

# Firstness

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1886 | One, Two, Three: Kantian Categories | EP 1:243

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If the universe is thus progressing from a state of all but pure chance to a state of all but complete determination by law, we must suppose that there is an original, elemental, tendency of things to acquire determinate properties, to take habits. This is the Third or mediating element between chance, which brings forth First and original events, and law which produces sequences or Seconds.

1887-1888 | A Guess at the Riddle | EP 1:248; CP 1.356-357

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The First is that whose being is simply in itself, not referring to anything nor lying behind anything. The Second is that which is what it is by force of something to which it is second. The Third is that which is what it is owing to things between which it mediates and which it brings into relation to each other.

The idea of the absolutely First must be entirely separated from all conception of or reference to anything else; for what involves a second is itself a second to that second. The First must therefore be present and immediate, so as not to be second to a representation. It must be fresh and new, for if old it is second to its former state. It must be initiative, original, spontaneous, and free; otherwise it is second to a determining cause. It is also something vivid and conscious; so only it avoids being the object of some sensation. It precedes all synthesis and all differentiation; it has no unity and no parts. It cannot be articulately thought: assert it, and it has already lost its characteristic innocence; for assertion always implies a denial of something else. Stop to think of it, and it has flown! What the world was to Adam on the day he opened his eyes to it, before he had drawn any distinctions, or had become conscious of his own existence – that is first, present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free, vivid, conscious, and evanescent. Only, remember that every description of it must be false to it.

1887-1888 | A Guess at the Riddle | EP 1:250; CP 1.361

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We have seen that it is the immediate consciousness that is preeminently first, the external dead thing that is preeminently second. In like manner, it is evidently the representation mediating between these two that is preëminently third. Other examples, however, should not be neglected. The first is agent, the second patient, the third is the action by which the former influences the latter. Between the beginning as first, and the end as last, comes the process which leads from first to last.

1887-1888 | A Guess at the Riddle | EP 1:275; CP 1.405

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Indeterminacy, then, or pure firstness, and hæcceity, or pure secondness, are facts not calling for and not capable of explanation.

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1892 | The Critic of Arguments. II. The Reader is Introduced to Relatives | CP 3.422

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I will only mention here that the ideas which belong to the three forms of rhemata are firstness, secondness, thirdness; firstness, or spontaneity; secondness, or dependence; thirdness, or mediation.

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1894 [c.] | The List of Categories: A Second Essay | CP 1.302

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The idea of First is predominant in the ideas of freshness, life, freedom. The free is that which has not another behind it, determining its actions; but so far as the idea of the negation of another enters, the idea of another enters; and such negative idea must be put in the background, or else we cannot say that the Firstness is predominant. Freedom can only manifest itself in unlimited and uncontrolled variety and multiplicity; and thus the first becomes predominant in the ideas of measureless variety and multiplicity. It is the leading idea of Kant's "manifold of sense." But in Kant's synthetic unity the idea of Thirdness is predominant. It is an attained unity; and would better have been called totality; for that is the one of his categories in which it finds a home. In the idea of being, Firstness is predominant, not necessarily on account of the abstractness of that idea, but on account of its self-containedness. It is not in being separated from qualities that Firstness is most predominant, but in being something peculiar and idiosyncratic. The first is predominant in feeling, as distinct from objective perception, will, and thought.

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1898-06-11 | The Logic Notebook | MS [R] 339:108r

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In the contents of consciousness we recognize three sorts of elements, Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness. A First is whatever it is in itself regardless of all else whether exterior to it or parts of it. [—] Firstness is feeling-quality; secondness is brute reaction; thirdness is mediation.

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1901-1902 [c.] | Definitions for Baldwin's Dictionary [R] | MS [R] 1147

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*firstness, n.*

1. The ordinal position of the first member of a series.
2. The mode of being of that which is whatever it is positively and regardless of anything else. According to the phenomenology of C. S. Peirce, this applies only to simple qualities, especially qualities of feeling. According to several of the other systems of metaphysics, it describes the mode of being of a substance, and does not apply to qualities which are such only by inhering in substances. In explanation of the former meaning, it is said that firstness is not attributed to simple qualities as embodied in subjects, but in the peculiar positive suchness which [...] makes each what it is and which is not affected by the embodiment of the quality...

