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*Firstness and the Collapse of Universals*

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**Abstract:**

Firstness is the most neglected of Peirce's categories, and is frequently held to be either elusive or inherently inconsistent. Yet, one's implicit understanding of Firstness guides the kind of interpretation given to a wide range of his philosophy. From the starting point of his account of qualia in perceptual awareness, Firstness can be seen to be a consistent category which indicates that reality is qualitatively rich, but that its qualitative richness indicates not a realm of sense universals or any sort of determinate repeatables but rather a realm of diverse and somewhat indefinite qualitative stimuli. There emerges from Peirce's epistemic/phenomenal characterization of Firstness in perception a metaphysical category of Firstness which is neither a remnant of traditional conceptions of determinate repeatable qualities, nor a remnant of traditional conceptions of eternal Platonic possibilities. Rather, what emerges is a Firstness which attributes to reality precisely those characteristics most antithetical to such traditional conceptions. Firstness in this sense not only underlies Peirce's radical rejection of foundationalist-antifoundationalist alternatives in epistemology, but also anticipates his rejection of the ontological alternatives offered by a tradition of substance metaphysics.

**Keywords:** Qualia, Repeatability, Continuity, Generality, Possibility, Perception, Firstness

In any discussion of Peirce's philosophy, Firstness is usually the most neglected of his categories. This, however, is not due to any unique clarity of the category of Firstness. It has been aptly noted by various critics that Firstness is by far the most elusive of Peirce's categories (Stearn, 1952, pp. 196-197), that it is the most difficult of the three categories to focus on clearly, and that it leads to some of Peirce's less helpful metaphors (Hookway, 1985, p.106). The plight of Firstness is succinctly encapsulated in the claim that it is without doubt both less clear and receiving of less attention than the other categories (Boler, 1963, pp. 122-123). The reason for this neglect may well be that an explicit interpretation of Firstness is not considered as important for the overall thrust of Peirce's philosophy as are interpretations of his other categories. Yet, it may well be that one's interpretation of Firstness provides the key for the kind of interpretation given to a wide range of Peirce's philosophy.

That Firstness is elusive is surely true. It has often been said, however, that its characterization is inherently inconsistent. This statement is debatable, and is largely rejected by the present view. The charge of inconsistency is based both on Peirce's diverse characterizations of Firstness (see e.g. Goudge, 1935, p. 538) and on his change in emphasis between earlier and later writings (see e.g. Murphey, 1961, pp. 306-307).

A useful way to approach Peirce's diverse characterizations of Firstness is by way of his brief discussions of perceptual awareness which contain the language of qualia. Peirce states of qualia that, "There is a distinctive quale to every combination of sensations so far as it is really synthesized" (CP 6.222). Further, "in quale-consciousness there is but one quality, but one element. It is entirely simple" (CP 6.231). This, however, is not meant to imply that we build up perception from atomic qualia. What is immediately recognized as given, though expressed in language, is epistemologically prior to language. And, what is given as the percept is not a "collection" of atomic qualia, but rather a gestalt or relation of qualia. Our immediate recognition of the date of sense is not of atomic qualia. Rather, the recognized content is a unitary percept or "feeling tone" which, Peirce holds, has its own distinctive quale, a unitary quale or experienced content which is analyzed rather than synthesized in the process of recognition. As Peirce observes, "We are, of course, directly aware of positive sense qualities in the percept (although in the percept they are in no wise separate from the whole object)" (CP 7.624). Murphey's characterization incorporates these features when he notes that,

A First is not the same as what is usually called a percept ... which has a structure and which combines a number of sense qualities. A pure First ... is simple and devoid of structure. But every percept has a First which is the single impression created by the total ensemble of its elements. Moreover, if a single sense quality of a percept is prescinded from all the rest and is considered by itself, such a quality is a First. (Murphey, 1961, p.307)

Peirce claims that while, "Each quale is in itself what it is for itself, without reference to any other ... . Nevertheless, comparing consciousness does pronounce them to be alike. They are alike to the comparing consciousness, though neither alike nor unlike in themselves" (CP 6.224). The repeatability of qualia, then, is itself a product of the synthesizing activity of consciousness acting upon unique qualia. The more fundamental level of unique qualia gives significance to Peirce's claim that Firstness is predominant, not necessarily because of the abstractness of that idea, but because of its self-containedness. The awareness of qualities as repeatable and recognizable qualia is a more primitive epistemological level than that of the awareness of qualities as objective properties indicating possibilities of future experiences. The only type of possibilities of future experiences inherent in repeatable qualia is the possibility of repetition. Here, however, it should be noted that qualities as qualia and qualities as objective properties are not meant to be numerically distinct, but epistemologically distinct. They represent different levels of interpretation. "It is not in being separated from qualities that Firstness is most predominant, but in being something peculiar and idiosyncratic."

