of the same name. He tells us that he has no particular fault to find with the numerous definitions of pragmatism he had lately come across, yet "to say exactly what pragmatism is describes pretty well what you and I have to puzzle out together" (5.16). Then in a playful and ironic passage Peirce teases the "new pragmatists" for not acknowledging their source.

To speak plainly, a considerable number of philosophers have lately written as they might have written in case they had been reading either what I wrote but were ashamed to confess it, or had been reading something that some reader of mine had read. For they seem quite disposed to adopt my term pragmatism. I shouldn't wonder if they were ashamed of me. What could be more humiliating than to confess that one had learned anything of a logician? (5.17)

Peirce is delighted to share the opinions of such a brilliant company and has no complaint to make against them except that they are "lively."
The new pragmatists seem to be distinguished for their terse, vivid and concrete style of expression together with a certain buoyancy of tone as if they were conscious of carrying about them the master key to all the secrets of metaphysics. (5.17)

No doubt, Peirce has in mind this "cocksureness," not merely qualities of literary style, when he chides the pragmatists for being too "lively." One thing that he could not tolerate was "cocksureness." This was for him the very antithesis of the scientific attitude or humble "fallibilism." It is clear that Peirce had in mind James (among others), who enthusiastically pushed the maxim to extremes. The pragmatic maxim was not intended to be an open sesame for all metaphysical problems or a panacea for all intellectual ills. Peirce meant it merely to be an aid toward "making our ideas clear." (It is a method, not a Weltanschauung; cf. 5.13, note 1, ca. 1902.) It was put forward not as a principle of speculative philosophy, but as a logical maxim, or, better, a semantical maxim that would help guide logical and, finally, metaphysical investigation. No doubt, the maxim involves a great deal of the speculative, but it itself is not a "sublime principle of speculative philosophy."

Therefore, around 1903, due to the sudden popularity of "pragmatism," Peirce was very much preoccupied with dissociating his views from those circulating at the time and with making his own very clear and unequivocal. More than once he demanded, directly and indirectly, that he be given credit for having introduced the term into philosophy and for having laid the groundwork on which others had built (however, so badly). Again, in 1905, Peirce felt that he ought to try once more to explain what his conception of pragmatism entailed and he even went so far as to coin a new word for it:

So, then, the writer, finding his bantling "pragmatism" so promoted, feels that it is time to kiss his child good-by and relinquish it to its higher destiny; while to serve the precise purpose of expressing the original definition, he begs to announce the birth of the word "pragmaticism" which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers. (5.414)

This series of three articles appeared in The Monist.

The pragmatic in Peirce's sense is not to be confused with the practical. It is not the practical consequences of a notion which
make it true, and meaningful, but its truth and meaningfulness which make it have consequences. An idea's consequences may be criteria for, but do not constitute in some crude sense, its truth and meaningfulness. Thus, we are back to Peirce's repudiation of the crude notion that action is man's end and what makes ideas true and significant. The key to an idea's truth and significance is its relation "to some definite human purpose," to some end which governs action, as law governs cases. Rational cognition is an instance of Thirdness and so must be interpreted in terms of some other third. For Peirce this can be nothing else but rational purpose. The pragmatic maxim, then, is but a way of expressing this relation. Once again, therefore, we see that Peirce intends meaning to be identical with rational purpose, not with action alone.

In the same 1905 article, Peirce tries to answer certain objections, indicating as clearly as one could wish the connection he saw between pragmaticism and normative science. It is objected, first, that according to the pragmatic position nothing enters into the meaning of a concept but an experiment; but an experiment, in itself, cannot reveal anything more than a constant conjunction of antecedent and consequent (5.424). This typical Humean objection, Peirce observes, betrays a misunderstanding of the fundamental point of pragmaticism. In the first place, the objection misrepresents what is involved in an "experiment." An experiment is not an isolated, "atomic" event, but one always situated in a connected series forming a system. An experiment essentially involves the following ingredients: (1) an experimenter, (2) a verifiable hypothesis concerning the experimenter's environment, and (3) a sincere doubt in the experimenter's mind concerning the truth of that hypothesis. The experimenter, by an act of choice, must single out certain identifiable objects to be operated upon. Then, by an external (or quasi-external) act, he modifies those objects. Next comes a subsequent reaction of the world upon the experimenter through perception. Finally, he recognizes the teaching of the experiment.

While the two chief parts of the event itself are the action and the reaction, yet the unity of essence of the experiment lies in its purpose and plan, the ingredients passed over in the enumeration.

