Peirce's Philosophical Perspectives

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Peirce on "Substance" and "Foundations"

CHARLES S. PEIRCE has a great deal to contribute both to understanding and to solving many of the philosophical problems that puzzle contemporary thinkers. In fact it is probably true that in some ways philosophers of our time are in a better position to understand Peirce's thought than those of his own day. Here I would like to consider but two puzzling notions: (1) the substantiality of things (including the "self") and (2) the foundations of human knowledge.

**Substance**

The substantiality of things has been challenged at least since the time of the Enlightenment. The question was and is whether an existing thing (like the self) is, and can be known to be, something that lasts over time and keeps its identity through change. Both the British empiricists and the Continental rationalists undermined the very notion of substance. The rationalists, following Descartes's characterization of substance as a reality which is capable not only of existing in itself (*in se*) but also of existing completely independently of anything else (*a se*), so divinized the notion of substance that Spinoza's monism and Leibnitz's monadism were the results. Even some rationalists found these a strain on credulity.¹

Hume all but eliminated the notion of substance by taking seriously Locke's characterization of it as an inert, unknowable substratum for sense qualities. Berkeley had already drawn the conclusion

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¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *The Monist*, 75 (1992), 492–503.
that material substance is self-contradictory precisely because it is inert. Nothing completely inert can either be or be a cause. He admitted, however, spiritual substance since it actively perceived ideas. Hume made short work of Berkeley’s spiritual substance (the self) by showing that it cannot be known since we have no impression of it whether of sensation or of reflection. But an idea having no corresponding impression is simply without any assignable meaning. For Hume, the notion of self as substance can at best be traced to a series of impressions of reflection and so really refers to a set of perceptions. Hence, the notion of self as unifying substratum of impressions is the product of either memory or imagination. Hume might further have argued that whatever is completely inert is completely unknowable since there would be no interaction whatever between the knower and what is to be known. Such an entity would be completely unintelligible and therefore unreal.

Peirce’s account of substance attempts to do justice to the empiricists’ criticism of our knowledge of substance and to the rationalists’ requirement of a principle of unity and continuity. Peirce’s position on substance is connected with his discussion of the self, and that position he frequently states in negative terms. Peirce, I would contend, does have the elements of a positive position on both self and substance which, even if never put together in a systematic way, is worth a second look since it suggests a notion of substance different from that criticized by the Enlightenment and one that is perhaps much sounder. I propose that we undertake a search for Peirce’s view of substance by looking at his views about the self, since it is perhaps the most important example of substance.

As Vincent Colapietro has pointed out in Peirce’s Approach to the Self, many passages from Peirce give the impression that his views about the self were purely negative. In the 1868 essays written for the Journal of Speculative Philosophy, for example, Peirce is emphasizing against the Cartesians that we have no intuition of the self or of anything else for that matter. Hence, he talks about our becoming aware of the self through our ignorance and proneness to error. Again, in the 1890s, emphasizing his synechism, Peirce denies in various ways that thoughts are confined to our own individual minds. In fact, our personal minds are not “individual” at all if by “individual” is meant isolated from other minds.
The point of Peirce's negative presentation was to counter the assumption that the self in its existence is separated and isolated from all others. This is precisely Locke's assumption about substance—an isolated, inert, unchanging, absolute substratum for sensible qualities. In effect, such a substance would be a logical atom. Pierce holds that there can be no logical atoms. Hence, the notion of self as individual, if this is understood to mean without relation to, or connection with, anything else, is just an illusion. Pierce's positive understanding of the self emphasizes its connectedness with other selves and with the environment. The self is real insofar as it is in continuity with everything else and yet at the same time keeps its identity as this self and not that. This understanding required Peirce to rethink both the notion of "individual" and the notion of "substance" to overcome the misconceptions of the Enlightenment.