Let us now consider what could appear as being in the present instant were it utterly cut off from past and future. We can only guess; for nothing is more occult than the absolute present. There plainly could be no action; and without the possibility of action, to talk of binarity would be to utter words without meaning. There might be a sort of consciousness, or feeling, with no self; and this feeling might have its tone. Notwithstanding what William James has said, I do not think there could be any continuity like space, which, though it may perhaps appear in an instant in an educated mind, I cannot think could do so if it had no time at all; and without continuity parts of the feeling could not be synthetized; and therefore there would be no recognizable parts. There could not even be a degree of vividness of the feeling; for this [the degree of vividness] is the comparative amount of disturbance of general consciousness by a feeling. At any rate, such shall be our hypothesis, and whether it is psychologically true or not is of no consequence. The world would be reduced to a quality of unanalyzed feeling. Here would be an utter absence of binarity. I cannot call it unity; for even unity supposes plurality. I may call its form Firstness, Orience, or Originality. It would be something *which is what it is without reference to anything else* within it or without it, regardless of all force and of all reason. Now the world is full of this element of irresponsible, free, Originality. [—]We mostly neglect them; but there are cases, as in qualities of feeling, self-consciousness, etc., in which such isolated flashes come to the front. Originality, or Firstness, is another of my Categories.

Category the First is the Idea of that which is such as it is regardless of anything else. That is to say, it is a *Quality* of Feeling. [...]

Category the First owing to its Extremely Rudimentary character is not susceptible of any degenerate or weakened modification.

Firstness is the mode of being which consists in its subject's being positively such as it is regardless of aught else. That can only be a possibility. For as long as things do not act upon one another there is no sense or meaning in saying that they have any being, unless it be that they are such in themselves that they may perhaps come into relation with others. The mode of being a *redness*, before anything in the universe was yet red, was nevertheless a positive qualitative possibility. And redness in itself, even if it be embodied, is something positive and *sui generis*. That I call Firstness. We naturally attribute Firstness to outward objects, that is we suppose they have capacities in themselves which may or may not be already actualized, which may or may not ever be actualized, although we can know nothing of such possibilities [except] so far as they are actualized.

Three kinds of elements can be discerned in whatever comes before the mind. The first is the element of Quality, such, for example, as Red; and including all the positive suchness of the idea in itself, as mere ideal suchness. It is that which is such as it is, positively and quite irrespective of anything else. I call this element the element of Firstness. Besides its direct presence we attribute to things out of us natures of their own irrespective of actual reactions.

1903 | Lowell Lectures on Some Topics of Logic Bearing on Questions Now Vexed. Part 1 of 3rd draught of 3rd Lecture | CP 1.343

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The immediate present, could we seize it, would have no character but its Firstness. Not that I mean to say that immediate consciousness (a pure fiction, by the way), would be Firstness, but that the *quality* of what we are immediately conscious of, which is no fiction, is Firstness.

1903 | CSP's Lowell Lectures of 1903. 2nd Part of 3rd Draught of Lecture III | CP 1.531

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A Firstness is exemplified in every quality of a total feeling. It is perfectly simple and without parts; and everything has its quality. Thus the tragedy of King Lear has its Firstness, its flavor *sui generis*. That wherein all such qualities agree is universal Firstness, the very being of Firstness. The word *possibility* fits it, except that possibility implies a relation to what exists, while universal Firstness is the mode of being of itself. That is why a new word was required for it. Otherwise, "possibility" would have answered the purpose.

1903 | CSP's Lowell Lectures of 1903. 2nd Part of 3rd Draught of Lecture III | CP 1.530

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When you strive to get the purest conceptions you can of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, thinking of quality, reaction, and mediation – what you are striving to apprehend is pure Firstness, the Firstness of Secondness – that is what Secondness is, of itself – and the Firstness of Thirdness.

