

The Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce  
Lecture 1  
Introduction; Survey of the Idea of “Pragmatism”

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## 1 Peirce the Man and the Polymath

Personally:

1. born in 1839, died in 1914
2. he was the son of perhaps the most eminent and influential 19th Century American mathematician, born to an elite, wealthy and privileged Boston Brahmin family; he was handsome and charming, by all accounts, and easily made friends in places both high and low; he then spent the rest of his life alienating most of them

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3. starting at age 17, he spent 2 years slowly working his way through Kant's three Critiques (in German—so he had a high pain tolerance), which clearly shaped much of his philosophical thinking, early and late; he could as well read ancient Greek, Latin (both classical and scholastic), and French fluently, and began reading widely from other philosophical traditions and time periods, especially the scholastic debates of the Middle Ages
4. he attended Harvard for his BA and his MSc in chemistry
5. he was cantankerous and difficult, exacerbated by a severe case of trigeminal neuralgia, and severe mood swings that would probably today be diagnosed as bipolar disorder type 1;<sup>1</sup> as was common in those days, he had recourse to ether, opium and cocaine to treat his ailments; while almost certainly fun, this probably did little to improve his social habits
6. his romantic life was scandalous by the mores of the day, including his shacking up with a woman, who would eventually become his second wife, while still married to his first; this, along with his acerbic personality, contributed strongly to his lifelong failure to secure permanent academic employment
7. he began his professional career as an experimental chemist, and subsequently worked in many different scientific capacities over a few decades (almost all experimental in nature), primarily at the United States Coast Survey and its successor the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey (itself one of the forerunners of the contemporary National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration)
8. he was appointed (non-tenured) lecturer at Johns Hopkins in 1879, and was dismissed in 1884 as a direct result of his personal scandals; numerous subsequent attempts by William James to have him appointed at Harvard were blocked for the same reason, as well as by the fact that his personal and professional nemesis Simon Newcomb (the doyen of late 19th Century astronomy) was ever on the appointments committee; and Harvard's president from 1869 to 1909, Charles William Eliot, was no friend of Peirce's either, having developed an animosity for him in the days when he lectured to Peirce in his BA courses<sup>2</sup>
9. at one point, he was a fugitive in New York City because of an outstanding warrant on an assault charge—which is either awesome or disappointing, depending on your point of view
10. he spent the last two decades of his life in severe poverty, subsisting on the benefaction and charity of his brother, his neighbors, a local baker, and a few close friends such as William James

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1. As his biographer Brent (1998) observed:

On the manic side he exhibited driven, paranoid, and impulsive actions; extreme insomnia; manic grandiosity and visionary expansiveness; hypersexuality; extraordinary energy; and irrational financial dealings, including compulsive extravagance and disastrous investments. On the depressive side, he exhibited severely melancholic or depressive states characterized by suicidal feelings or flatness of mood, which were accompanied by inertness of mind, inability to feel emotion, and an unbearable sense of futility.

In sum, probably a good guy to have at parties, perhaps not whom you want to watch your children.

2. So let this be a warning: don't be wantonly obnoxious to your professors; you never know when they will hold power over your career.

He made fundamental contributions to:

1. every branch of philosophy, including pragmatism (which he founded, as a philosophical school of thought)
2. mathematical logic, which he co-founded, independently of and contemporaneously with, Frege, developing a theory of first- and second-order quantification, including probably the first axiomatic set theory, pre-dating Zermelo by about 2 decades; he also developed a consistent and powerful theory of infinite cardinals and their arithmetic 2 decades before Cantor, and without the benefit of Bolzano's work; I could go on for a while in this vein, but suffice it to say that, by common acclaim, he is considered the greatest logical bad-ass of the 19th Century, and one of the greatest of all time
3. semiotics (which he co-founded, along with Saussure)
4. mathematics, statistics, chemistry, optics, astronomy, metrology (introducing blinded, controlled randomized experiments decades before Fisher), electrical engineering (he was the first to note that Boolean operations could be performed by electrical switches, pre-dating Shannon by 50 years), empirical psychology, and geodesy (the U.S. National Geodetic Survey and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the USA have erected three monuments honoring Peirce)
5. his published work, in all fields, technical and popular, comes to over 12,000 pages; the majority of his work (over 80,000 pages) is unpublished, consisting of thousands of hand-written manuscripts, note and letters in varying degrees of completeness; The Peirce Edition Project at Indiana University, started in 1975, is working on collecting the important of these into a set of volumes, projected to be over 30 by the end, of which currently 8 have been published (covering the years 1857–1892)

