Charles S. Peirce

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Published by Fordham University Press

Potter, Vincent G.
Charles S. Peirce: On Norms and Ideals.

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II

Synechism & Law
Peirce frequently remarked that his pragmaticism was intimately related to synechism or the doctrine of continuity. In a letter to William James he says that his own version of pragmatism leads to synechism (8.257). In another place Peirce remarks that a thorough-going proof of pragmaticism's truth "would essentially involve the establishment of the truth of synechism" (5.415). In still another place he says that synechism "is not opposed to pragmatism in the manner in which C. S. Peirce applied it, but includes that procedure as a step" (5.4). Peirce spent the better part of twenty years working out his synechistic cosmology. This period (from about 1880 to 1900), it will be noticed, fills in the gap between Peirce's first formulation of the pragmatic maxim and the later reworking of it. It should also be pointed out that this period coincides with his awakening to the place of the normative sciences in philosophy. This was not all by accident. Peirce's appreciation of the connection between logic, practices, and esthetics came out of his cosmological studies. He undertook and pursued the inquiry into the nature of the cosmos under the guidance of his pragmatic principle. As this inquiry progressed he gained greater insight into the meaning of this principle itself. In a very real sense Peirce drew out what was implicit in his early essay by putting the maxim to work. In other words, Peirce's cosmological speculations form the bridge between the 1878 and 1903 versions of pragmaticism.

Just what, then, is this synechism which Peirce considers so essential to this thought? His popular presentation of the notion in Baldwin's Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology will serve our present purposes. In the first place, it is not "an ultimate and absolute

1 The main features of synechism were developed after the first formulation of the pragmatic maxim in 1877 and its subsequent revision in the light of the doctrine of normative science (ca. 1903). No doubt it was Peirce's work with synechism which led him to see the relevance of normative science for pragmatism. Cf. M. Thompson, The Pragmatic Philosophy of C. S. Peirce (Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1963), p. 103.
metaphysical doctrine," but like the pragmatic maxim itself "is a regulative principle of logic" (6.173). While this renowned maxim deals with the meaning of concepts, the synechistic principle prescribes "what sort of hypothesis is fit to be entertained and examined" (6.173). In general, it seeks to exclude any hypothesis which would block the road of inquiry.

The general motive is to avoid the hypothesis that this or that is inexplicable. For the synechist maintains that the only possible justification for so much as entertaining a hypothesis is that it affords an explanation of the phenomena. Now, to suppose a thing inexplicable is not only to fail to explain it, and so to make an unjustifiable hypothesis, but, much worse, it is to set up a barrier across the road of science, and to forbid all attempt to understand the phenomenon. (6.171)

Thus, Peirce tells us, synechism as a logical principle forbids one to consider any inexplicability as a possible explanation, and this is nothing more or less than the assumption behind the scientific enterprise as such, namely, that the world is knowable.

The synechistic principle does not deny that there is an element of the inexplicable and of the ultimate and brute in the world. That would be to deny that there is such a thing as experience. Experience is what is forced upon one will he, nill he. It is the element of shock and surprise which counters expectation, engenders doubt, and so stimulates further inquiry. In short, there is a sort of compulsion which in the very act is inexplicable and so ultimate. There is brute fact, or Secondness. This does not block the road of inquiry, but rather stimulates one to generalize from the experience, to form new hypotheses, because he is convinced that the facts can be understood —that they manifest another mode of being other than brutishness, namely, obedience to rationality and to law.

It would, therefore, be most contrary to his own principle for the synechist not to generalize from that which

2 In his Harvard Lectures of 1903, Peirce says that pragmatism is nothing but the logic of abduction, that is, it proposes a rule for the admissibility of hypotheses to rank as hypotheses (5.196). It must be, then, an expression or summary of synechism.
experience forces upon him, especially since it is only so far as facts can be generalized that they can be understood; and the very reality, in his way of looking at the matter, is nothing else than the way in which facts must ultimately come to be understood. (6.173)

It is clear, then, that an understanding of synechism as a principle of inquiry is closely bound up with an understanding of the interdependence of the categories of Secondness and Thirdness. What Peirce has in mind is much like Aristotle’s distinction between the fact and the reasoned fact. Every phenomenon insofar as it is an event has something brute about it. If that event happens contrary to our expectations, that bruteness manifests itself as struggle and shock. But insofar as that event is a kind of phenomenon, it can be understood, and our expectations can be altered to include its like in the future. Therefore, the ultimacy of fact is not the last word—it is not something to be looked upon as absolutely realized.