(5.424; emphasis added)
In the second place, this sort of objection fails to catch the pragmaticist’s attitude of mind. Rational meaning does not consist in an experiment, but in experimental phenomena. The phenomena to which the pragmaticist refers are not particular events which have already happened to someone or to something in the past, but “what surely will happen to everybody in the living future who shall fulfill certain conditions” (5.425). The essence of experimental phenomena, then, is that they have been predicated.

The phenomenon consists in the fact that when an experimentalist shall come to act according to certain schemes that he has in mind, then will something else happen, and shatter the doubts of sceptics, like the celestial fire upon the altar of Elijah. (5.425)

In the third place, this sort of objection overlooks, in a very nominalistic way, the fact that the experimenter is not interested in this or that single experimental phenomenon. He is interested in their general kinds, for what is conditionally true in futuro can only be general. In other words, experimental method implicitly at least affirms the reality of generals (5.426).

It is just at this point that the connection between pragmaticism and the normative sciences becomes unmistakable. Peirce asks how it is that the rational meaning of a proposition lies in the future. According to his theory a proposition has meaning precisely to the extent to which, by its form, it becomes applicable to human conduct, “not in these or those special circumstances, nor when one entertains this or that special design, but that form which is most directly applicable to self-control under every situation, and to every purpose” (5.427). Now, only future conduct is subject to self-control, and for the proposition’s form to apply to every situation and purpose upon which it has any bearing, “it must be simply the general description of all the experimental phenomena which the assertion of the proposition virtually predicts” (5.427). According to pragmaticism, therefore, a proposition’s meaning is capacity for governing future action through the knower’s exercise of self-control. That is its “rational purport.”

The next objection is that pragmaticism is a thoroughgoing phenomenalism. Peirce denies the allegation in the light of what had just been said about “rational purport.” We pass over that in order to get to the answer to the next objection more directly connected
with the point we have been trying to make. This is the crucial objection, in Peirce’s view, and it involves the fundamental mistake of James.

**QUESTIONER:** Well, if you choose so to make Doing the Be-all and the End-all of human life, why do you not make meaning to consist simply in doing? Doing has to be done at a certain time upon a certain object. Individual objects and single events cover all reality, as everybody knows, and as a practicalist ought to be the first to insist. Yet, your meaning, as you have described it, is general. Thus, it is of the nature of a mere word and not a reality. . . . (5.429)

The objection is put about as forcibly and clearly as it can be. For Peirce it touches the very heart of the matter, because it illustrates the fundamental option between nominalism and realism. The objection is powerful because it involves so many things that have to be admitted, and Peirce clears away the ground by immediately conceding what he must:

It must be admitted, in the first place, that if pragmaticism really made Doing to be the Be-all and the End-all of life, that would be its death. For to say that we live for the mere sake of action, as action, regardless of the thought it carries out, would be to say that there is no such thing as rational purport. Secondly, it must be admitted that every proposition professes to be true of a certain real individual object, often the enironing universe. Thirdly, it must be admitted that pragmaticism fails to furnish any translation or meaning of a proper name, or other designation of an individual object. Fourthly, the pragmaticic meaning is undoubtedly general; and it is equally indisputable that the general is of the nature of a word or sign. Fifthly, it must be admitted that individuals alone exist; and sixthly, it may be admitted that the very meaning of a word or significant object ought to be the very essence of reality of what it signifies. (5.429)

These admissions come down to this: pragmaticism holds that meaning or rational purport, because it is necessarily general, can only belong to the category of Thirdness, and, consequently, as has so often been observed, cannot be reduced to action-reaction or to individual existence, which belongs to the category of Secondness. Of course, a general is of the nature of a word or sign, precisely because it cannot be exhausted by a singular individual
instance, just as a word or sign can stand for many different individuals. Though it is true that generals do not exist, it does not follow that they are not real. They have the reality of types or forms to which objects may conform but which none of them can exactly be (5.429). In other words, those generals which are real have a normative function ("scholastic realism," cf. 1.16ff., Lowell Lectures, 1903).

Some generals, then, are real. Furthermore, they may have a real efficacy in just the same way as common sense acknowledges an efficiency in human purposes. Human actions are controlled in terms of human purposes; they are specified and determined by certain ends and goals. So, too, real generals specify and determine human knowledge. Real generals are what constitute the cosmos as ordered and intelligible and so are both the conditions of possibility that there be any rationality whatsoever and the normative principles of a rationality (human) continually dependent upon the shock of experience. Peirce puts it this way: "individual existence or actuality without any regularity whatever is a nullity. Chaos is pure nothing" (5.431).

