

Frontiers in American Philosophy

VOLUME II

Edited by Robert W. Burch
and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr.

Texas A&M University Press
College Station



Pragmatism Is an Existentialism?

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"You misspelled part of your title," said a loyal and diligent proofreader. "It's pragmatism."

So one day when I was doing nothing in particular in the library I looked for the word in the 1958 edition of Webster's unabridged dictionary. Here is what I found on page 1938: "Pragmatism. The philosophic doctrine of C. S. Peirce; adopted by Peirce to distinguish his philosophy from other forms of pragmatism."¹

Where and when did he adopt the strange word? It happened in 1905, in an article for *The Monist* entitled "What Pragmatism Is."² There Peirce recalled his introduction of pragmatism in the Metaphysical Club at Cambridge in the 1870s. Peirce had virtually lived in a laboratory since age six. So, it was an experimentalist's theory "that a *conception*, that is, the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life; so that, since obviously nothing that might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct, if one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and *there is absolutely nothing more in it*."³

That, of course, is a version of the pragmatic maxim—that is, the pragmatic maxim—one of the jewels of American technical philosophy, a way of finding the meanings of concepts. A common erroneous tendency is to regard this maxim as an early form of logical empiricism, erroneous because logical empiricism is inconsistent with Peircean realism and his notion of open inquiry, not to mention being inconsistent with semiotic. Moreover, Peirce explicitly denied that it was a kind of positivism.⁴ Perhaps that is why, if our eyes are lifted toward the more human elements of those remarks, we can detect a statement by a man struggling through the cosmos, as we all must do—to the effect that life is an experiment, with nothing guaranteed in advance and no sure path except to continue experimenting, correcting our errors as best we can as we push toward future interpretations. That is hardly the stance of a foundationalist, whether of the Cartesian or sense-datum variety.

Peirce is often understood only as a technician in philosophy. But consider that passage from a wider perspective. Doesn't the phrase *finding the intellectual purport of conceptions*, which is the utility of Peirce's maxim, begin to bring to mind the possibility that alongside words like "argument" or "reality" he is also thinking of the intellectual purport of "happiness" or "community" or "person"?

Why did he adopt the strange term? In the interval since the public announcement of the philosophical conception of "pragmatism" in a lecture by William James in 1898,⁵ until Peirce's article in 1905, multiple versions of "what pragmatism is" had appeared in the United States and elsewhere. The situation was about as varied then as it is now. Now, as then, it is difficult to keep track of all the pragmatists, especially when the list contains persons as diverse as Henry Kissinger, Richard Rorty, or Lee Iacocca. One is tempted to observe that pragmatism has become too successful. Peirce reflected that the situation had become so bad that his brat "pragmatism" was even beginning to appear in literary journals, "where it gets abused in the merciless way that words have to expect when they fall into literary clutches."⁶ Peirce then made a radical decision: "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 kidnapers."⁷

This result appeased my proofreader. But in the course of sifting the foregoing material, certain other questions came to me. Why, more than eighty years later, is this name for Peirce's work still so little used? Surely not because it is ugly, or that Edwardian kidnapers have a stronger stomach than their contemporary comrades—which is to say that many more ugly bastards have been kidnapped since 1905. Moreover, why is Peirce's work, by any name, still less well known today and less used now, even by those among us who are identified as pragmatists? Why are philosophers and academicians today, similar to those of 1905, likely to know nothing of pragmaticism, the overall philosophical doctrine of C. S. Peirce, the founder of pragmatism as a philosophic movement?

I can't give complete answers in this short compass. Some evidence relevant to these issues is already generally available. But I can offer a hypothesis, which, if correct, will be relevant.

Abruptly expressed, it has occurred to me that pragmaticism is an existentialism. If that were true, because existentialism is rather out of fashion among the majority of philosophically inclined intellectuals in North America, it would tend to answer my questions about pragmaticism and its relative nonabsorption into American and English intellectual life. It would also tend to explain the rather curious fact that Peirce is more generally appreciated in Europe than in his native Massachusetts. Behold, the fate of prophets!

If pragmaticism is an existentialism, there should be some recognizable consequences of that claim. At least we ought to be able to find some parallels with some of the existentialist thinkers. But the first problem encountered there is that the existentialists are about as varied as the pragmatists! Probably the best I can do here is to select some writers who are generally acknowledged as good representatives of existentialist tendencies. I will use an inductive sample of two: Walker Percy and Jean-Paul Sartre. And I limit the sampling to just a few points.