As one might expect, the key to Peirce's ability to rethink these notions successfully is his theory of categories. It would take us too far afield to review the entire theory, but it is probably enough simply to recall that for Peirce, while the categories—Firstness (mere possibility), Secondness (brute fact), Thirdness (law-like-ness)—are real (not merely logical) and really distinct (one is not the other), they are not separable in the real order. We can distinguish them but we can neither find them in reality nor experience them in isolation from one another.\(^5\)

These universal categories, according to Peirce, are three in number, no more and no less, absolutely irreducible to one another yet interdependent, and directly observable in elements of whatever is at any time before the mind in any way. Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness roughly correspond to the modes of being: possibility, actuality, and law. (1.23)\(^6\)

Consider, first, Peirce's rethinking of individuality. He distinguishes individuality in a strict sense and in a wider sense. He characterizes strict individuality as reaction, and reaction, of course, is in the category of Secondness. On this account, strictly speaking, the individual is such only at the moment of an actual reaction. But for Peirce such an actual reaction can neither exist nor be understood in isolation from everything else (otherwise Secondness would be separable from the other categories). Fur-
thermore, such an account of the individual does not square very well with our experience of physical objects and of other people as individuals lasting as individual over time. Peirce’s category of Thirdness comes to the rescue, since, as the category of continuity, it allows him to characterize individuality in a wider sense as a “continuity of reactions” which constitutes a single logical subject:

an individual is something which reacts. That is to say, it does react against some things, and is of such a nature that it might react, or have reacted, against my will. . . . It may be objected that it [the definition of individual in the strict sense] is unintelligible; but in the sense in which it is true, it is a merit, since an individual is unintelligible in that sense. . . . That is to say, a reaction may be experienced, but it cannot be conceived in its character of a reaction; for that element evaporates from every general idea. According to this definition, that which alone immediately presents itself as an individual is a reaction against my will. But everything whose identity consists in a continuity of reactions will be a single logical individual. (3.613)

The notion of the self as an individual in the sense of a continuity of reactions brings us to the notion of substance, since, as Colapietro points out, Peirce’s substance is one and the same as continuity of reactions.7

By insisting upon continuity, regularity of behavior, the lawlikeness of reality, Peirce in effect retains a notion of substance but one very much different from Locke’s. In his well-known piece “A Guess at the Riddle” (ca. 1890), Peirce, speculating about the origin of things, writes:

Pairs of states will also begin to take habits, and thus each state having different habits with reference to the different other states will give rise to bundles of habits, which will be substances. Some of these states will chance to take habits of persistency. . . . Thus, substances will get to be permanent. (1.414)8

The permanence of reactions is substance. Hence, the notion of substance is relational. It means regularity of behavior, continuity. This is a far different notion from the Lockean hidden substratum, absolute and inert. Peirce is right in suggesting that his use of the term is in an “old sense” (1.414, note). After all, in the past when various schemes of act and potency were common philosophical
categories, at least some thinkers understood substance to be a co-principle of being inseparably related to accident, its corresponding co-principle. On such an account, then, substance is relational; in fact, it is a relation. The real, existing thing (Aristotle's "first substance") is a *composite* of substance and accident related in such a way that they are distinguishable but not separable. Some called this kind of relation (between co-principles of being rather than between beings) a transcendental relation (to distinguish it from the more familiar predicamental relation). This older view would maintain that substance is known in and through its accidents (that is, its sensible manifestations and regular behavior). It would maintain that only some such scheme renders a changing thing intelligible. Finally, it would maintain that nothing unintelligible (even though perhaps as yet not understood by us here and now) is, or can be, real. These views I take to be Peirce's too.

Let me conclude my remarks on Peirce's general conception of substance by pointing out in Colapietro's words Peirce's distinction between existence and persistence:

[For Peirce] existence is the mode of being of an individual substance considered as a continuity of *reactions*; insofar as it is *actually* reacting against other things, it exists. Persistence is the mode of being of such a substance seen as a *continuity* of reactions; insofar as it endures throughout a series of reactions, it persists. In other words, existence . . . designates the aspect of secondness exhibited by any individual substance, while persistence . . . designates one of the ways in which it manifests thirdness (1.487).

Both these aspects of substance are relevant to the cognitive enterprise of human agents. Substances are both designatable and knowable: designatable, by virtue of their brutally oppositional presence; knowable, by virtue of their inexhaustibly intelligible character.10

FOUNDATIONS

Peirce steadfastly maintained that human knowledge is discursive, not intuitive. This also meant that there is no immediate knowledge of anything. Hence, for Peirce, if *all* human knowledge is discursive
and mediated, both the question of "first principles" and the question of the "foundations" of human knowledge need to be rethought in a radical way.