Qualia "in themselves" as "absolutely simple," and "absolutely free" (CP 1.302, 6.236) are "what the world was to Adam on the day he opened his eyes to it ... that is first present, immediate, fresh, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, free ... " (CP 1.357).

Such a characterization leads Peirce to speak of Firstness in terms of qualities of feeling (CP 5.444). As he analogously states, "There is no resemblance at all in feeling, since feeling is whatever it is, positively and regardless of anything else, while the resemblance of anything lies in the comparison of that thing with something else" (CP 1.310). Murray Murphey distinguishes between the description of a First in epistemological and psychological terms. He argues that epistemically it is a sense quality, while psychologically it is a feeling, and that Peirce so abruptly switches from one mode of description to the other that it is often difficult to tell which he is using unless this duality is constantly kept in mind (Murphey, 1961, p.339). To think of feeling as used by Peirce in terms of psychology, however, is to be misled by a word, for as Peirce himself emphatically states, "If by 'psychology' we mean the positive or observation science of the mind or consciousness ... psychology can teach us nothing of the nature of feeling, nor can we gain knowledge of any feeling by introspection, for the very reason that it is our immediate consciousness". Or, as he elsewhere states, he uses the word 'feeling' "to denote that which is supposed to be immediately, and all at one instant, present to consciousness. Peirce's use here of the phrase, "supposed to be", emphasizes that we cannot directly observe what is instantaneously present to consciousness (MS 739, p.30).

Feeling, for Peirce, indicates an epistemic level, not a psychological content. It indicates that level of experiencing Firstness which is prior to the grasp of repeatable sense qualities. Feeling thus indicates that which is in its purity "unknowable". Though no element of the phaneron exists in isolation, even the "conceptual isolation" of pure Firstness for purposes of analysis is difficult because of its primitive nature. Peirce stresses that every description of it must be false to it (CP 1.357). A metaphorical or anthropomorphic extrapolation from this claim concerning the "felt" character of qualitative immediacy to the claim that the "secondary qualities" are to be found in nature leads Peirce to his cryptic statement, usually taken as indicative of his idealism, that "It is a psychic feeling of red without us which arouses a sympathetic feeling of red in our senses" (CP 1.311).

This level of felt qualitative immediacy is the important level for the issue at hand, for if qualia are unique in the most primitive experience of them and if it is "comparing consciousness" that makes them repeatable, then Firstness in its metaphysical aspect

does not seem to indicate any sort of determinate repeatables. To allow the repeatability of qualia to lead to a metaphysics which gives an independent ontological status in any sense to determinate repeatables is completely to ignore this most basic mode of Firstness as it enters into experience. Thus, in turning to the example, "Yesterday I saw a blue color; and here is a blue color," Peirce stresses that "some beginner may object that they have both blueness in them; but I reply that blueness is nothing but the idea of these sensations and of others I have had, thrown together and indistinctly thought at once" (CP 7.392). This reference to ideas of sensations is perhaps a good example of Peirce's often confused way of speaking. However, the general direction of his thought seems clear enough. We cannot compare presentations in terms of the ontological quality, "blueness," for the repeatable quality is itself dependent upon the assimilation of past and present presentations. Firstness as determining a class of repeatable qualitative presentations is the product of an epistemic function; it is not an ontological given. Qualia as "alike to the comparing consciousness," are in one sense the most abstract elements of the phenomenon, though this does not contradict their characterization as Firsts. The recognized qualia are the most abstract of the phenomena in the sense in which abstraction is equated with precision. By abstraction or precision Peirce means a mental separation which "arises from attention to one element and neglect of the other" (CP 1.549). The term "precision" as used by Peirce is the cognate of the verb "prescind," not the adjective "precise." As Peirce states elsewhere, what he intends can best be expressed by the term "precession" (CP 2.42). Furthermore, in this latter passage Peirce stresses that the process of precision is not that by which we obtain, for example, the abstract concept, whiteness, but rather that by which we are able to grasp a white appearance generally, or, in other terms, to recognize a quale as an instance of a kind. And, in this sense, qualia, as the recognizable but ineffable element in experience, are the most abstract of the phenomena of experience and of the nature of Firstness, for while pure abstraction can be reached by the agreement of things in some respect, Peirce denies the relativity of Firstness to anything else by which it is grasped. Thus, in its phenomenological sense, a First is an immediately recognized quale.

