

Suggested Paper Topics for “The Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce”

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1 *Nota Bene*

This is not yet the complete list of suggested paper topics. In particular, it contains few suggestions on the papers in the “Illustrations of the Logic of Science” series, and none on the 1903 Harvard lectures on pragmatism. Questions on those will be added over the course of the rest of the semester. Also some questions currently on the list are given only in skeletal form, and still need some fleshing out.

2 Structure and Evaluation of the Paper

MA students should write a term paper of approximately 6000 words (not counting bibliography), and BA students one of approximately 3000 words (not counting bibliography), due some time in September 2020, the exact date still to be determined. The paper will be on a subject of your choice, which may be one of the topics I suggest below (§3). I strongly urge students to consult with me before choosing a topic. If you decide to write on a topic not of my suggestion, I require that you consult with me beforehand. I will be happy to read and comment on rough drafts of the final paper, so long as they are given to me at least three weeks before the due date. Please send me the paper by email, with your name and Matrikelnummer clearly given at the beginning. Do not have a separate title page, as that is only a waste of paper.

For a grade in the range 1,0–1,3, you need to have a clearly articulated question and main claim, both of which have to be presented in the introduction. You have to develop an independent and original argument supporting your main claim; merely reconstructing arguments is not enough. Your argument has to take up more than 50% of the term paper. The argumentative structure of the term paper has to be made explicit (*e.g.*, by an overview in the introduction, by guiding the reader in each section, and so on). You have to anticipate and discuss possible objections to your own arguments. You must show that you are able to reconstruct arguments from the relevant literature in a concise and accurate way. You must show that you are familiar with the relevant literature, so you should refer to and at least briefly discuss at least 3 publications that are not

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part of the required reading in the schedule of lectures and readings, though they may be part of the suggested reading. Finally, the paper should be clearly written. Grades lower in the scale will be given in proportion to how many of these criteria the paper does and does not satisfy. My expectations are spelled out more thoroughly in the essay “Notes on Learning Philosophy.”

3 Suggested Topics

1. Explain the definition of pragmatism in Peirce (1992j). Do you think it works as the foundation for an entire philosophical system? Discuss an example of a traditional philosophical problem that it seems to give insight on, and another that may be problematic for it.
2. Peirce (1992j) claims that radical doubt is impossible, and that we can have beliefs it is impossible to doubt and yet which are still susceptible to correction. Explain all this. Do you think his views are cogent? Are these views themselves indubitable or corrigible?
3. [*** analogue to following question, for Aristotle ***]
4. Compare Kant’s “derivation” of his system of categories (Kant 1929) to Peirce’s (Peirce 1992b). What role do the ideas of “judgment” and “experience” play in each? Does Peirce improve on Kant? If so, how? Does his list (and so the derivation) fall prey to refutation by new discoveries, as Kant’s did, *e.g.*, by non-Euclidean geometry? What does Peirce mean by the “validity” of a conception (p. 1), and what is Kant’s analogous idea? Compare how each argues that their categories have it.
5. Peirce (1992c, p. 54): “... the word or sign which man uses *is* the man himself.” Explain, taking account of the different kinds of signs. Do you agree or disagree?
6. In Curiel (2020b), I made the following claims:
 - a. “For Peirce there are no mental processes without signs, and no signs without mental processes.”
 - b. “It seems that signs are fundamental to and always involved in reasoning and, conversely, anything involved in reasoning in the relevant sense is a sign.”

Explain what you think the claims mean. Do you agree or disagree? You should rely on at least one of the 3 Peirce readings for that lecture; you are of course free to discuss any other writings of Peirce on semiotic you think relevant. Peirce (1992c) and Peirce (1992a) in particular may be useful.

7. What is the sense and role of “resemblance” or “similarity” in Peirce’s account of icons? Discuss the treatment of icons in both Peirce (1992i) Peirce (1992a). Compare Goodman (1972) (available in the course’s Dropbox folder); do Goodman’s critiques apply to Peirce? If so, does Peirce have a reply?
8. Peirce has a particularly rich and broad notion of “experience”. Choose a work it plays an important role in (especially the works on semiotic and pragmatism, and those in the “Illustrations of Science” series), and explain what you think his concept is and the role it plays in the arguments and conclusions of the work you examine.

9. Explain Peirce's views on linguistic meaning as briefly sketched in the discussion of symbols in Peirce (1992a) and worked out in greater detail in Peirce (1903). What is the role of *reference* in the theory?
10. Given Peirce's views on linguistic meaning, as briefly sketched in the discussion of symbols in Peirce (1992a) and worked out in greater detail in Peirce (1903), especially the role of habituation in it, why does he create awkward neologisms for every single one of his important technical concepts? (Hint: see the discussion on nomenclature in Peirce 1992j.) Is he trying to emphasize that his concepts are so novel as to never have played a role, in any (even if only inchoate form) in human activity before? Surely not. Is he attempting to force the generation of a new habituated use, both to guard against misunderstanding that would come from conflation of meaning with previous habituations, and to ensure that circumstances conduce as much as possible to the reader's (or auditor's) being forced to Think (in the technical sense of Peirce 1992i) critically and deeply about Peirce's conceptions? If not, what then? You will first need to explain what Peirce's views on linguistic meaning are.
11. Compare Peirce's views on the non-conventional nature of Indices (as he discusses them, *e.g.*, in Peirce 1992i and Peirce 1992a) with the critique of ostensive definition and rule following in Wittgenstein (2009).
12. How can Peirce not be a psychologist, as he adamantly claims, given his views on reasoning and logic (Peirce 1992a), which are all worked out based on his views on belief and the actual cognitive inferential processes of real humans? You will need first to explain his account of reasoning and logic.
13. Compare the treatment of Quality, Relation and Representation in Peirce (1992b) to that of Feeling, Reaction and Thinking in Peirce (1992i). What are the similarities and what are the differences? How much of that can be attributed to the different roles each plays in its respective essay?
14. In the early going of Peirce (1992h), he gives two separate but clearly related characterizations of the validity of an inference. I claimed in Curiel (2020a, §2) that there is a *prima facie* tension, perhaps even contradiction, between the two. Analyze the two characterizations, describing your understanding of each (including explicit definitions of all the important concepts, with a defense of your interpretation!); explain what tension I was pointing to; either provide a resolution or argue that there is no tension or contradiction at all, *prima facie* or otherwise.
15. In Peirce (1992h), Peirce claims that, in some sense or other, the "guiding principle" associated with an inference-producing habit is what licenses the relevant family of actual inferences the habit produces. Give your interpretation of the relevant passages and concepts. What do you think is supposed to underwrite the licensing? See Curiel (2020a, §2) for a few suggestions, and problems with them.
16. Explain the "paradox" Peirce uncovers about trusting probabilistic reasoning in Peirce (1992d, §IV). How does he deal with the problem? Do you find his solution convincing?

17. Explain the 3 kinds of inference Peirce discusses in Peirce (1878), including their logical form, and a comparison of the epistemic or justificatory warrant each can give to its conclusions.
18. What is the doctrine of necessity and why does Peirce think it to be indefensible (Peirce 1992e)? Explain the role that Peirce's views on meaning in particular and pragmatism in general play in his arguments. Do you think his arguments work?

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