1904 | Letters to Lady Welby | CP 8.328

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... I was long ago (1867) led, after only three or four years' study, to throw all ideas into the three classes of Firstness, of Secondness, and of Thirdness. This sort of notion is as distasteful to me as to anybody; and for years, I endeavored to pooh-pooh and refute it; but it long ago conquered me completely. Disagreeable as it is to attribute such meaning to numbers, and to a triad above all, it is as true as it is disagreeable. The ideas of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness are simple enough. Giving to being the broadest possible sense, to include ideas as well as things, and ideas that we fancy we have just as much as ideas we do have, I should define Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness thus:

Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else.

Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third.

Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other.

1904 | Letters to Lady Welby | CP 8.329

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The typical ideas of firstness are qualities of feeling, or mere appearances. The scarlet of your royal liveries, the quality itself, independently of its being perceived or remembered, is an example, by which I do not mean that you are to imagine that you *do not* perceive or remember it, but that you are to drop out of account that which may be attached to it in perceiving or in remembering, but which does not belong to the quality. For example, when you remember it, your idea is said to be *dim* and when it is before your eyes, it is vivid. But dimness or vividness do not belong to your idea of the quality. They *might* no doubt, if considered simply as a feeling; but when you think of vividness you do not consider it from that point of view. You think of it as a degree of disturbance of your consciousness. The quality of red is not thought of as belonging to you, or as attached to liveries. It is simply a peculiar positive possibility regardless of anything else. If you ask a mineralogist what hardness is, he will say that it is what one predicates of a body that one cannot scratch with a knife. But a simple person will think of hardness as a simple positive possibility the *realization* of which causes a body to be like a flint. That idea of hardness is an idea of Firstness. The unanalyzed total impression made by any manifold not thought of as actual fact, but simply as a quality, as simple positive possibility of appearance, is an idea of Firstness. Notice the *naïveté* of Firstness. [—] The idea of the present instant, which, whether it exists or not, is naturally thought as a point of time in which no thought can take place or any detail be separated, is an idea of Firstness.

1904 | A Brief Intellectual Autobiography by Charles Sanders Peirce | Peirce, 1983, p. 78; MS [R] L107:5 - MS [R] 914:5

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...*Firstness*, or the mode of being of that which is such as regardless of anything else, as exemplified by simple Qualities of feeling...

This quote has been taken from Kenneth Laine Ketner's 1983 reconstruction of Peirce's 'Autobiography'. Ketner identifies the source as "variant pages" of the manuscript. Ketner refers to the portion from MS [R] 914 with the page number 2; in the manuscript, it is 5.

1904 | A Brief Intellectual Autobiography by Charles Sanders Peirce | Peirce, 1983, p. 72; MS [R] L107:22

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*Firstness* is the mode or element of being by which any subject is such as it is, *positively* and regardless of everything else; or rather, the category is not bound down to this particular conception but is the element which is characteristic and peculiar in this definition and is a prominent ingredient in the ideas of quality, qualitateness, absoluteness, originality, variety, chance, possibility, form,

essence, feeling, etc.

This quote has been taken from Kenneth Laine Ketner's 1983 reconstruction of Peirce's 'Autobiography'

1905 | Letters to Mario Calderoni | MS [R] L67:17

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I find that there are in the phaneron,  
1<sup>st</sup>, elements each of which is (that is, appears to be, for we are speaking of phanera) such as it is *positively* and regardless of anything else. I call these *priman* elements.

1905-06-01 | The Logic Notebook | MS [R] 339:242r

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*Firstness* is the Mode of Being of that which is such as it is positively and regardless of anything else. It is thus an abstract possibility, It can therefore only be known to us immediately.

1907 | Pragmatism | CP 5.469

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Careful analysis shows that to the three grades of valency of indecomposable concepts correspond three classes of characters or predicates. Firstly come "firstnesses," or positive internal characters of the subject in itself; secondly come "secondnesses," or brute actions of one subject or substance on another, regardless of law or of any third subject; thirdly comes "*thirdnesses*," or the mental or quasi-mental influence of one subject on another relatively to a third.