One general character in common between the existentialists and Peirce is recognition of the reality of persons: acting, choosing, suffering, living, searching, interpreting, dying beings. This factor in Peirce's thought sometimes is obscured by his proper emphasis upon community and his disgust with Cartesian subjectivism *in science*. But there is a strong, not well-known, personalist strain in Peirce's general system (which is wider than his account of science and philosophy). You will have to accept my promissory note for a defense of that claim on another occasion.

To descend to more particular similarities, we might first notice that when we initially come to realize our personhood, we find that we are in a *world*, as Percy phrases it,⁸ as opposed to just an *environment*. An environment, in his sense, is a setting in which only efficient causal relations are to be found. A world, on the other hand, along with environmental factors, also includes significance, meaning, interpretation, understanding, and selves. These additional factors Percy places under the heading of triadic behavior, or sign use. Percy's discovery was that such triadic relations cannot be reduced to conglomerates of dyadic relations. Or, worlds are not reducible to environments. In this point Percy is actually an independent rediscoverer of the almost identical principle noticed by Peirce about 1866.⁹ I have traced aspects of these two parallel discoveries elsewhere in considerable detail.¹⁰ It is a major confirmation of my thesis that Dr. Percy, after a period of intense immersion in the literature of existentialism, rediscovered this point independently. Only later did he come to realize that Peirce had worked it out almost a century earlier.¹¹ That the two thinkers are so close on this fundamental point is a major confirmation, and hence perhaps the principal point of comparison that tends to support pragmaticism's really being an existentialism.

This world of triadic phenomena, in which we first come to recognize ourselves, has a fundamental place in Peirce's late work. I think that there is only a terminological difference between it and related topics in existentialism. He referred to it as "common sense." All of his mature philosophical elaborations arise from his belief that the world of common sense is a fundamental guide to all philosophizing, a process he understood as only a task of clarifying in a controlled way what in a vague form we already accept as residents of the common-sense world. There is also much in Peirce's semiotic that can be brought forth to bolster the notion of a world (but not today).

The very definition of existentialism can be seen as a way of claiming this same point. My favorite example of this is from Sartre.¹²

What [the existentialists] have in common is simply the fact that *existence* comes before *essence*—or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective. . . .

There is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality. What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus there is no human nature.

This passage provides the opportunity for an interesting experiment. Suppose we rewrote it using the terminology of pragmatism? Would we get something that the existentialists would accept, at least those who savvy Peirce's lingo? "What do we mean by saying that man's reality comes before man's nature or significance? We mean that first of all the human mind acquires the power of interpretation, then begins to engage in interpretation, including interpretation of self. Thus a person will be what his or her interpretation of self creates. There is no a priori human nature: yet there is an 'image of man' which is but the collective consequence of many individual instances of interpretive actions, or *semeioses*."

That is, a pragmatist would urge that Sartre could have made his point more accurately by means of Peirce's existence/reality distinction. Instead of "existence precedes essence," it would have been more accurate to explain that "the reality of the process of semiosis precedes any actual interpretations." In other words, for Peirce, existentialists might be better identified as "realist-existentialists." Peirce might have agreed with Sartre that man is nothing, in the sense of "no thing" but could have gone on to elaborate that not being a thing (not being a *res cogitans*, or just a collection of banging, wiggling molecules), man is a process of semiosis or system of relations, the central feature of which is the action of interpreting. This is the upshot of Peirce's essay, "Man's Glassy Essence," the title referring to our mirror-like essence.¹³ By this allegory of mirrors I take it that Peirce was imagining one of us looking in a mirror and thinking, "That is me." That is to say that the essence of a self is that it interprets, even itself, and that the very reality of a self is as a continuing process of interpretation and self-interpretation.

Existentialists of all varieties are widely known for their emphasis upon human freedom. There are few clear statements in Peirce about that topic. However, consider this one:¹⁴ "My account of the facts you will observe leaves a man at full liberty, no matter if we grant all that the necessitarians ask."

This infrequency of comment on the subject is, I believe, somewhat mis-

leading. Peirce is well-known as an exponent of interpretation. I think this is but a somewhat logically oriented way of asserting the same point for which Sartre, for instance, is widely known—the claim that man is “condemned to be free.” There are occasions in Sartre’s prose when for him to continue to talk of choosing causes reader nonresonance, leading one to wish that he would switch over to interpretation-talk, for his point would make more sense that way. For example, his dictum that “in choosing for myself, I choose for all mankind” would on the face of it be more plausible if it were, “In making an interpretation I am aiding in forming the idea or general image of humanity.”

