THE VITAL IMPORTANCE OF FIRSTNESS IN PEIRCE’S PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: This paper tries to show the vital importance of the category of Firstness within Charles Peirce’s philosophy, reflecting on the role of freedom in a symmetric relationship between subject-object and, more precisely, considering the ideas of consciousness and world. Furthermore, we try to show how Firstness becomes essential to the consideration of a genetic philosophy, as it can be found throughout the author’s thought.

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Together with countless other original points in his thought, the concept of Firstness is, to our mind, fundamental to understanding Peirce’s effective contribution to Philosophy. Indeed, the author’s consolidation of the cenopythagorean categories at the turn of the century enabled the definitive creation of his architecture of sciences, consistently interrelating Mathematics with Philosophy and the latter with Special Sciences. Furthermore, within Philosophy, Peirce was finally able to establish a link between the science of appearances, Phenomenology and Normative Sciences – comprising then Aesthetics, Ethics, Logic or Semiotics – and between these and Metaphysics.
Nevertheless, the accomplishment of such a task was not without difficulty, requiring homogeneity of the categories, i.e., a harmonious transposition of the modes of appearing to the modes of being, certainly in the light of a Semiotics or Logic capable of ensuring a formal course to the investigation. From the universe of experience to the
universe of reality, categories should be, thus, indiscriminately applicable as formal instances of *freedom, facticity* and *necessity*.

To us it seems that the effectual understanding of the author’s doctrines occurs after a reflexive path through his concepts, to and from his systems; we must stress here that Peirce is a systematic author and, in our view, the last in contemporaneity. His system is shaped by a fine overlapping of his doctrines, wherein categories perform a fundamental agglutinative role.

Such a conceptual path through Peirce’s thought is, in fact, fundamental for the correct interpretation of the diverse dimensions in which his ideas are considered, in view of the homogeneity of the categories. These pass along all the constitutive sciences of knowledge, with the passage from a theory of appearances to a theory of reality, where the same categorial *forms* will, effectively, become evident, being particularly relevant under the formal and constitutive point of the understanding of Peirce’s doctrines.

This is one of the structural points of Peircean philosophy on which we are, again, adamant: the homogeneity of categories is a prerequisite for overcoming a genesis dichotomy between subject and object, an original estrangement between Man and Nature, typical of a nominalist tradition in the History of Philosophy, so strongly criticized by Peirce. For his project, such a domination must be logical, irrespective of provoking ethical and, even, metaphysical consequences. From appearance to reality, the same modes of being will become evident, the *forms* of which, we reiterate, must be included in the normative sciences, particularly in the semiotic forms of reasoning.

Phenomenology, on the other hand, will herald categorial symmetries that, in effect, will be genetic: it generates the conditions for Peirce’s radical *realism*. A realism initially defined by him as scholastic, in the wake of the recognition of the universals’ reality, later perfected as a *continuous* reality, in the light of his *synechism* doctrine, or *continuum* theory. It is under *synechism* that one can assert both reality of the *laws* and *continuum* of *qualities*, rejecting outright any nominalist posture in philosophy¹.

It is also within this science that Peirce expands the concept of *experience*. They are equally phenomena, in interiority, *feelings*, reactions to the non-ego that constitutes our *past* and *thought*. In this order they fall under the categories of firstness, secondness and

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thirdness. The phenomenical experience in its exteriority, under this same categorial order, will include the diversity of quality in things, the reaction of alterity against conscience and the aspects of the ordered time-space appearance of the world’s objects. This symmetry will be vital to Semiotics. Only with it can this science be regarded as dialogic. Indeed, the homogeneity of categories will enable the signical forms not to be exclusively concentrated on the word or on the various expressions of the human language. The semiotic dialogy will be based on a trade between meaning and reality, legitimated by a homology of forms. The world’s verbal silence shall be expressed by signical forms equivalent to our human language, including mathematics, enabling the real to contain meaning and not, simply, in a nominalist fashion, to be granted meaning by the cognizant subject through a generality-establishing process.

We believe the idea of Firstness to be the fulcrum of this heuristic symmetry. Within this context, it brings in itself, as a concept, its intrinsic difference from other categories as regards the tradition of western thought. Secondness and thirdness, in fact, have already been inscribed in history’s tradition, under the concepts of alterity and reason.

Nevertheless, it must also be stressed that Peirce attributes to them a distinctive realist configuration, highly ontological. This tradition is, markedly, world-acknowledged as opposition, object – objec tor – where no genetic unit precedes the conflict with alterity, where reason assumes a mediating and, in many cases, constitutive role.

Notwithstanding its differentiating importance, it is interesting to note that the category of Firstness has eluded many of the author’s scholars. There are various reasons for this.

On the one hand, within its phenomenological scope, it deals with the bogged terrain of feelings or, to be more faithful to the author, with the quality of feelings, which represent the psychological dimension of the category despite such dimension being contingently required only when it reflects a descriptive instance of the phenomenon.