For science, therefore, and so for synechism, facts cannot be looked upon as being, in the last analysis, atomic and unrelated. They cannot be considered incapable of generalization. They must be seen in a system (cf. e.g. 1.424) where they are related and grouped according to general laws. Peirce thinks of this relatedness of facts as a continuum.

A true continuum is something whose possibilities of determination no multitude of individuals can exhaust . . . (6.170). True generality is, in fact, nothing but a rudimentary form of true continuity. Continuity is nothing but perfect generality of a law of relationship. (6.172)

Atomic, isolated facts would be ultimate in the objectionable sense of being inexplicable and unintelligible. They would be examples of pure Secondness—uninterpretable and so unknowable. They would be Kantian “things-in-themselves.” In short, they would not have any reality—at any rate not for us.

In short, synechism amounts to the principle that inexplicabilities are not to be considered as possible explanations; that whatever is supposed to be ultimate is supposed to be inexplicable; that continuity is the absence
of ultimate parts in that which is divisible; and that the form under which alone anything can be understood is the form of generality, which is the same thing as continuity. (6.173)\(^8\)

By now the reader undoubtedly suspects that, despite Peirce's apparent disclaimer concerning synechism's metaphysical pretensions, this regulative logical principle does indeed involve an ontology and a metaphysics. And these suspicions are justified, for Peirce himself in several places tells us that metaphysics consists in the acceptance of logical principles as principles of being (1.487; 1.624–625).\(^4\) But if any doubt remains, Peirce dispels it when he writes:

Synechism is founded on the notion that the coalescence, the becoming continuous, the becoming governed by laws, the becoming instinct with general ideas, are but phases of one and the same process of the growth of reasonableness. This is first shown to be true with mathematical exactitude

\(^8\) Peirce, of course, was much influenced by Kant. He cut his philosophical teeth on the *Critique of Pure Reason* and had it almost by heart. A passing remark made in his famous rejoinder to Prof. Carus indicates that the doctrine of synechism was fashioned with Kant in mind—that is, to bridge the gap between the inner and outer worlds. Discussing the view that Kant's *a priori* is a universal objective, as opposed to subjective, condition of cognition, Peirce declares: "It is a weak conception, unless the whole distinction between the inward and the outward world be reformed in the light of agapastic and synechistic ontology. For to deny that the *a priori* is subjective is to remove its essential character; and to make it both subjective and objective (otherwise than in the sense in which Kant himself makes it objective) is uncalled for, and is cut off by Ockham's razor. But when synechism has united the two worlds, this view gains new life" (6.590).

\(^4\) Here again Kant's influence is apparent. The *Critique of Pure Reason* concluded that metaphysics as an empirical science was impossible because the *a priori* source of necessity and universality is a subjective condition of knowledge only. Knowledge itself, or in any case, empirical knowledge requires a synthesis of the manifold of sense. In other words, for Kant, empirical knowledge is limited by experience. When Peirce says that his synechism unites Kant's "two worlds," he means that the transcendental conditions of knowledge should not be confined merely to the subject, but must also be in the object. In other words, the object of knowledge itself is intelligible, has a rational structure.
in the field of logic, and is thence inferred to hold good
metaphysically. (5.4)

In the second place, then, synechism is a metaphysical position (even
though not "ultimate and absolute") precisely because it is a regu­
lative logical principle.\(^5\) Although one cannot separate logical from
metaphysical considerations in Peirce (for the reasons just adduced),
insofar as they can be distinguished our interest will be confined to
the metaphysical. Thus we must undertake a close examination of
"becoming governed by law" as a phase in the "process of the growth
of reasonableness."

\(^5\) It may be well to reproduce this Peircean description of metaphysics:
"Metaphysics consists in the results of the absolute acceptance of logical prin­
ciples not merely as regulatively valid, but as truths of being. Accordingly,
it is to be assumed that the universe has an explanation, the function of which,
like that of every logical explanation, is to unify its observed variety. It fol­
lows that the root of all being is One; and so far as different subjects have a
common character they partake of an identical being. This, or something like
this, is the monadic clause of the law. Second, drawing a general induction
from all observed facts, we find all realization of existence lies in opposition,
such as attractions, repulsions, visibilities, and centres of potentiality gener­
ally. . . . This is, or is a part of, a dyadic clause of the law. Under the third
clause, we have, as a deduction from the principle that thought is the mirror
of being, the law that the end of being and highest reality is the living im­
personation of the idea that evolution generates" (1.487). As always Peirce
uses his universal categories to characterize whatever discipline he wishes to
describe.