

TRANSCENDENT ACTION IN THE LIGHT OF C.S. PEIRCE'S ARCHITECTONIC SYSTEM

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Abstract. The article presents the key problems relevant to the issue of 'transcendent action', as Peirce calls it. The author focuses on the relation between 'belief' and the 'transcendentals': unity, truth, goodness, and beauty, in their peculiar Peircean context. He considers firstly 'belief' in the sense of „an original impulse to act consistently, to have a definite intention” and, secondly, „Normative Science, which investigates the universal and necessary laws of the relation of Phenomena to Ends, that is, perhaps, to Truth, Right, and Beauty”. Finally, he considers Peirce's defense against two popular accusations: one on the part of the logicians which „confounds *psychical* truths with *psychological* truths”, and the second one regarding *hedonism*.

Introduction

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1913) occupied himself with the nature of truth, probability, the foundations of statistical reasoning, semiotics as the theory of meaning and representation, logic, especially the logic of relatives. He developed a genuine theory of categories, grounded on a phaneroscopy – *qua* phenomenology – conjoined with mathematics and logic. Moreover, he made important investigations in ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of mind, and metaphysics (in the form of a process philosophy). However, Peirce's main focus, as Potter argues, was „on the substantiality of things (including the „self”), and the foundations of human knowledge” (Potter 1992, p. 11).

In the current essay we will consider a number of problems relevant to the issue of „transcendent action”, as Peirce calls it. We will talk briefly about Peirce's new theory of categories, and then focus the relation be-

tween *belief* in Peirce's sense and the *transcendentals*: unity, truth, goodness, and beauty, though in a pragmatic key. We will consider firstly belief in the sense of „an original impulse to act consistently, to have a definite intention” (CP 5.28, 1903), and, secondly, „Normative Science, which investigates the universal and necessary laws of the relation of Phenomena to Ends, that is, perhaps, to Truth, Right, and Beauty” (CP 5.121, 1903). At the end we will have a look at Peirce's defense again two popular accusations: one on the part of the logicians which „confounds *psychical* truths with *psychological* truths” (CP 5.485, 1907), and the second one regarding *hedonism*.

I. Belief and the categories of thought

As Skagestad noticed, „In 1905 Peirce was explicitly arguing for the claim that the essence of mind is not consciousness, but purpose, or final causation.” (Skagestad 1999, p. 554). Peirce himself characterized his own philosophy at that time as follows:

I understand pragmatism to be a method of ascertaining the meanings, not of all ideas, but only of what I call „intellectual concepts,” that is to say, of those upon the structure of which, arguments concerning objective fact may hinge. (...) Intellectual concepts, however – the only sign-burdens that are properly denominated „concepts” – essentially carry some implication concerning the general behavior either of some conscious being or of some inanimate object, and so convey more, not merely than any feeling, but more, too, than any existential fact, namely, the „would-acts,” „would-dos” of habitual behavior; and no agglomeration of actual happenings can ever completely fill up the meaning of a „would-be”. (CP 5.467, 1907).

Peirce relegated „Feelings” to the first category of thought, namely *Firstness*, which includes *Quality*, and consciousness of *qualia*. „Existential fact” was related to *Relation*, *Secondness*, a „consciousness of an interruption into the field of consciousness, sense of resistance, of an external fact, of another something” (CP 1.377, 1885) which occurs *hic et nunc* (cf. CP 2.146, 1902; 7.532, undated). Meaning *qua* concept demands something else, a new category. As Potter points out:

„These universal categories [according to Peirce] are three in number, no more and no less, absolutely irreducible to one another yet interdependent, and directly observable in the elements of whatever is at any time before the mind in any way. Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness roughly correspond to the modes of being: possibility, actuality and law. (CP 1.23)” (Potter 1992, p. 494).

Thirdness, as a synthetical-consciousness, gives the idea of continuity, representation, mediation or law. This category is involved in making predictions about the future behavior of an object (cf CP 1.555, 1893). It is not dyadic, as has very often been thought, because its very meaning depends on successive thought, which in Peirce's theory is called *Interpretant*. So, meaning, or truth, is constituted not simply in the adequation of the mind to its object, but by a triadic relation within the frame of thought. In a situation of full information, when the goal of action has been perceived and acknowledged in the light of the *transcendentals*, truth means the adequation of the mind to its object by means of a thought *qua* intention.

As Houser notices:

Occasionally Peirce refers to the third division of consciousness as thought, but when he does he is not referring to anything in the mind, as he may seem to be when he speaks, for example, of thoughts being determined by previous thoughts (7.332). It is not thought, but relations, the object or substance of thought that is in the mind. Thought is like a habit, or „the meaning of a word”. (...) „It is we that are in it, rather than it in any of us”. (8.257) (Houser 1983, p. 345)

To regard the categories, *Firstness*, *Secondness* and *Thirdness* as both logical and ontological is not at all obvious. Peirce's system was realized in time. Around 1867 or 1868, Peirce discovered the work of Duns Scotus. In those years he changed his position on *qualia*. In 1865 he wrote: „Qualities are fictions; for though it is true that roses are red, yet redness is nothing, but a fiction framed for the purpose of philosophizing; yet harmless so long as we remember that the scholastic realism it implies is false” (W 1:307). After 1897 he had recognized possibility as real; and associated it with *Firstness*, in his new list of categories. He affirmed then, that there were real and objective laws (Boler 1963, p. 128; cf CP 1.16, 1903).