According to Peirce, if this "scholastic realism" be put in the form of a general conditional proposition as to the future calculated to influence human conduct, one has the pragmatic maxim. True pragmatism, therefore, or, as Peirce preferred, "pragmaticism," does not make action the summum bonum, but rather the growth of concrete reasonableness in the world of existents. As evolution progresses, human intelligence plays a greater and greater role in that development through its characteristic power of self-control. There is an interaction between human intelligence and the evolutionary process. In the beginning human intelligence emerged from that process, but once emerged, it influences the course of evolution through deliberate conduct. Human intelligence becomes one of nature's agents in that process. Nature's objective regularity specifies man's knowledge (final cause) accordingly. Even if, through some perversity, some men, even over long periods of time, should choose to counteract Nature's directives, in the long run experience will force man to recognize her as growing in rationality in spite of him and as guiding him in the development of his own quest for reason.
Accordingly, the pragmaticist does not make the *summum bonum* to consist in action, but makes it to consist in that process of evolution whereby the existent comes more and more to embody those generals which were just now said to be *destined*, which is what we strive to express in calling them *reasonable*. In its higher stages, evolution takes place more and more largely through self-control, and this gives the pragmatist a sort of justification for making the rational purport to be general. (5.433)

After having remarked the close parallelism between the pragmatic maxim and Aristotle’s *dictum de omni* (5.435), Peirce concludes this extremely informative article by insisting upon the utter inadequacy of action (Secondness in general) to account for the generality (Thirdness) involved in meaning (5.436). To understand fully all that is involved in this contention, one would have to undertake a serious study of continuity, which “is simply what generality becomes in the logic of relatives, and thus, like generality, is an affair of thought, and is the essence of thought.” The motive for alluding to this theory, says Peirce, is to emphasize what is absolutely essential to the doctrine of pragmaticism: namely, that

the third category—the category of thought, representation, triadic relations, mediation, genuine thirdness, thirdness as such—is an essential ingredient of reality, yet does not by itself constitute reality, since this category can have no concrete being without action, as a separate object on which to work its government, just as action cannot exist without the immediate being of feeling on which to act. (5.436)

Almost fifteen years earlier (ca. 1892) Peirce had said, “My philosophy resuscitates Hegel in a strange costume” (1.42). Indeed, the “Secret of Hegel” was just that he had discovered that the universe is everywhere permeated with continuous growth (1.40–41). Peirce tells us again that pragmaticism is “closely allied to Hegelian absolute idealism,” with this important difference: Thirdness alone is not enough to make the world. Hegel’s fundamental mistake was to dismiss Firstness and Secondness (5.436; cf. 5.79, 5.37ff.).

In 1906 Peirce added a long note to the original statement of the pragmatic maxim as it appeared in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear.” The first thing he remarks is that he used, contrary to his
wont, five derivates of the word concipere in the maxim's formulation. He did so for two reasons: (1) to show that he was speaking of meaning "in no other sense than that of intellectual purport," and (2) "to avoid all danger of being understood as attempting to explain a concept by percepts, images, schemata, or by anything but concepts." Action is like the finale of a symphony of thought. Nobody would say that the finale was the purpose of the symphony; it is, rather, its upshot.

Of course, pragmatism recognizes a connection between thought and action. It ultimately makes thought apply to action, but to conceived action. This is quite a different matter from saying either that thought (that is, the purport of symbols) consists in action or that thought's ultimate purpose is action.

Pragmaticism makes thinking to consist in the living inferential metaboly of symbols whose purport lies in conditional general resolutions to act. As for the ultimate purpose of thought, which must be the purpose of everything, it is beyond human comprehension; but according to the stage of approach which my thought has made to it—with aid from many persons, among whom I may mention Royce (in his World and Individual), Schiller (in his Riddles of the Sphinx), as well, by the way, as the famous poet [Friedrich Schiller] (in his Aesthetische Briefe), Henry James the elder (in his Substance and Shadow and in his conversations), together with Swedenborg himself—it is by the indefinite replication of self-control upon self-control that the vir is begotten, and by action, through thought, he grows an esthetic ideal, not for the behoof of his own poor noodle merely, but as the share which God permits him to have in the work of creation. (5.403, n. 3)

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 399.