On the other hand, it will require the scholar to abandon his analytical conscience in order to reflect, as commented hereunder, on the origins of our synthetic human conscience. Without delving in its fundaments, the issue of logical synthesis in Peircean philosophy is based on the first category, not only because the abductive argument is under it, within the semiotic classification of the arguments, but also because the

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2 In Ibri (2002) there is a more detailed explanation of the categories of Phenomenology.
continuum of need has genesis within the continuum of logical probabilities. Based on the first category, it is possible to conceive the creation of a genetic philosophy, an archeology of knowledge, through a bias that will distance itself from a classic idea of reason shaped by a Cartesian-deductive reasoning, notably as regards its certainty and precision ambitions.

It is also interesting to perceive that reflections on the origin of synthetic reason requires thought on its evolutionary formation, on its incompleteness and limitations, necessarily in harmony with an evolutionary hypothesis of Nature. Such limitations, however, will not occur through the interposition of any unknowable instance but, rather, through a necessary abdication of pretensions of absolute-certainty in matters of science. Firstness assumed under its ontological nuance, typified by the freedom of a principle of Chance active in Nature, shall impose an incompleteness in the causal need for laws, causing phenomena to deviate from symmetries and shape the overall aspect of diversity that our human experience reveals. If symmetry exists, it occurs in that which fundaments the homology of the category applied to internal and external worlds: in symmetry with a diversity of quality of feelings correspond myriad qualities of Nature.

It is this correspondence of the ontological nature that will prevent Peirce from dealing with the qualities of feelings at the level of meaning, at the level of a special science, such as Psychology. As soon as Phenomenology reveals, in its inventorying mission of the universe of appearances, the homogeneity and symmetry of categories as regards internal and external worlds, the author will assume the logical treatment that he truly intends to apply to the meaning of feeling. Under this view, Psychology is solely a phenomenal context resource, and not method.

In its interior aspect, note an exemplary passage through which Peirce founds firstness:

Imagine a magenta color. Now imagine that all the rest of your consciousness -- memory, thought, everything except this feeling of magenta -- is utterly wiped out, and with that is erased all possibility of comparing the magenta with anything else or of estimating it as more or less bright. That is what you must think the pure sense-quality to be. Such a definite potentiality can emerge from the indefinite potentiality only by its own vital Firstness and spontaneity. Here is this magenta color. What originally made such a quality of feeling possible? Evidently nothing but itself. It is a First.

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3 See Parker(1997), pp103-127.
4 CP-6.198 – my bold type.
What is complex is this required silencing of reason. Logocentric and compulsively judicative, we face the difficulty of reflecting on this experience of unity provided by the quality of feeling; this reflection notwithstanding, when it occurs it cannot be simultaneous to one’s own experience. It is interesting to note that the interposition of thought dissociates the object in the conscience, while in the simple contemplation or simple experiencing of a quality, both representation and object coincide: both truly contain that pure quality, and the nature of representing is solely reflexive. Observe that in this passage the author’s approach is already speculatively logical. It acknowledges the character of probability in that unity affirming the original, or first. In it Peirce attributes this character of potentiality, of probability, to the spontaneity of what is genetically first.

It is remarkable how, under Phenomenology’s task of formal symmetry, spontaneity emerges in external phenomena:

Now I don't know that it is logically accurate to say that this marvellous and infinite diversity and manifoldness of things is a sign of spontaneity. (...) I would rather say it is spontaneity. I don't know what you can make out of the meaning of spontaneity but newness, freshness, and diversity.5

In another passage the author states: “Now the world is full of this element of irresponsible, free, Originality”.6

Peirce maintains that this aspect of diversity in Nature does not really draw our attention. Obviously, we would say, because our everyday lives teaches us to seek what, in the facts, might be the object of logical judgment, mediating the object’s secondness in predictive representations, in order to set behavioral limits according to them. This implies in our constantly being conscious of time, enabling the creation of signs that mediate our action in relation to alterity. Therefore, such a crushingly greater incidence of mediating reason in our conscious life makes such experience of pure immediacy under firstness rare and infrequent, notwithstanding its essentiality for experiencing a freedom that the spirit can never enjoy when under the conditionality and restraint of reason, of thirdness.

Freedom, under the first category, will not be confined only to the solitude of the spirit, since it is under such double aspect of the phenomenon, internal and external, that

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5 CP-1.160.
6 CP-2.85
Firstness will emerge as the category of the free and unconditioned original. Freedom is a quality that, under the categorial homology of Firstness, will permeate both Nature and spirit.

It is no longer the case to place a man in the world endowed with free choice for the distressing task of choosing, within a world written in causal determination, a starting point, indeed, of an innate estrangement between subject and object, alongside all the logical difficulties that an ontological determinism will impose on the comprehension of the practical consequences of freedom, making use of the pragmatic criterion of concept analysis.