In 1868 Peirce (just turning thirty years of age) published a series of three articles in the Journal of Speculative Philosophy. The views set out there remained central to his thought throughout his long career. In those articles he makes a sustained attack on what he took to be the spirit of Cartesianism, which, according to him, consisted in a preoccupation with removing skeptical doubt by establishing human knowledge as immediate, intuitive, and certain. Peirce attributed this penchant to the empiricists as well, although what they claimed to intuit were sensible rather than "clear and distinct" ideas. In place of this Cartesianism Peirce strove to put a theory according to which human knowledge is thoroughly mediated and discursive. In a preliminary draft he makes the point that what we think is to be understood only in terms of the proper method for ascertaining how we think. He begins, therefore, with an account of cognition, then of truth and reality, and finally of the grounding of inference.

The first paper, "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man," centers on whether we have any immediate or intuitive knowledge of ourselves, of our mental states, or of the external world. By intuition Peirce means cognition not determined by previous cognition. In the case of judgment this would be a proposition which can be a premise but is not itself a conclusion—a first principle in the traditional sense. His conclusion on this point is negative. All knowledge is inferential and mediated through signs. By introspection Peirce understands internal cognition of our internal states not determined by external cognition. He concludes that we have no such power. All knowledge of our mental states is by inference from overt behavior, not by an inward looking.

The second paper, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," focuses on a theory of cognition in terms of inference and sign-mediation. The argument proceeds on the assumption that language as the external manifestation of mental activity is to be taken as a model of that activity's structure. Language is a system of signs. Pierce works out an analysis of signs and the way they function. Mental activity, then, is viewed as "inner speech." What is
more, the thought process manifested in language is inferential. Inferences are expressed in (and so can be analyzed into) a series of propositions (asserted in judgments). Judgments in turn are expressed through (and so can be analyzed into) concepts. But the thought process which is expressed in propositions and general terms and is analyzed into judgments and concepts is continuous and inferential. It is not the case that judgments are constructed out of concepts and inferences out of judgments. So to think would be to make a mistake comparable to thinking that because a line segment can be analyzed into points it can also be constructed out of points. The linguistic representation of inference (say, in the syllogism) is static and discrete. The process itself is dynamic and continuous. Such representation is no doubt useful, but it is inadequate. It would be an error to attribute to the process what is an attribute of its representation. It is this error that generates Zeno’s paradoxes. Later in his career Peirce made this point very clear when he distinguished between an argument and an argumentation.\(^{14}\) The former is the living inferential process; the latter, its representation in premises and conclusion.

If the human thought process is inferential, still that process is differentiated. Just as the color spectrum is continuous but differentiated, so the inferential process is continuous but differentiated. It can be analyzed into three sorts of inference: abduction, deduction, and induction. Abduction forms hypotheses (perceptual judgment is a limiting case), deduction draws their implications, and induction tests their truth. This process is continuous; hence, there is no first premise which is not itself a conclusion. What, then, according to Peirce, grounds this inferential process?

At the close of the second article Peirce introduces three notions necessary to handle this foundational question: the notion of truth, the notion of reality, the notion of community. From one point of view, truth is what is the case independently of what anyone happens to think. From another point of view, truth is what is destined in the long run to be agreed upon by investigators. It is not the agreement which constitutes the truth but the truth which in the long run brings about the agreement. To put it another way: it is the opinion of the community which converges; that opinion is about reality. But reality neither is an opinion nor is constituted by an opinion. The persevering application of the inferential thought
process will correct error and bring about a convergence on the truth. Reality is that which is represented in the long-run agreement. Here and now it is the knowable. In the limit case of the long run it is what will be known. Here and now reality is what is intended in knowing. In the limit case it is knowledge of everything about everything. For Peirce there is no reality that is absolutely incognizable. Such a supposition is self-defeating. Truth and Reality, then, are convertible terms. These notions as merely intended by human cognition at any given time suppose the notion of a community without definite limits and capable of an indefinite increase in knowledge. In the last two paragraphs of this article, Peirce says:

Finally, as what anything really is, is what it may finally come to be known to be in the ideal state of complete information, so that reality depends on the ultimate decision of the community; so thought is what it is, only by virtue of addressing a future thought which is in its value as thought identical with it, though more developed. In this way, the existence of thought now, depends on what is to be hereafter; so that it has only a potential existence, dependent on the future thought of the community.

