

The Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce

Lecture 2

“On a New List of Categories”

Erik Curiel[†]

July 1, 2020

Contents

1 Categories, Generally Speaking	1
2 Peirce’s New List	4
3 Invitation to a Short Essay	10
References	10

This lecture discusses Peirce (**1992b**).

1 Categories, Generally Speaking

1. a *category*: highest (or deepest), most comprehensive genus of classification or qualification or conceptualization or description or ... of some philosophically important class of entities (meant in the broadest possible sense)
2. depending on the philosophical approach or school of thought, the entities can be concepts or modes of being or modes of cognition or features of cocepts, and so on

[†]**Author’s address:** Munich Center for Mathematical Philosophy, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität; Black Hole Initiative, Harvard University; Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory, Radio and Geoastronomy Division; email: erik@strangebeautiful.com

-
3. it is, in any event, something that can or must: be attributed to; be predicated of; inform; qualify; attach to; subsist in; or ... anything of the relevant kind
 4. a “system” of categories, historically, is a purportedly complete, unique, mutually exclusive list of such genera: all and only categories appear on the list, each captures something that the others do not, and there is only one such list (*i.e.*, one cannot “carve up the category space” in different ways)
 5. in order to characterize or postulate something as a category, it behooves one to state criteria for them, and an argument that those are appropriate and adequate criteria; in order to posit a list as a system, one should have, again, an appropriately justificational argument (and, even better, a good reason why that sort of justification is appropriate); ideally one has something like a derivation procedure for the categories in one’s system, with something like a soundness and completeness argument for it, and an explanation for why the derivation works
 6. historical systems

Plato

- a. arguably the first system is Plato’s theory of the Forms as articulated in *Republic* and *Symposium* (although he does not describe it as such), with the form of the Good occupying the uppermost echelon, and the forms of Being, Truth and Knowledge immediately subservient to it¹
- b. Plato explicitly claims that everything “partakes of” the Good, and implies that everything also subsidiarily partakes of Being, Truth and Knowledge
- c. these categories have both ontological and epistemological import
- d. Plato sketches arguments to justify the system, *e.g.*, that grasp of the Good is what ultimately supports the understanding of all ideas and supports all truths and knowledge because everything has an end that it intrinsically aims at but one cannot grasp or define an end without the Good; but in the end his claims about it seem to rest largely on an idea of some kind of cognitive intuition that directly grasps it and thereby sees its role in the world and in cognition, the faculty of which can be trained and developed

Aristotle

- a. the first self-consciously styled system
- b. the categories (at least as discussed in his work *Categories*) are something like the most general entities which everything in the world can either be defined as, or be defined as possessing, or be defined as involving, or be defined as being involved in²
- c. according to the list most commonly accepted as canonical, there are 10: substance; quantity; quality; relation; place; time; physical attitude; state; action; passion

1. If one were feeling particularly ornery, I reckon one could make a case that Parmenides’ One is the first system.

2. I use a linguistic formulation, following the popular and influential interpretation of Ackrill, as employed in his translation and commentary (Aristotle 1963) and developed in his exegetical essay (Ackrill 1968). The text radically underdetermines interpretation, so many other viable and interesting interpretations are possible, including ones that are more explicitly ontological in character. Even on something like the Ackrill interpretation, however, almost everyone agrees the categories have immediate ontological import as well.

-
- d. there is no hierarchy *per se*; so-called primary substance, however, seems to have ontological priority
 - e. these categories, again, have both ontological and epistemological import
 - f. Aristotle gives no explicit description of how he arrived at his list, nor any real justification for its soundness or completeness; there are many interpretive proposals that try to explain it

Kant

- a. the Big Kahuna, against which all subsequent attempts to construct a system must be judged, or at least compared with
- b. all geared towards answering Kant's central question: how are synthetic *a priori* judgments possible? (*i.e.*, propositions known to be necessarily true, independent of experience yet not in virtue of the meanings of its terms alone)
- c. his categories: something like, universal and most abstract concepts or representational forms that all cognitive representations and processes must respect or embody; thus the conformance of a judgment to them serves as the necessary preconditions for the possibility of the experience of the content of that judgment; thus certain non-analytic judgments formed from or otherwise based on combination of the categories alone (*e.g.*, the principle of causality) could be known to be necessarily true independent of experience³
- d. roughly, Kant derives the list by considering all possible forms of judgment one can construct using Aristotelian logic; he concludes there are 4 classes of these, each of which has 3 types
 - quantity** unity, plurality, totality
 - quality** reality, negation, limitation
 - relation** inherence and subsistence, causality, reciprocity
 - modality** possibility, existence, necessity
- e. it is not entirely clear whether, for example, "quantity" is itself a category, or only "unity", "plurality", and "totality"; it is hard to see how it cannot be, but Kant avows that there are exactly 12, so go figure
- f. anyway, each of the 4 classes imposes or represents or captures or ... its own peculiar form of unity on the object of judgment (we shall talk about at least one kind of "unity" this might mean in our discussion of Peirce below)
- g. on the standard reading, the categories provide the deepest and most basic universal elements of humanity's conceptual scheme (with the implicit assumption that all humans necessarily share the same one⁴)
- h. thus, they seem to have strictly epistemological, not ontological, import, but some