On the contrary, the acceptance of firstness will make freedom symmetrically deployed in man and Nature, and will require a general ontological principle for the diversity of things – Chance. It will be the fundamental metaphysical principle that will make possible one of the most brilliant conjectures of the author: the origin of natural laws. Peirce’s realist hypothesis will induce a world search for a categorial correlate of feeling: this role is assigned to Chance. Unity and diversity, then, seem co-originals. Such correlation afforded by the category of Firstness will, thus, lead to the supposition that there should be a connaturality between both. But how can such possible connaturality be investigated? Peirce will reply to this solely according to his Cosmology, in our view his most proficient and interesting metaphysical conjecture.

Under the aegis of this freedom, common to subject and object, will be the entire deconstruction of the determinism that would generate incongruities within a purportedly realist system. Furthermore, we stress yet again the evolutionism that permeates Peircean philosophy, involving the idea of growth and demanding Firstness as a principle of freedom and unconditionality.

This evolutionism, resulting in a life dynamics vectorially steered towards the expansion of natural mediations as habits, enables Peirce to found his idealism. Only a mental substratum could be capable of acquiring habits and, therefore, this substratum would have cosmic dimensions. A primary ideality would, thus, have to comprise the universe, and even matter would be nothing but an aged phase of that original ideality. All these

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7 Cf. CP-7.514-515.
8 CP-6.32.
Peircean theses have a complex logical structure and, obviously, cannot be satisfactorily explored in the restricted space of a paper, even if we could expound at length on them. But we can, in synthesis, say that Peirce’s ontology contains a monism formed in strong reaction to the Cartesian dualism that proposes spirit and matter as radically separate substances. Nevertheless, the homogeneity of Firstness requires that the qualities of feeling and the diversity of Chance be categorial correlates and, thus, no substantial hiatus could be established between them. Here, the principle of continuity afforded by synechism applies.

Under a heuristic viewpoint, the logic of abduction, Peirce will repudiate any logical scheme that generates restraint in the formation of a new hypothesis, creator of a new body of signs that constitutes a new mediating theory. In its creative role, the human mind requires freedom to conjecture, albeit under a repertoire of signs that can assume new configurations, new combinations, that can deal with new experiences. Certainly there is no defensible argument for a kind of form-generating empiricism, a heresy that Kant rightfully banned from epistemology.

The dialogical aspect of Semiotics will occur in a heuristic ambiance, between sign and object necessarily conatural, in order that the latter may determine the former among a variety of possible forms that it may have or, even, requiring new forms that, with a new possible representation, could deal with phenomena hitherto unknown.

The fundamentally heuristic principle of Peircean philosophy does not occur under the conscious unity of I am, as it appears in Kant, or in the identity of the self founded on intellectual intuition, as in Fichte. The synthetic unity occurs under an experience of firstness that, in the final analysis, implies in the suspension of judgment, not because of a skeptical conviction of the powerlessness of reason in resolving doubts, but rather by the certainty that the whole is only evident when we abandon the activities of the spirit that fragment conscience, making it comparative and judicative and, for this reason, inserted in temporality. This distancing of time seems essential for a kind of heuristic repose of the spirit, in which it will freely form new signical forms.

The unity of conscience formed by mere contemplation of qualities occurs in a time hiatus, wherein conscience compares nothing, since it does not judge and, by so doing,

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9 Readers may study the theses that are shown nearly systematically in volume VI of the Collected Papers.

10 See the excellent reflection by Sandra Rosenthal (2002) on scientific creativity.
abdicates from its mediating and predictive role that permanently strains it for the future, as noted earlier. Thus, past and future are banned from that experience, and for no other reason. Peirce sees it as pure presentness. But, this pure presentness is truly nothing more than a hiatus in conscience’s time, a totality of qualities assembled, in its unity, in the mind of whoever experiences it. New signs will be created under this state of mind, as new combinations in a list of available representations.

This bias provides the fundament of abduction, the original argument of the creation of new explanatory hypotheses in which the synthetical character occurs under the freedom of firstness, generating new forms of thirdness.

Here, in the Peircean project, we have a unique mixture between senses and reason that even Kant himself had not achieved. Senses, for Kant, are instances of apprehension and a time-space ordering of phenomena – they contribute towards cognition but are not, by themselves, cognitive. Under this light, the Peircean solution is daring. The judicative instance, on the other hand, is in perception, totally sensitive. Feeling is originally cognitive, and in it abduction has its synthesis substratum.

To understand the passage of the unity of conscience to the instance of judgment, and the latter’s reliance on the former, requires the mobilization of Peirce’s entire theoretical system under the viewpoint of a *genetic philosophy*. It is in this vector that Firstness is positioned as its origin and fundament.

**References**