## 2 Peirce's Work in Philosophy

1. spans every field of philosophy, including mathematical logic
2. we will look at very few of the unpublished manuscripts, because we are (not yet) hard-core Peirce scholars
3. he wrote on so many topics, over so many years, producing such an enormous mass of material, that it is difficult—perhaps even misguided—to try to isolate and identify a fixed set of central themes and ideas, much more unifying or foundational ones
4. nonetheless, there are themes and ideas that recur continually in every stage of his career in his writings on almost every major philosophical topic, sometimes with more and sometimes with less emphasis and centrality, their content and form ever evolving; we shall explore several of these:
  - a. semiosis
  - b. pragmatism

- c. the characteristic forms of rational argumentation (deduction, induction, and abduction)
  - d. the normative nature of thought and logic
  - e. the triadic nature of mind and world
5. Peirce was primarily a scientist, and primarily an experimental one at that, as determined both by self-conception and by time and energy spent in his professional life; we cannot understand his philosophical thought without appreciating this fact
  6. his development of pragmatism as a philosophical world-view testifies to that fact; because almost all of his other thought, at one time or another, influenced his development of pragmatism, and vice-versa, we will begin the course by trying to understand one of Peirce's mature attempts to articulate the view

### 3 “What Pragmatism Is”

In this section of the lecture, we will discuss the essay “What Pragmatism Is” (Peirce 1905b). In brief, Peirce's idea of “pragmatism” is that meaning is exhausted by the possible practical effects of whatever is at issue. As such, it is both a normative theory of semantics and a regulative philosophical methodology. As we shall see, this innocuous seeming gloss hides a wealth of questions to ponder and explore. I will raise more questions than I answer here; my intent is to introduce and begin to illuminate Peirce's thought through the questions (as I see them) that we must try to answer in order to fully grasp it rather than through a didactic iteration of expository claims. The essay is useful for this purpose, as it introduces, even if only in passing, almost all the philosophical themes and ideas Peirce struggled with throughout his life.

A quick outline of the essay to begin:

1. introduction (pp. 331–333)
2. intermezzo on nomenclature (pp. 333–335)
3. propædæutic to the definition of pragmaticism, on thought and habit (pp. 335–338)
4. exposition of pragmaticism, as call and response (pp. 338–344)
5. concluding remarks on the archetypical Peircean themes of continuity and thirdness (pp. 344–345)

Now more detailed notes:

#### **introduction (pp. 331–333)**

1. he begins with a description of a type of human he calls the ‘experimentalist’ (p. 332):
 

... you will find that whatever assertion you may make to [the typical experimentalist], he will either understand as meaning that if a given prescription for an experiment ever can be and ever is carried out in act, an experience of a given description will result, or else he will see no sense at all in what you say.

the experimentalist, thus, is characterized by the notions of “*experiment*” and “*experience*”, which, we shall see, are crucial to Peirce’s thought—indeed, as he explicitly remarks, he is *exemplifying* the type in writing the essay<sup>3</sup> (p. 332)

2. the experimentalist is thus “color-blind” to “ontological meaning” that goes beyond the possible objects of experience
3. using this as the basis for formulating a philosophical theory, Peirce proposes the following as the essence of *pragmatism* (p. 332, emphasizes his):

[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*.

4. let us pause to raise, and prepare to reflect on, several issues and questions that all this immediately raises:
  - a. what, for Peirce, is the status of these claims about the experimentalist? really just simple, basic psychological generalization “ideally [!] constructed upon a basis of observation”? if so, how can he base a philosophical position on them, or even reliably use them even if only for motivation of such a position? does that give us a clue about how he conceives of philosophy in general? if not, then what? is it perhaps that, so far in human history, the scientific experimentalist has provided us with the most secure and the deepest fund of knowledge, and so we should trust the mental construction and the correlative epistemic processes typical of the production of such knowledge?
  - b. he is characterizing “conception”, *viz.*, the *action* of conceiving or the state of performing that action, *not* “concept”, which is either the result or the vehicle of the act of conception
  - c. he characterizes here only the *rational* “purport” of an expression of the conception; this seems to leave open the possibility of other kinds of “purport” that expressions may have
  - d. what can it mean for the “purport” of an “expression” to have a bearing upon the conduct of life? how can the meaning of expressions (construed, presumably, broadly) shape or guide action?
  - e. the use of ‘conceivable’ in characterizing the idea of “conception”: a problematic circularity? what is the modality here, in the universal quantifier “all conceivable”: causal, metaphysical, logical, epistemic? that which, as Aristotle would have said, is required to “bring about the good” (which we will call ‘beneficent modality’, for lack of a better term)? if epistemic, as seems likely at least in part, then is it qualified by the present, actual epistemic state of humans, or is it an ideal “convergence to the truth in the long run” epistemic possibility? if beneficent, which, as we shall see, also seems to be at least in part likely, then is it the good of humans as they are now or as they would be in a perfected state (*e.g.*, the ideal epistemic state adverted to in the previous question)?

