

PEIRCE AS AN INTERESTING FAILURE?

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In this short presentation, I have only a brief time to sketch some variations of a theme that seems to have motivated much of the scholarship on Peirce. This theme can be expressed as a positive answer to the question posed in the title of this paper. After describing several ways in which some scholars have conceived Peirce to be an interesting failure, I shall mention several changes in methods and assumptions that I recommend as improved tools for approaching an understanding of Peirce's work. I suggest that if these tools are used, we may find, contrary to what many have claimed, that Peirce was an interesting success, and that the quality of his philosophy, as it has survived for us to study, is equal to that of the highest rank in human history.

A very popular way of suggesting that Peirce was an interesting failure is really nothing more than a bold *ad hominem* appeal, and it can take various forms. A typical procedure in this category is to recite certain supposed oddities about Peirce's life, sometimes without any supporting evidence whatsoever (unsubstantiated legends are not evidence), with the suggestion being that such a supposedly strange person must have an equally strange philosophy. Last year, a distinguished university in the United States held a symposium in commemoration of Peirce. It seemed a ceremonial routine for most of the speakers to begin their presentation with a comment about some supposed or real oddity in Peirce's personal life. This is perhaps the most disappointing way in which some scholars have suggested that Peirce was a failure, for any college freshman student of logic knows that such tactics violate intellectual ethics. Moreover, if one reviews the history of philosophy, one will find among philosophers a wide range of personality types, many of which might be regarded by the populace at large as being odd, even queer. But none of these data concerning popular reactions to personalities of philosophers, no matter how true as reactions, are at all relevant for studying philosophical matters. Naturally I do not advocate covering up any facts about Peirce's life, or the life of any great intellectual figure. However, let us agree to combat the apparently powerful tendency to place Peirce's philosophy within a frame delineated by ideas of the general populace concerning presumed normal personality configurations. Each of us, as practicing philosophers, can probably remember occasions in which non-philosophers viewed a philosopher's behavior as strange. It should be no surprise, then, that a great philosopher such as Peirce should be described by his contemporaries as odd. If Peirce had not been thought to be odd, we might even be led to think that to be a piece of evidence for a lack of greatness.

A second factor which often leads scholars to conclude that Peirce failed in a particular instance concerns bibliographic and editorial matters. Most of the secondary scholarship on Peirce to date has been based solely upon the *Collected Papers*. At one point, this was an acceptable approach, for this collection was about all that was generally available. However, since the publication in 1967 of the Harvard microfilm set and Robin's *Catalogue*, this procedure has become obsolete. Therefore, a sound rule to follow now in assessing contemporary scholarship is to consider as incomplete any work that does not take into account this published microfilm of Peirce's manuscripts, or the manuscripts themselves. Of course, other materials will soon be available, and these will be "required reading" when they are published. I am referring to the comprehensive edition of Peirce's work now under preparation at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis, to the edition of Peirce's mathematical writings now appearing with Mouton Publishers at The Hague, to the edition of Peirce's contributions to *The Nation* that is partly printed and partly yet in press, and to the microfiche edition of Peirce's published works that will include a comprehensive bibliography; the last two are projects of the Institute for Studies in Pragmaticism. When these materials have been made available for inspection, the *Collected Papers* will be seen to be appropriately redescribable as the Very Selected Papers. The arrangement of the *Collected Papers* has contributed to a related way of seeing Peirce as a failure: namely, the often heard claim that Peirce is "fragmentary." In a good many cases, the fragmentary quality lies in the manner in which the editors of the *Collected Papers* separated works that were wholes in their original form, usually in order to make content conform to an editor's view of how Peirce's work should be organized. This suggests that Peirce even failed in organizing his own work, a position that is totally false, at least in terms of my own experience in studying his manuscripts.

Another tendency is to see Peirce's work in terms of what is happening in the consciousness of an interpreter. There are many subcategories in this class, so I can mention only a few. First, it is popular to say that Peirce was inconsistent on particular important points. Of course, no human philosophical system is likely to be perfectly consistent, and certainly no human being has that quality; but it is reasonable to expect and to hope for some consistency in major points of a philosophical enterprise. I suggest that in many instances the supposed inconsistency in Peirce may actually be a reflection of a difficulty in the mind of the interpreter. I shall not pause to offer examples of this here; I only urge you to keep this suggestion in mind in the future. By the way, such supposed inconsistencies are often related to my previous point, exclusive reliance on the *Collected Papers*.