But even the unity of a unique "self-contained" quale has lost some of the original diversity, for as Peirce notes: "That very same logical element of experience, the quale-element, which appears upon the inside as unity, when viewed from the outside is seen as variety" (CP 6.236). And, again, "No unity can originate in concentration ... but any unity there (sic) was there already may in that way, be many times intensified" (CP 6.227). That Peirce characterizes the quale-element, which appears "upon the inside as

unity, and upon the outside as variety," as the same logical element is merely a recognition of the fact that this distinction is not needed if one is considering only the logical or epistemological function of qualia in cognition. And, since an uninterpreted quale is itself a "synthesis of sensations", then surely at this level also, what is seen on the inside as unity will be seen on the outside as variety. Here, however, it is crucial to note that although Peirce uses the terms 'impression' or 'sensation' quite often, he explicitly indicates not only that there are no first impressions of sense (CP 5.213, 7.465), but also that when he does use the term 'impression' it is used as a limiting concept to indicate the boundary of consciousness (Writings, vol.1, p.515).<sup>1</sup> The concept of a synthesis of impressions as the limiting concept of the boundary of consciousness merges with the concept of the point of organism environment interaction. It throws us outward onto the universe within which perception arises. Just as recognition unifies diverse qualia, so qualia unify diverse stimuli. The terms 'qualia' and 'stimuli' are not meant to indicate a numerical distinction but rather a logical or epistemological distinction: qualitative richness as grasped by consciousness and as independent of consciousness respectively. Peirce holds quite emphatically to a theory of direct perception (See CP 5.56). And, just as the unifying function of recognition must have some basis upon which to work - however vague this basis may be - so the unifying function of the "production" of qualia must have some objective basis, no matter how vague, upon which to work. As Peirce emphasizes this objective basis, "No sensation nor sense faculty is requisite for the possibility which is the being of the quality" (CP 1.422). From the backdrop of the above transition to Firstness as a category of metaphysics the discussion will now turn more directly to the character of Firstness as indicative of both ontological qualitative richness and ontological possibility. From the limited discussion thus far it can thus already be seen that firstness is at once, but without inconsistency, quality of feeling, ineffable and unknowable, and pure possibility. Furthermore, it is both quality determining a class and quality as the sensory element of experience. Diverse combinations of these various features have been held to point to the inconsistencies in Peirce's characterization of Firstness mentioned earlier.

Here certain terminological confusions must be clarified. Peirce, in his writings, uses the term 'possibility' to characterize not only Firstness but also Thirdness. And, as an added confusion, he indiscriminately interchanges the terms 'possibility' and 'potentiality'. Peirce's dual use of the term 'possibility' is quite understandable, for since Secondness comprises the domain of the actual, the possible, in a broad sense, must include both Firstness and Thirdness. What Peirce means, however, can be clarified in the light of a few illuminating statements. He holds that "A quality is how something

may or might have been. A law is how an endless future must continue to be" (CP 1.536). Again, at times he characterizes his three categories of being as possibility, actuality, and destiny (CP 4.547). Finally, he states that "Generality is either of that negative sort which belongs to the merely potential, as such, and this is peculiar to the category of Firstness, or it is of the positive kind which belongs to conditional necessity, and this is peculiar to the category of law" (CP 1.42). What the contextual meaning of the various pairs of terms used to characterize Firstness and Thirdness indicates in each of these examples is that Firstness involves a weaker type of possibility than does Thirdness. The most appropriate terms to distinguish the possibility involved in each of the two categories would be 'possibility' to indicate the First category, 'potentiality' to indicate the Third category. However, because Peirce indiscriminately switches back and forth between these two terms, the present essay would often be using one term precisely where Peirce is stressing the other term. To avoid such confusion, the terms 'negative possibility' and 'positive possibility' will be used to characterize the possibility involved in Firstness and Thirdness respectively, though what will be meant by these terms is roughly the distinction between mere possibility and potentiality, or, in Peirce's terms, the difference between "a mere may be" and a "would-be". This terminological distinction lies implicit in Peirce's claim that "Potentiality is the absence of Determination (in the usual broad sense) not of a mere negative kind but a positive capacity to be a Yea and to be a Nay" (MS 277, p.1). Furthermore, this terminology has an advantage in its own right, for it will indicate clearly the relationship between possibility and generality.