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3. It is useful to compare Nietzsche’s exhortation “Versuchen wir’s!” (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*), proclaimed with regard to experimentation with different styles of life as the basis for a healthy human individual living in a healthy society.

- f. recall that Peirce characterized the outcome of an experiment by the *experience* that results from it—Peirce’s notion of “experience” is a difficult one, and much hinges on determining exactly what he means by it; at a minimum, it involves the idea that the significance of each human’s cognition and activity lies in the fact that it is embedded in a larger web of socially constitutive structures and processes; this gives a clue to how to begin to approach the question raised above: what can it mean for the “purport” of an “expression” to have a bearing upon the conduct of life, in so far as language is one of the strongest constituents of the web’s infrastructure?
- g. in what sense is it “obvious” that “nothing that might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct”? should we perhaps understand the claim as implicit, correlative definitions of “result from experiment” and “have a direct bearing on conduct”? or are there prior meanings of these ideas that Peirce is calling upon?
- h. what does it mean to “affirm or deny a concept”? usually, it is propositions that are affirmed or denied—does he mean to affirm or deny a proposition representing, say, the application of the concept to a particular entity?

#### intermezzo on nomenclature (pp. 333–335)

- 1. why interrupt the flow of discursus with remarks on a seemingly irrelevant, or at least trivial, topic? because it is not trivial at all. . .
- 2. the goal: to bring philosophy into that condition of collegial and mutually beneficial support, eventuating in the production of secure and deep knowledge, enjoyed by the natural sciences; one necessary condition (p. 333, Peirce’s emphasis):<sup>4</sup>

a suitable technical nomenclature, whose every term has a single definite meaning universally accepted among students of the subject, and whose vocables have no such sweetness or charms as might tempt loose writers to abuse them. . . . [T]he only way in which the requisite unanimity and requisite ruptures with individual habits and preferences can be brought about is so to shape the canons of terminology that they shall gain the support of *moral principle* and of every man’s sense of decency; and. . . he who introduces a new conception into philosophy is under an obligation to invent acceptable terms to express it. . .

- 3. again, this compressed passage is pregnant with important questions and issues:
  - a. what picture of cognition does Peirce have, that, absent the conscious attempt to derail it, vocabulary can so harness its process by force of habitual use as to steer it inevitably into sloppiness and carelessness, conducing to our thoughtless extension of established word usage to cover new cases the words may not be suitable for, or at least, in so doing, to efface real distinctions that ought to be kept clearly in view?<sup>5</sup>

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4. Compare “that hope which so signally characterized our predecessors earlier in this century [*viz.*, the Logical Empiricists in the 20th Century]: the hope for a cumulative and progressive philosophy, to the advance of which many workers would contribute in collaboration among contemporaries and development by successors” (Stein 1994). Needless to say, the leading Logical Empiricists and their close kin (Carnap, Schlick, Neurath, Frank, Nagel, Reichenbach, Popper, . . .) deeply admired Peirce.

5. As evidence that Peirce may be on to something important, see the remarks in Stein (1967, pp. 190–193),

- b. intellectual progress and the cognitive processes whereby we bring it about, including the work we must do to prevent habit from inhibiting their proper functioning, are *moral* matters; or at least are matters appropriately amenable to guidance by moral principle—what does that say about Peirce’s picture of scientific reasoning in particular, and cognition in general?
  - c. an invented term must be “acceptable” (and, as later proposed, “suitable”)—as we shall see later in the course, in Peirce’s picture of semiosis the relation between sign and signifier is *not* an arbitrary one<sup>6</sup>
4. p. 335: “From this original form [*i.e.*, Peirce’s original conception of pragmatism,] every truth that follows from any of the other forms can be deduced, while some errors can be avoided into which other pragmatists have fallen.” Perhaps it is best here to recall the chapter headings of Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* (and Nietzsche’s tendency to sly self-mockery), and Goodman’s proof that *P* (<http://consc.net/misc/proofs.html>).