Because interpreters naturally have philosophical views of their own, another common subcategory in this class can be described as a tendency to see Peirce in terms of such views. Thus, it has been fashionable in some circles to understand Peirce as an early logical positivist—yet we have his own

word that he was not a positivist, but an objective idealist, perhaps best described as a semiotic idealist. Or, formalists in logic have tried to perceive Peirce as also being a formalist. But he was not. In cases such as these, the typical result is that Peirce is said to have failed just to the extent that his views depart from those of his interpreters. This problem can be minimized if one does the utmost to understand the intellectual milieu of Peirce's time and to understand the philosophic traditions he admired and studied. It is helpful also if one takes Peirce at his word that he was that now unfashionable horror, an idealist. I should mention one other misinterpretative technique in this general class, which is often represented in claims that Peirce was a precursor of some feature of the intellectual landscape supposedly now well understood. Naturally, in many cases this kind of claim is relevant and useful, but it can be carried to an extreme such that 'precursor' gets translated as "dabbler."

Perhaps because the current fashion for practicing philosophy is to proceed in a "piecemeal" manner, it has become a rather common practice to "compartmentalize" Peirce's work. That is, one practicing this tactic may be interested only in Peirce's metaphysics or his semiotic, and hence think that it would be appropriate to consider just such supposed parts of his work thought to be relevant. However, Peirce was not a piecemeal philosopher—he was a philosopher. That means that he was working on, or more likely, had completed, a means for making the totality of human life in the universe more intelligible. And in doing so, it was his constant practice to relate things which we might, with our colored spectacles, see as diverse and unrelated. So, in Peirce's writings one finds no absolute or watertight compartments. For example, much material relevant to modern day students of semiotic can be found in what at first glance appear to be strictly mathematical writings. Or, discussions of common sense contain important insights on the "logic of indeterminacy." Therefore, Peirce's work, as has always been the case traditionally in philosophy, must be understood as an integrated attempt to solve the great riddle. The "piecemeal" approach to Peirce can take another significant form. That is, because it is now respectable to conceive of philosophy as a profession separate from others such as physics or mathematics, one can likewise consider Peirce as a multiprofessional man, and then conclude from this that one as philosopher ought to be able to ignore all of Peirce's nonphilosophical professions. Again, it seems that Peirce did not take this attitude. So, one at least ought to offer arguments against that view if its opposite is to be adopted as a principle for studying Peirce.

The final point I wish to mention goes beyond Peirce's writings, whether they were those published during his lifetime or afterward, whether in print or microform. I am referring to that part of his philosophy that was expressed in his actions and in his life. This too is something that is often overlooked in philosophy in general in our time, not simply in attempting to interpret Peirce correctly. One of the clearest examples of this tendency is

associated with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Wittgenstein's insistence that the most important part of the *Tractatus* was the part that was not written down was overlooked or ignored until recently. And what might that unwritten part be? Among other things, it might include Wittgenstein's life and actions as expressed in the extreme devotion to the spirit of pure philosophical inquiry which was required to produce that work under extremely trying conditions of warfare and personal deprivation. Another part might be the quality of experiences that must be associated with production of such kinds of work. Here I am thinking of the "highs" and "lows" associated with a life of intellectual creativity and originality. And there is also the change in the quality of one's day to day life in one's relations with other human beings in matters not at all directly connected with the practice of *writing* philosophy. It is abundantly clear that Peirce possessed these kinds of attributes—this can be most easily inferred from his manuscripts, especially those associated with the later part of his life. Thus, I think it fair to claim that both Peirce and Wittgenstein were masters of technical philosophy, yet both were masters in an older, and I would say more important, sense of that word.

I have sometimes been scolded for being (supposedly) a Peirce "purist," or a "nostalgia buff," or one who thinks that Peirce could do no wrong. I hold none of those positions. I simply wish to insist upon doing away with a certain general way of studying Peirce that unfortunately has been far too popular. That method is the one that begins with an assumption that Peirce was unsuccessful, and then proceeds to offer what evidence lies conveniently at hand for that claim. I advocate an objective beginning with Peirce, wondering what he was proposing and whether he was successful, and trying to answer these kinds of questions objectively in light of Peirce's *complete* literary corpus (not simply by using a few selected essays from a convenient popular student edition).

I conclude this sketch by observing that Peirce scholarship is just now beginning. This is especially true if the kinds of misinterpretative techniques I have been mentioning are put aside in favor of more defensible principles of interpretation of his work. Much past scholarship then, can be seen as an instructive prelude, although often in a negative sense, toward the period, which is just now dawning, in which the foundational scholarly apparatus for Peirce's works will be at last reasonably complete and dependable, and also will be widely disseminated in forms that are readily useful and available. When the task of preparing these materials is completed; when our editions, collections, and bibliographies have at last reached a convenient and dependable state, then let us consider carefully the principles by which we shall objectively interpret this huge mass of material. If we develop these principles wisely and then diligently apply them, I am confident that within a few years it will become abundantly clear to everyone that Peirce is an internationally significant philosopher of the equal rank of Plato or Kant. Thus, you see, I predict that soon Peirce will be recognized by most persons of the philosophic spirit as being a very interesting success.