In another location we can catch Sartre making the switch himself, for there he virtually accepted “interpret” as an explication of his sense of “choose.”¹⁵ “No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world. The Catholics will reply, ‘Oh, but they are!’ Very well; still, it is I myself, in every case, who have to interpret the signs.”

A bit later on the same page, Sartre made it clear that each of us bears full responsibility for the “decipherment of signs,” that each of us decides the meaning of our being through interpretation. Coming to knowledge of this brings with it the experience of one of those Sartrean emotions, “abandonment,” the feeling that we are inevitably separated from any a priori source that will create our person. An accompanying feeling is anguish, brought about through the realization that each of us and no other is responsible for the interpretations we make. One familiar with semiotic who reads these sentences in Sartre will find it difficult to escape the conclusion that Sartre’s enlarged conception of “choice” is very much more than likely equivalent to Peirce’s notion of “interpretation.” Thus, the slogan widely associated with Sartre can be restated in equivalent Peircean language: “We are condemned to interpret.”

For Peirce, the first move out of the world of common sense is a major person-forming choice—selection of a method of resolving doubt. In typical existentialist manner, he is aware that there is nothing guiding or forcing the choice of the objective or rational method versus any of the nonobjective or egocentric approaches (authority, tenacity, fashion). He described that choice, on which all his later intellectual work was based, in ringing prose that is reminiscent of the focus and tone of Sartre and Percy.¹⁶

Such are the advantages which the other methods of settling opinion have over scientific investigation. A man should consider well of them. . . . Upon such considerations he has to make his choice—a choice which is far more than the adoption of any intellectual opinion, which is one of the ruling decisions of his life, to which, when once made, he is bound to adhere. . . .

Yes the other methods do have their merits: a clear logical conscience does cost something—just as any virtue, just as all that we cherish, costs us dear. But we should not desire it to be otherwise. The genius of a man’s logical method should be loved and revered as his bride, whom he has chosen from all the

world. He need not condemn the others; on the contrary, he may honor them deeply, and in doing so he only honors her the more. But she is the one he has chosen, and he knows he was right in making that choice.

Which of the two concepts, "choice" or "interpret," is more encompassing? I can but guess now that the answer is "neither," that a more complete study would show that they are equivalent notions.

Let us end this exercise as we began it, by thinking of the maxim of pragmatism. Instead of being some vague precursor of the verification principle, Peirce stated on a number of occasions that it was but a corollary of the theory of signs, a corollary of semiotic, which is in effect a theory of interpretation. Presented in the semiotic mode, the pragmaticistic maxim might read in general that the meaning of a concept lies in future interpretations, in particular those interpretations on which we will be prepared to act. That suggests that it might be plausible for us to summarize our results by modifying a well-known philosophical graffittum:

To be is to interpret.
Peirce

To be is to do.
Sartre

Do be do be dooo.
Sinatra

Notes

1. *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1958).
2. Charles Sanders Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," *The Monist* 15 (1905).
3. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
4. Charles Sanders Peirce, "On the Natural Classification of Arguments," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 7 (1867): 283-84.
5. William James, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," *University Chronicle* 1 (1898): 287-310.
6. Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is," p. 165.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), pp. 97f.
9. Documented in Walker Percy, "The Delta Factor: How I Discovered the Delta Factor Sitting at My Desk One Summer Day in Louisiana in the 1950's Thinking about an Event in the Life of Helen Keller on Another Summer Day in Alabama in 1887"; reprinted in Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer*

Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975), pp. 3–45.

10. See Kenneth Laine Ketner, "Peirce's 'Most Lucid and Interesting Paper': An Introduction to Cenopythagoreanism," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1987): 375–92.

11. For example, in Charles Sanders Peirce, "On a New List of Categories," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 7 (1867): 287–98; Charles Sanders Peirce, "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2 (1868): 103–14; Charles Sanders Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2 (1868): 140–57.

12. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1956), pp. 289–90.

13. Charles Sanders Peirce, "Man's Glassy Essence," *The Monist* 3 (1892): 1–22.

14. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce," Department of Philosophy, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS. 448:25.

15. Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," p. 298.

16. Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (1877): 14.