#### propædæutic to the definition of pragmatism, on thought and habit (pp. 335–338)

- 1. why is the “capital merit” of his original formulation that “it more readily connects itself with a critical proof of its truth” (p. 335), and not that it admits more and more powerful conceivable experimental outcomes? what is the role and status of such a “critical proof” in the system of pragmatism itself?
- 2. the impossibility of radical doubt (p. 336),<sup>7</sup> and the correlative observation that philosophy must be carried out starting from the state of mind we actually are in, not in one that we try to imagine ourselves as in, have the following consequence (p. 336): “that which you do not at all doubt, you must and do regard as infallible, absolute truth”
  - a. be clear on what is being claimed: not that it *is* absolute truth, but rather that one must *regard* it as such—so one can, presumably, step back and observe this both about oneself and about any of the things one does not at all doubt, and poke at and prod it, and question it, but not, it seems, doubt it
  - b. again, therefore, we must ask: what is the modal force of the “must”? causal, metaphysical, logical, epistemic, beneficent? is this, as it may appear, a case of “ought implies is”? is this the same modality as we previously encountered?<sup>8</sup>

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to the effect that the “loose and uncontrolled manipulation of verbal distinctions” committed by philosophers and historians in their treatments of Newton’s more philosophical passages led to the abusive misunderstanding of his work for much of the 20th Century.

6. His position can be favorably compared to that of Plato in *Cratylus*—which is *prima facie* puzzling. We shall have much to discuss. As an aside, with regard to Peirce’s claim that “it has probably never happened that any philosopher has attempted to give a general name to his own doctrine without that name’s soon acquiring, in common philosophical usage, a signification much broader than was originally intended,” it is amusing to recollect that Anscombe (1981) introduced the term ‘consequentialism’ as a term of abuse, an ugly word for an ugly thesis—which was subsequently picked up and used without irony by its champions.

7. It is useful to compare Kierkegaard’s mocking examination of the idea of Cartesian doubt as the well-spring of philosophy, especially in his *Johannes Climacus* and *Fear and Trembling*. I do not know whether Peirce read Kierkegaard, or even knew of his existence, but I suspect Peirce would have admired him. They shared, *inter alia*, the idea that consciousness is at bottom a symbol-system.

8. His riposte to the dilettante doubter, “unless he can make a thing white and black at once, he has to regard what he does not doubt as absolutely true,” prefigures Moore’s Paradox: “It makes sense to say, ‘she believes *p*,

- c. also the question: what type of thing, for Peirce, is susceptible of doubt in the first place? propositions (as semantic entities)? claims (as markers for psychological states)? psychological states themselves? states of affair (things in the world and their configuration)? more general symbolic representations of states of affair?
  - d. of course one can believe that some of one's (other) beliefs are mistaken—but that shows only that it takes a new belief in order to call a previous one into doubt
  - e. if one believes that truth is that which belief tends to move towards in the long run, if it becomes stable in the long run (and here Peirce should add something like: “through a rationally self-corrective process of experimental investigation”), then: “truth” and “falsity” are definable in terms of doubt and belief and how they are shaped by experience—what is the argument for this? what kind of argument can there be for it? and why does the logical dependence run in the stated direction? we shall see later in the course that, at least in earlier stages of his career, Peirce seemed to hold the converse view (*i.e.*, the conditional with protasis and apodosis swapped)
3. “belief”, it is claimed, is here merely “the contrary of doubt” (footnote on p. 336); but it is also claimed that “[b]elief is not a momentary mode of consciousness; it is a habit of mind essentially enduring for some time, and mostly (at least) unconscious” (p. 337)—in what sense is the latter the “contrary” to doubt? in a purely psychological sense (*e.g.*, doubt is that dissolution of belief begun when it “meets with some surprise”)? in a logical sense (*e.g.*, the content of a belief logically contrary to that of the original belief)? in a causal sense (*e.g.*, the “start” of the causal chain that results in the sincere questing of one's belief)?
  4. it is further claimed that doubt is the “privation” of a habit (which does not preclude that it is also a belief), and, as such, “must be a condition of erratic activity that in some way must get superseded by a habit” (p. 337)—why? what would go wrong if that supersession never happens? what, to beat a now familiar drum, is the modal force of the claim? and, again, is it the same as the previous ones? here, based on what immediately follows about self-reproach and blame, it seems to be at least in part beneficent modality—reasoning and cognition for Peirce always seem to be in some sense grounded in or at least strongly informed by a generalized sort of ethical or practical normativity (“the good” need not always be of an ethical sort—one who is good at wielding a knife may wield it for ill)
  5. I believe the entire discussion of habituation, self-reproach, blame and self-control to be inspired by the analogous discussions in Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea*, and I do not see how one can fully understand Peirce's ideas without comparison to it, but that (sadly) goes beyond the scope of this lecture<sup>9</sup>
  6. in any event, how are we to understand Peirce's claim that “thinking is a species of conduct which is largely subject to self-control” (p. 337)? he cannot mean that the production of