The individual man, since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellow, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation. This is man,

"... proud man,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence." (5.316–317)

The third article, "Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic," sets out to justify inference in all its forms. Peirce begins with a consideration of deductive or necessary inference. He shows that each type of categorical syllogism is governed by the dictum de omni and refutes various classical objections to syllogistic reasoning. With respect to abductive and inductive (probable) inference, Peirce disposes of any attempt to justify them by turning them into a form of deduction or by appealing to the uniformity of nature. Since both abduction and induction are inferences from part to whole, they are essentially forms of statistical inference the validity of which depends upon the fact that in the long run any item selected is as likely as any other to be included in the sample.
Peirce maintains that this in turn follows from the very notion of reality which he previously developed. Suppose that men could not learn from induction. The reason would be that as a general rule when they had made an induction the order of things would change. But then the real would depend on how much men should know of it. But this general rule could be discovered by induction, and so it must be a law of a universe such that when the rule was discovered it would cease to operate. But this rule too could be discovered by induction, and so there would be nothing in such a universe which could not be known by a sufficiently long process of inference. But this contradicts the hypothesis that men cannot learn from induction. Finally, Peirce stresses:

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 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. (5.354)

To illustrate how a continuous process can begin in time and yet have no "first" members of the series, Peirce asks those readers to suppose an inverted triangle gradually dipped into water (5.263). Clearly there is a beginning in time of its being submerged, but there is no assignable first place on the triangle where it first contacts the water. Once the triangle is immersed, the surface of the water traces a line on it at some distance, say length $a$, from the apex. Such a line can be marked wherever one pleases and there will still be an infinite number of other places between it and the apex where it could be marked: at $1/2a$ or at $1/4a$ or at $1/8a$ . . . Because the series is continuous, there is no "first place" which must enter the water first. The apex itself is not that "first place" since it is the triangle's boundary and marks where the triangle is not yet in the water.

Peirce suggests that we think of the triangle as representing cognition and of the water as representing what is distinct from cognition. Thus, when the apex itself is at the water's surface, there is as yet no cognition. Now, let each line traced by the water on the immersed triangle represent a cognition, and let those lines nearer the apex represent cognitions which determine cognitions
represented by lines further up the triangle. It is clear, then, that although every cognition is determined by one prior to it, there is no first cognition, that is, one which itself is not so determined.

Peirce contends, therefore, that one can conceive, without contradiction, of every cognition’s being determined by another, although the whole process had a beginning in time. The term “first cognition” or “first principle” cannot mean “a cognition not determined by another” or “a premise which is not itself a conclusion.” Whatever is to ground, or be the foundation of, cognition must be other than the “first principles” as abstractly conceived by at least some of the tradition.

It is here, I think, that the late Canadian philosopher Bernard Lonergan has something to offer Peirce. Lonergan holds substantially the same position as Peirce does with regard to the inferential and mediated character of all human knowing.15 His helpful proposal is that what grounds the process of cognition (continuous as it is) is intelligence in act. The “foundation” of knowing is not itself an abstract knowing, but rather a concrete seizing of intelligence in action by the intelligent knowing agent. “First principles” (Identity, Contradiction, etc.) as abstract formulas are mere tautologies which, for all we know, have no truth value for anything outside the world of lexigraphical meaning. They are what Lonergan calls “analytic propositions.” They are principles only insofar as they are grasped as existentially instantiated, and this is possible only in the concrete act of knowing. It is in the concrete act of knowing that their evidence is grasped as sufficient, that is, they are recognized as operating here and now because whatever be the conditions of their operation, they are fulfilled here and now. If the evidence is challenged, the response is to point out a performatory (not merely a logical) contradiction if such evidence is rejected. To challenge and reject the first principles as existentially instantiated in any concrete act of knowing itself requires a concrete act of knowing which instantiates the principles. For if the challenge were truly telling, it would bring intelligent acts to a stop and reduce everyone to silence. To put it another way: the very act of challenging the evidence produces the same evidence again. Notice that this response itself is an inference and is determined by another act of cognition. These concrete principles grasped in the act of knowing are the conditions of possibility of the act, not abstractly and tauto-
logically enumerated, but grasped as fulfilled in the act of knowing itself. Hence, they are *a priori* but not outside the conscious appropriation of the act of knowing. They are *transcendental*, not in the Kantian sense of an object ever beyond the knowing experience, but in the sense of the immanent structure of every act of knowing.