3. "Kant was first and foremost proud of his table of categories; with that in his hand he said: 'This is the most difficult thing that could ever be undertaken on behalf of metaphysics.'" – Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Part I, §11. Indeed, Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories occupies an odd role in the history of philosophy, justifying Nietzsche's arch observation: everyone agrees it is deep and gets at something profoundly important, but no one agrees on what that is and how it gets there.

4. We are not, however, all created equal with regard to our capacity to exercise that scheme: "Deficiency in the faculty of judgment is what is ordinarily called stupidity, and for such a failing there is no remedy." (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A133n/B172n)

commentators/interpretations demur (note how “object of judgment” is nicely non-committal with respect to this issue)

- i. the system infamously fell prey to new discoveries in mathematics and physics (non-Euclidean geometry, field-theoretic accounts of electromagnetism, *et al.*)—seemingly necessary truths were seen to be neither necessary nor true, which, to my mind, constitutes one important form of progress in philosophy

2 Peirce’s New List

Interpretive study questions:⁵

1. Kant was always and primarily concerned to show the knowability of the necessary truth of certain synthetic *a priori* judgments—what is Peirce’s goal?
2. What is Peirce’s method of derivation?
3. What is his justification for the propriety and adequacy of the derivation, and how does that bear on the answers to the remaining questions?
4. Does he consider his list to be a system in the classical sense?
5. What are the ontological, epistemological and methodological characters of the categories?
6. What is the role of empirical psychology in their characterization and their derivation?
7. What is the role of semiotic in their characterization and their derivation?
8. What are the strong points of Peirce’s list and his argument for them? What do you find appealing about them? What do you find particularly problematic? (You should attempt to answer this *only* after having first answered the previous question.)
9. What would constitute a decisive counter-example to the list, or a decisively contrary argument to the derivation? (To answer this well, one need not necessarily produce a counter-example or counter-argument, only to describe what each would need to exhibit or conclude.)

Outline:

1. §§1–3: the characterization of “conception”, its universality and the gradation thereof, grounded in its semiotic nature
2. §4: the characterization and derivation of “Being” and “Substance” as the extremal categories
3. §§5–6: methodological interlude: the manifestation or embodiment of conception in actual mental processes of “separation” (roughly speaking, distinction or discernment); statement of method of derivation of intermediate categories based on processes of separation
4. §§7–11: derivation and characterization of the intermediate categories
5. §§12–14: further elucidation of important ideas, especially those of “ground”, “correlate” and “interpretant” and their relation to semiotic

5. These come in two kinds: those one has before one begins to read; and those that force themselves on one as one reads. Often, but not always, the latter are more important.

6. §15: the three semiotic conceptions and their correlative categories as fundamental to Logic

In more (some might say excruciating) detail:

1. §1, Peirce begins with invocation and acceptance of a basic schema of Kant's picture:

[T]he function of conceptions is to reduce the manifold of sensuous impressions to unity, and . . . the validity of a conception consists in the impossibility of reducing the content of consciousness to unity without the introduction of it.

let us unpack this:

- a. it seems as though he does not say what it *is*, only what it *does*—I suspect he does not yet want to take a side in the medieval Scholastic debate of nominalism versus realism (though he will do so, I claim, in §7; see discussion below); another possibility, however, is that Peirce does not distinguish between a conception and its function—it just *is* what it does, similar to how, on some views of language, the meaning of word just *is* its use; the latter possibility seems consonant with some of his remarks on signs and representations, to the effect that representation is not something a sign does but rather is what the sign is (or ,again, perhaps better, that there is no distinction between what it is and what it does)
 - b. Peirce's formulation ("the content of consciousness") is less ambiguous with regard to epistemology versus ontology than Kant's ("the object of judgment")
 - c. "unity": something like "the immediacy of the connection of subject and predicate" in a semiotic representation (standardly: a proposition), as explicitly suggested by §4 (and discussed further in my notes on it)
 - d. why does the "validity" of a conception consist in its *necessity*? perhaps another Kantian theme: something like a necessary precondition for the possibility of experience; he attempts to clarify (or, perhaps, to explicate) the meaning of "validity" in §5—does that attempt square with its usage here?
 - e. on the same theme: what is the modality here, in what sense "impossible"? as a brute matter of human psychology? because of a fundamental principle of epistemology? of metaphysics? of logic?
2. §2:
- a. "universal": Peirce was deeply influenced by the medieval scholastic debates, especially over the Doctrine of Universals, so this surely harks back to that
 - b. Peirce does not claim a gradation in conceptions themselves, only in *the conception* of conceptions; does this gradation, in any event, induce a linear order? surely not in general, but perhaps for those most general categories he is concerned with here?
 - c. a gradation of universals suggests a connection both to Plato's and Aristotle's accounts, not so much Kant's

3. §3:

-
- a. “the present, in general” as given by the “act of attention”: no connotation, only pure denotation,⁶ *i.e.*, nothing predicated of any object, only the pure undifferentiated object, so to speak (and so a *substance*, in the most abstract sense—see §4)
 - b. because the conception of “the present, in general” has no connotation, it therefore has no unity in itself; but it is required to reduce the manifold of sense itself to unity, and thus presumably is the most universal (on the scale of gradation of conceptions), for every cognition partakes in or rests upon sensory impressions in some way, even if only distantly (see §5: “Elementary conceptions only arise upon the occasion of experience; that is, they are produced for the first time according to a general law, the condition of which is the existence of certain impressions.”)
 - c. note that, even at this early stage of his career, Peirce is already thinking of the mind and its activity in semiotic terms (connotation, denotation, . . .)
 - d. “the *it* cannot itself be made a predicate”: straight out of Aristotle
4. §4, the derivation of “Being” and “Substance” as the extremal categories:
- a. “the unity of a proposition”: predication is a primitive relation in the sense that there is no further semantic contraption joining subject and predicate in a proposition, no relations one can insert conjoining “subject” and “predication” on one side and “predication” and “predicate” on the other, so to speak, just as one cannot apply a metaphysical jointer to substance and property to make their conjunction smoother and more immediate
 - b. *n.b.*: “being” is *not* the same as “existence”; “being” is the commonality of modalities, and as such existence falls under it, as does possibility
 - c. because “being” is merely the “junction” of subject and predicate, and each kind of being (“existence” and “possibility”) merely the mode of the junction, it can have no content (otherwise, the connection of subject and predicate would not be primitively immediate)
 - d. “being” at the most general level, having no content, cannot itself be a proper subject (“is inapplicable to a subject”)
 - e. “substance” at the most general level, being undifferentiated from its possible predicates, is entirely indeterminate and so cannot itself be a proper predicate
 - f. the gradation of completely universal conceptions: it “begins” with substance (what is necessary for the conception of “the present in general”) and “ends” with being (what is necessary for any determinate predication of something to a substance)
 - g. why does Peirce take only “existence” and “possibility” as the modes of “being”, and not also necessity, as Kant does (and Aristotle, whom Peirce is strongly channeling here)?
 - h. given that “being” is not a subject, and so presumably can have nothing predicated of it, what is Peirce doing here in trying to describe or characterize it? why does the fact that “substance” is not a predicate not seem to pose the same problem for the attempt to describe it?
5. §5, on kinds of mental separation:
- a. he has at this point already “derived” the extremal categories, using a methodology that is a funny mixture of Aristotle’s brute assertion (“substance” and “predicate” *just are* the

6. Compare the medieval ideas of “hic et nunc” and Hegel’s first Moment in the unfolding of Absolute Spirit.

fundamental kinds of ontological entity, deal with it) and Kant’s transcendentalism; the explicit introduction of what is manifestly a different methodology suggests that what he had been relying on is in some way inadequate or inappropriate for the derivation of the intermediate categories—why?