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but not- $p$ ', and to say 'you believe  $p$ , but not- $p$ ', but not 'I believe  $p$ , but not- $p$ .' There is something deep about that.

9. It is always dangerous, yet still often worthwhile, to try to mine the psychology of the philosopher one is reading for nuggets of insight into his or her philosophical ideas and arguments. (Descartes, for instance, with his irrational and phobic demands for absolute certainty, was almost certainly a paranoid and deeply neurotic personality.) In this case, it is intriguing to speculate that Peirce's insistence on self-control as the ground of rational cognition may have its origin in the signal *lack* of self-control he exhibited in his personal life.



each thought is a voluntarily controlled process; it seems more likely that he has rather in mind something like the idea of “habits of thought”, but that is difficult to spell out with any exactitude and clarity

7. finally, how does all this relate to the introductory claims about experimentation and experience? if the meaning of an expression—in this case, what is believed beyond doubt—is exhausted by “all the conceivable experimental phenomena which [its] affirmation or denial . . . could imply,” then can we infer that “conceivable”, in the introductory passages, means “conceivable *by me*, the actual epistemic agent as I in fact am”? is it really the case that one can have a belief such that *all* experiential consequences that *anyone ever* could conceive of must or will always hold true? on this question partly hangs the proper interpretation of the following crucial passage (p. 337):

[T]here is a certain distinction between things you “cannot” do merely in the sense that nothing stimulates you to the great effort and endeavors that would be required, and things you cannot do because in their own nature they are insusceptible of being put into practice. In every stage of your excogitations, there is something of which you can only say, “I cannot think otherwise,” and your experientially based hypothesis [of one’s incapacity to doubt] is that the impossibility is of the second kind.

8. the other part of the interpretation of the passage hangs on the highly elliptical and tantalizingly compressed remarks at the top of p. 338, about what a person is and that all thought is a sign; we do not have the resources to discuss this now; we shall return to these themes throughout the course<sup>10</sup>

#### **further exposition and defense of pragmatism, as call and response (pp. 338–344)**

1. Damn it, I ran out of time in writing these notes. I’ll complete this section later in the week, and post it on the course’s webpage.

#### **concluding remarks on the archetypical Peircean themes of continuity and thirdness (pp. 344–345)**

1. it would take us well beyond the scope of this introductory lecture to elucidate Peirce’s cryptic, near oracular remarks, laden as it is with obscure and difficult Peircean ideas

## **4 “Issues of Pragmatism”**

We obviously do not have time to discuss the essay in lecture. I invite you to produce an outline of the essay (the same format and brevity as mine at the start of §3), and then focus on a passage from the essay and write me no more than 2 pages (*i.e.*, no more than 1000 words, ignoring the outline for the word count) discussing it—raising questions, proposing interpretations, whatever

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10. I will remark that, again, Peirce’s thought here bears fruitful comparison to Nietzsche’s ideas about the self, that it is “masks all the way down” (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*), and also to Rousseau’s conception of the self as a gathering of friends (or, in Rousseau’s own case, of politely hostile acquaintances), as laid he it out—one might say, as he constructs it—in his *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*.

seems of most interest to you. If you get it to me by the start of next lecture (28. April), then I will return it to you with my comments the following week.

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