I would like to conclude by returning to the three ideas central to Peirce’s theory of knowing as continuous inference. The three central ideas are: the notion of truth, the notion of reality, and the notion of community.

Peirce adds to the traditional notion of truth (what is the case independently of what any finite knower may think) a heuristic notion of truth as that upon which the community of inquirers will agree in the long run. This emphasizes the search for truth rather than its possession (although it does not deny the latter). It introduces an historical and existential dimension which characterizes what actually goes on within the scientific community. Lonergan recognizes this implicitly when he points out that the canons of scientific method leave open the question of further relevant issues and thus make scientific inquiry a fallible and therefore indefinite quest.

Peirce’s account of reality explicitly endorses the scholastic insight into truth and reality as co-extensive. There is nothing that cannot be known, for if there were, it would be inexplicable and so would block the road to inquiry. This is operative in Lonergan’s notion of metaphysics as heuristic and of being as whatever is or can be known. This insight is at the heart of both Lonergan’s and Peirce’s argument for God.

Finally, Peirce’s account of truth and of reality requires the explicit recognition of the role of the community. This refers not just to any group of people but to the community of inquirers. Nor is this community merely *a de facto* requirement for arriving at the truth about reality. It is a necessary condition for the enterprise even to begin. This need for a community of inquirers, by the way, does not mean that there must be actually an endless community of researchers. All that is required is that the possibility of an endless community of researchers be real. As long as the possibility is real, the condition is fulfilled even if as a matter of fact the community destroys itself or is destroyed.

I would suggest that the essential role of the community in
Peirce's understanding of human inquiry rejoins Lonergan's insistence on the need for a series of personal conversions in order that there be any members of such a community dedicated to searching for the truth.\(^{17}\) This includes what for Lonergan is the final and perhaps most important conversion, "falling in love." Peirce indeed could have written the following: "When he pronounces a project worthwhile, a man moves beyond consideration of all merely personal satisfactions and interests, tastes and preferences. He is acknowledging objective values and taking the first step towards authentic human existence."\(^{18}\)

Much of what Peirce proposed may be of real help in overcoming the seeming bankruptcy of contemporary thought by shifting it away from the paralyzing self-doubt of skepticism. I would like this essay to be a small contribution to that project.

**Notes**


4. Colapietro, *Peirce’s Approach to the Self*, pp. 61–65. See also Peirce’s: “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” 1868 (5.264–314); Responses to James, ca. 1891 (8.81–82); MS. from ca. 1892 (7.565ff.); “Detached Ideas on Topics of Vital Importance,” 1898 (1.616–676).


6. Ibid., p. 11.


8. In 1.409–416 Peirce sums up his “guess at the riddle” and shows that his system of categories is the key to his answer.

9. One such act/potency scheme looks like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT</th>
<th>POTENCY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(principle of perfection)</td>
<td>(principle of limitation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Existence</strong></td>
<td>esse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Essence</strong></td>
<td>substantial form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity</strong></td>
<td>accident</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ORDER OF

essence  prime matter  substance


11. See, for example, Peirce’s articles of 1868 published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (1.213–357).


13. Ibid.


17. See, for example, Lonergan, “Theology in Its New Context,” *Sec-
To show that Peirce in effect requires the same sort of thing of his searchers after truth would require a study of Peirce’s understanding of the Normative Sciences and how they are interdependent and hierarchically ordered.