Peirce was of the opinion that when a human being acts according to a purpose, s/he believes in and is expecting some predicted phenomenon. The pragmatic maxim, the clue to Peirce's theory, borrowed from A. Bain says that belief is „that upon which a man is prepared to act.” (CP 5.12, 1907).

II. Belief and the Transcendentals

Rationality manifests itself through habit, or the inclination to give an intelligent response, in a determined way, to any kind of stimulus (cf CP 5.440, 1905). In Peirce's own words,

belief consists mainly in being deliberately prepared to adopt the formula believed in as the guide to action. If this be in truth the nature of belief, then undoubtedly the proposition believed in can itself be nothing but a maxim of conduct. That I believe is quite evident. (CP 5.27, 1903).

Peirce considered himself „to be the sole depositary at present of the completely developed system, which all hangs together and cannot receive any proper presentation in fragments.” (CP 8.255, 1871). His Architectonic System has its foundation in three Normative Sciences: Logic, Ethics and Aesthetics. In addition, the *conditio sine qua non* of his pragmatism was the principle: „to act consistently, to have a definite intention”. As he expressed it:

But how do we know that belief is nothing but the deliberate preparedness to act according to the formula believed? My original article carried this back to a psychological principle. The conception of truth, according to me, was developed out of an original impulse to act consistently, to have a definite intention. (...) all attempts to ground the fundamentals of logic on psychology are seen to be essentially shallow (CP 5.28, 1903; cf Forster 2003, note 7).

Potter adds:

Even though Peirce came to undertake a serious study of the normative sciences only late in his career, he did not consider it an appendix to pragmatism nor a mere afterthought. [...] It would be a basic mistake, therefore, to assume that because Peirce’s exposition of their role is short and unsatisfactory, it is not an integral part of what he conceived to be his „architectonic” system. (Potter 1966, p. 6).

The role of normative science is not to judge something as good or bad, but to inquire into what should be done, to formulate necessary rules governing choices, in other words: „to set up norms, or rules which need not, but which ought, to be followed” (CP 2.156, 1902). Potter notices that the term ‘ought’, presumes a *surplus*, a *something more*, in determining a future action. There is no room for *ought* where *must be* prevails or else where there is *no choice at all* (Potter 1966, p. 7). The term ‘ought’ involves free-will, auto-determination, a voluntary act, and therefore „implies ideals, ends, purposes which attract and guide deliberate conduct.” (CP 1.575) This implies the need for knowledge of categorical propositions which make a truth claim. Hence,

Now it is no longer simply a question of considering the ideal itself, but of my adopting or rejecting that ideal. Peirce talks in terms of Kant’s categorical imperative pronouncing for or against the ideal, but with an important difference:

while for Kant the imperative is itself beyond control, for Peirce it is not. The imperative itself is open to criticism and this is what makes it rational. (...) At this point, then, there is room for a distinction between good and bad aims: a good aim is one that can be consistently pursued, a bad aim is one that cannot. (CP 5.133).

Determining rules of conduct, making investigations concerning ideals, all this belongs to ethics, a theory whose normative character, in this context, sets it apart. Peirce had explored this for over twenty years, before arriving at the conclusion that,

We are too apt to define ethics to ourselves as the science of right and wrong. That cannot be correct, for the reason that right and wrong are ethical conceptions which it is the business of that science to develop and to justify. (...) The fundamental problem of ethics is not, therefore, What is right, but, What am I prepared deliberately to accept as the statement of what I want to do, what am I to aim at, what am I after? To what is the force of my will to be directed? Now logic is a study of the means of attaining the end of thought. It cannot solve that problem until it clearly knows what that end is. Life can have but one end. It is Ethics which defines that end. It is, therefore, impossible to be thoroughly and rationally logical except upon an ethical basis. (CP 2.198, 1902)

In other words, Ethics is not concerned with *what is right or wrong*, because these are already ethical categories and Ethics must first define them. Ethics must concern itself with the norms and ideals which give right and wrong their meaning. It is neither an art nor a practical science, but theoretical *par excellence*.

„To say that knowledge of normative science would directly and in itself either help one to think more correctly or to live more decently or to create more artistically, would be like saying that a knowledge of the mechanics involved in a game of billiards would allow us to become a master-player (see, e.g., CP 2.3)”. (Potter 1966, p. 8).