- b. “prescision” and “abstraction”:
 - i. seem to be synonyms, but it is difficult to say for certain
 - ii. attention to one “element”, neglect of the rest—means “element of the content of consciousness” in general, or “element of the object of attention”, or “element of a conception”, or something else?
 - iii. the gloss on “exclusive attention” seems to suggest the second, but it is not entirely clear
 - iv. sounds suggestively like Kant’s concept of “analytic judgment”
- c. “discrimination”: a distinction in meaning (which would seem to place it even closer to at least one form of Kant’s concept of “analytic judgment”)—but what the hell is the “essence” of a *term*? shows that “term” cannot be meant in a strictly syntactic or semantic sense? a prefiguring of Peirce’s deeper semiotic?
- d. “dissociation”: “consciousness of” (or, I think, “attention to”) one thing without the simultaneous consciousness of (or attention to) another; this clearly invokes both Hume’s account of necessary connection as a “constant conjunction in thought” and Kant’s account of necessary connection as informed by the category of causality and the synthetic *a priori* judgment expressing the principle of causality; more generally, this sounds suggestively like Kant’s concept of “synthetic judgment”
- e. the introduction of “elementary” in the argument that prescision is not reciprocal: the argument seems in the end to be more about what is elementary and why than about the structural properties of prescision; the latter seems to be interesting only as a vehicle for introducing and elucidating the former⁷
- f. “elementary”: a conception that is necessary (and so non-arbitrary) for the reduction of *impressions* to a unity
- g. how is the “gradation” of mental processes of separation—least is discrimination, next prescision, then dissociation—related to the gradation of the universality of conceptions? if the relations to Kant’s conception of “analytic” and “synthetic” are correct, does this show that Peirce has a conception of these ideas as being characterized by something like a continuous spectrum, contraries rather than discrete, disjoint contradictories?
- h. why does the non-reciprocal character of prescision require an argument, whereas none of the other claims about separation do? because of its relation to elementary conceptions? if so, why do the others not share this relation?
- i. elementary conceptions “are produced for the first time according to a general law, the condition of which is the existence of certain impressions”: what is the sense of “production” and “first time”? the initial generation of a given conception in one’s

7. But see the role that prescision plays in Peirce’s account of inference in Peirce (1992a, p. 22), where the step after colligation is described thus: “the contemplation of that complex icon, the fixation of the attention upon a certain feature of it, and the obliteration of the rest of it, so as to produce a new icon.”

cognitive faculties in general (*i.e.*, in the sense that the conception had not been present at all in one's cognitive faculties before, and is present after because of a process of creation, say, as a young child learning to think and speak)? or rather the occasion of the first manifestation of a given conception in a particular experience, the conception already having been present, even if only "potentially" or "dispositionally", in one's cognitive faculties? Given the context, and the claim in §6 about what it means to "introduce" a category, and the discussion in §7 of about the way that "the conception of *being* arises upon the formatino of a proposition", I am almost certain the latter, but I cannot be completely certain; the following also inclines me towards the latter—it seems unlikely to me, on Peirce's view, that it is cogent to speak of the "creation" of the categories in one's cognitive faculties, even if only as a matter of empirical psychology, as the very idea of cognitive faculties for Peirce seems to presuppose them, but, again, I am not entirely confident about this, and without such a process it is difficult to understand the cognitive growth of an infant learning to speak and talk; it seems unlikely to me, however, that Peirce believes the categories to be congenital, at least in the way that Kant does; so I am still in a state of *aporia*

6. §6, begins the search proper for categories:
 - a. "category": "universal elementary conception" intermediate between substance and being; "universal" here presumably means something like "involved in every reduction of manifold of substance to unity of being"
 - b. "introduction" of a category: either reduction of substance to unity ("production of determinate thought by predication, which involves one of the three processes of mental separation"), or else conjunction to substance of another conception (meaning that "substance" here is really shorthand for "an already reduced unity of substance"?)
 - c. empirical psychology—but *not* "introspection"!—reveals to us the "occasion" of the introduction of a conception; why is this relevant to this foundational, philosophical investigation? the first truly sharp and decisive break from Kant, in content and methodology
7. §7, the "derivation" of the first intermediate category, "Quality" ("Ground"):
 - a. the central claim:

A proposition always has, besides a term to express the substance, another to express the quality of that substance; and the function of the conception of being is to unite the quality to the substance. Quality, therefore, in its very widest sense, is the first conception in order in passing from being to substance.
 - b. is this a logical claim, about the necessary form of any possible judgment? a semantic claim, asserting an analytic proposition? an implicit definition of "Quality"? or something else?
 - c. what is its justification and status?
 - d. it is *not* given by "introspection", so the discussion of discrimination as the associated cognitive process of separation perhaps belongs to empirical psychology? at least in his later thought, he seemed skeptical of this, as the manuscript (MS 785, n. 12) quoted in the editor's note 2 to the text suggests (though the remark addresses the explicit

invocation of empirical psychology in the derivation of the second intermediate category, “Relation”

e. a clue to his semiotic:

The same thing is meant by “the stove is black,” as by “there is blackness in the stove.”