In a similar way, Peirce reflected upon Aesthetics. As Nowak notices: „It is necessary to remember, that although its project is in an embryonic state, Aesthetics is not an Ethics concerning Art, nor is any theory of value involved. Nor is it the Philosophy of Beauty” (Nowak 2002, p. 188). Aesthetics, as a normative science, is concerned with Ends; what is admirable in itself; what carries meaning, absolutely, without additional justification. In terms of Peirce’s theory the very object of Aesthetics is *summum bonum*.

According to Peirce, in searching for an unequivocal answer concerning the nature of the object of Aesthetics

we should eliminate from it, not merely all consideration of effort, but all consideration of action and reaction, including all consideration of our receiving pleasure (...), everything in short, belonging to the opposition of the ego and the non-ego. (CP 2.199, 1902).

Peirce maintained that in English there is no suitable concept for it, but in Greek one may use the word *kalós*. The Greek term permits us to construct an expression perhaps a bit strange, or shocking, for ordinary language – „the beauty of the unbeautiful”. As Nowak puts it,

Someone affirms: the beauty of the unbeautiful – apparently a paradox; but s/he does not enter into dispute with Peirce. (...) Noticing the absence of an antinomy in this formula helps us to apprehend how the main part of an answer in response to the „purely” formed question of aesthetics is to be found in what must disappear from the heavy [Greek] „kalós” by the time it becomes the light [French] „beau”. (Nowak 2002, p. 188).

According to Peirce, „aesthetics considers those things whose ends are to embody qualities of feeling, ethics those things whose ends lie in action, and logic those things whose end is to represent something.” (CP 5.129, 1903).

Thus normative ethics is concerned with behavior in relation to the Ends of action; it does not ask simply about good or bad, but *what makes good good and bad bad*. Ethics determines rules and aims for rational action, therefore its bond with logic is obvious since logic is the study of means, the study of solid and proper reasoning. Peirce claimed in this regard: „It is, therefore, impossible to be thoroughly and rationally logical except upon an ethical basis.” (CP 2.198, 1902).

III. Belief and hedonism

For Peirce, „to make a normative judgment is to criticize; to criticize is to attempt to correct; to attempt to correct supposes a measure of control over what is criticized in the first place. [...] In this Peirce was directly opposed to almost all other schools of thought of his day”. (Potter 1966, p. 20).

In contrast to the German school Peirce maintained that logic, as a science, „cannot be reduced to a matter of feeling. Ultimately an argument cannot be judged valid because of some instinctive feeling that it is so, nor by any compulsion so to judge, nor by appeal to an intuition” (Potter 1966, p. 9; also cf. CP 2.39-51, 1902).

Peirce insisted in this regard on a distinction between „logical consequentiality” and „compulsion of thought” (CP 3.432, 1896; Potter 1966, p. 9). Outside of the German school this a position represented by John Stuart Mill. Peirce said: „The principle on which Mill based his opinion is that to say how a man *ought* to think has to be based ultimately on how he *must* think.” (After Potter 1996, p. 21).

One of the accusations Peirce had to confront in regard to his Architectonic System was that „by making logic dependent upon ethics, and ethics dependent upon aesthetics, Peirce in effect has fallen into the error of hedonism” (Potter 1966, p. 21). How could he respond? As we mentioned earlier, Peirce distinguished three categories of thought: *Firstness*, *Secondness* and *Thirdness*, or *qualities*, *actuality* and *law*, respectively. Logic as a normative science is concerned with *Thirdness*, Ethics with *Secondness*, and finally Aesthetics with *Firstness*. Initially Peirce did not realize how to avoid inconsistency in his theory and how to overcome the difficulty inherent in the above accusation until he made a more penetrating analysis of his categories. At the end, he arrived at the conclusion: „To say that morality, in the last resort, comes to an esthetic judgment is *not* hedonism – but is directly opposed to hedonism.” (CP 5.111, 1903). This affirmation was possible due to an apprehension of the representational character of *Firstness* and *Secondness*, in relation to the human mind. In other words, the rejection of the accusation of hedonism became possible when Peirce realized that the categories *Firstness* and *Secondness* had their representations in *Thirdness*. As Potter puts it,

Again, hedonism is avoided because on this view pleasure consists in something intellectual – it is not the case that something is deliberately approved because it is pleasurable, but something is pleasurable (esthetically pleasing) because it is approved of. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Peirce is saying that something is pleasurable because it is reasonable, and not *vice versa* (Potter, p. 23).

So, in the last analysis, it is pleasure that that is the guide of conduct, because behind it there is the observation of a factual situation, and a voluntary response to it.

Without entering into a more detailed exposition, we may conclude that, in the *Basis of Pragmatism* (1905-06), Peirce shows that „the control of thinking with a view to its conformity to a standard or ideal is a special case of the control of action”. (Potter 1966, p. 26). „There is in a sense a compulsion at the base of logic, a compulsion arising from positive ob-

servation of a factual situation, not a compulsion of mere feeling, nor a compulsion based on the principles of another theoretical science. (Potter 1966, p. 9).

Therefore logic must rest on ethics, as a normative science concerned with conduct.

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