I claim he is doing two things here:

- i. I think he is now taking a side in the nominalism versus realism debate (see note to §1): that they mean the same thing implies he’s a realist; otherwise “blackness” could not be “in” the stove
 - ii. do not be misled by the form of language, the particular expressions we happen to use—they do not always map neatly onto, are not necessarily conformant to or directly expressive of ontology or metaphysics; so what a type is, we shall see, is more subtle than just a “syntactic abstraction” of a token
 - f. the “proof” of this last assertion relies on the idea of the function of a conception: early hints of pragmatism
 - g. asymmetry of precision is the criterion for where the category lies in the order determined by gradation—why?
8. §8, the “derivation” of the second intermediate category, “Relation” (“Correlate”):
- a. explicitly relies on empirical psychology for the way in which it is possible to “know” a quality, which implies the nature of the second intermediate category
 - b. see discussion of §7 for his later skepticism of this method of derivation
 - c. again, asymmetry of precision is the criterion for where the category lies in the order determined by gradation—why?
9. §9, the “derivation” of the third intermediate category, “Representation” (“Reference to Interpretant”):
- a. “the occasion of reference to a correlate is obviously by comparison”; every comparison (in this sense, between ground and correlate) implies—necessarily goes by way of—a “mediating representation”, which, I think, can perhaps usefully be thought of as similar to the vehicle of a metaphor, *i.e.*, that in virtue of which the ground *qua* representation can be conceived of as relating in the relevant way to the correlate *qua* representation
 - b. and “that” in the “that in virtue of which” in the previous remark, is itself a representation, and indeed is *the* representation that the third intermediate category refers to, or, perhaps better, that instantiates or plays the role of the third intermediate category in the cognitive process at issue
 - c. again seems to rely on empirical psychology for the characterization and derivation
 - d. yet again, asymmetry of precision is the criterion for where the category lies in the order determined by gradation—why?
10. §10, further discussion of “Representation”:
- a. the diversity of impressions makes possible—perhaps even necessitates—representation (as “reference to an interpretant”)

-
- b. this is because the consequent (or concomitant?) “feeling of complication or confusion ... leads us” to make differentiations
 - c. puzzle: whence this feeling of complication or confusion if there is no differentiation in the first place? what does it mean for impressions to present as a “diversity” without differentiation?
 - d. thus the unity it imposes is not the junction of conception to substance (a proposition, or what is encoded in a proposition), but rather the unity of “the manifold of substance itself”—perhaps something like, “the available conceptual space from which propositions can be carved out”?
 - e. and this provides the conclusive proof of the place of Representation in the graded order of categories
- 11. §11: summary of system of categories (the “New List”)
 - 12. §12: introduction of the central Peircean ideas of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness (which we will discuss in detail later in the term)
 - 13. §13: not clear to me
 - 14. §14: the explicit introduction of the basis of Peirce’s theory of semiotic, with the famous trichotomy of “representations” (quite soon thereafter, Peirce would change the terminology so that ‘sign’ means what ‘representation’ means here, *i.e.*, the trichotomy will be imposed on the concept of “sign”)
 - 15. §15: the trichotomy of representations serve as the fundamental conceptions of logic (the “Universal Science”)

3 Invitation to a Short Essay

As I did last week, I invite you to write me a short discussion (no more than 2 pages, *i.e.*, no more than 1000 words) in response to one of the interpretive study questions I list at the start of §2 of these notes. You can raise further questions, propose answers or interpretations, or whatever seems of most interest to you. If you get it to me by the start of next lecture (5. May), then I will return it to you with my comments the following week.

References

- Ackrill, J. 1968. “Aristotle’s Categories, Chapters I–V: Translation and Notes”. In *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by J. Moravcsik, 90–124. Modern Studies in Philosophy. NY: Macmillan.
- Aristotle. 1963. *Categories and De Interpretatione*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Translated with notes by J. Ackrill.

-
- Peirce, C. S. 1868. “On a New List of Categories”. *Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 7:287–298. Presented to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on May 14, 1867., doi:[10.2307/20179567](https://doi.org/10.2307/20179567).
- . 1992a. “Of Reasoning in General”. Chapter 3 in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, edited by The Peirce Edition Project, volume 2 (1893–1913), 11–26. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. The first part of an unpublished work entitled “Short Logic” that Peirce began in 1895.
- . 1992b. “On a New List of Categories”. Chapter 1 in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, edited by N. Houser and C. Kloesel, volume 1 (1867–1893), 1–10. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. Presented to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on May 14, 1867, subsequently published as Peirce (1868).