The term 'generality' must be clarified because it also serves a dual function. Peirce means by the general the opposite of the singular. Since the singular belongs to the category of Secondness, generality must, in a wide sense, characterize both Firstness and Thirdness. As indicated above, Peirce calls the generality of Firstness negative generality and the generality of Thirdness positive generality. The meaning of these characterizations, however, can best be approached indirectly. When the category of Firstness was discussed from the perspective of perceptual features, it was indicated that Firstness as constitutive of the universe would be characterized by diverse qualitative stimuli. However, to understand the difficulties that arise here, one further statement made by Peirce in connection with perception must be cited again here. Though Peirce states that the quale element which appears on the inside as unity appears on the outside as variety, he adds that "no unity can originate in concentration ... but any unity there (sic) was there already may in that way, be many times intensified" (CP 6.226, 6.227). Thus, the ontological basis for the experience of Firstness

is not merely "pure" Firstness or diverse qualitative stimuli in their aspect of diversity, but rather pure Firstness "overlaid" with some unifying element. And, if some element of unity within the diversity is required for the experience of Firstness in the sense of a unified quale, then this unity itself must be "part of" ontological Firstness. Thus, a further distinction between the element of diversity and the element of unity is necessary if Peirce's characterizations of Firstness are to be understood. This, however, leads straight to the problem of positive and negative generality.

Though recognizing the significance of Peirce's switch from substance to process in most areas, John Boler holds that there remains one sense in which Peirce, like Scotus, holds to a real common object, for Peirce argues that the commonness of qualities which was the concern of the schoolmen is a degenerate form of real generality ((Boler, 1963, p.158, p.158 ftn.18). Thus, according to this interpretation, at one point at least real generality for Peirce indicates "real commonness" or repetition of form in some sense. This line of argument seems to hinge on the unstated assumption that Peirce's ontological category of Firstness implies repeatable, fully structured qualities. On this assumption, since Peirce declares that Firstness involves generality, the "real generality" of Peirce's position, at this point at least, would be similar to the scholastic concept of the common nature as a "real common object". On this view, then, the degenerate or negative generality of Firstness provides a unifying factor by providing a rigid structuring of determinate repeatables. But questions remain. In what sense is this a negative or degenerate generality? Furthermore, did not Peirce's discussion of the epistemic and phenomenological dimensions of Firstness lead toward the expectation that the unity of diverse stimuli would be not a rigid structure of repetition but rather a somewhat indeterminate basis for a rigid epistemological structuring of repeatable qualities? However, this latter view appears to run into problems of its own, for it is not readily evident that Firstness as diverse qualitative stimuli can in any way be characterized as general. The real negative generality of Firstness must be accounted for.

What characterizes the general, as opposed to the singular, is the fact that the laws of excluded middle and non-contradiction do not apply to the general. It would seem, then, that one could hold the diverse stimuli of the evolving universe, in their diversity, to be general in the negative sense that no determination can be made of them. Thus, though it is true, as Peirce points out, that a triangle in general is not isosceles or equilateral or scalene, yet a triangle in general is triangular, and the generality of triangularity does limit the possible alternatives of further determination. However, it would seem that the

diverse stimuli, in their diversity, display a negative generality in that they are limited by nothing whatsoever. Peirce's reference to Firstness in this pure sense which emphasizes the qualitative uniqueness of each of the stimuli can be seen from his statement that "I cannot call it (Firstness) unity, for even unity supposes plurality" (CP 2.83).

At this point, however, another problem arises, for the negative generality of Firstness has not accounted for the unifying element required by Peirce. The clue to the nature of this unity is found in Peirce's statement that "The general is seen to be precisely the continuous" (8, p.279). Generality, then, must involve continuity; hence, the generality of Firstness can only be fully understood when this category is viewed from the aspect of the unity or continuity which pervades it. Here it may be objected that continuity belongs to the category of Thirdness. Thus, it has been concluded that the close relationship between possibility and continuity is that of Firstness to Thirdness (Noble, 1989, p.170). However, if the general is the continuous, then the negative generality of Firstness must imply a negative continuity which belongs to the category of Firstness rather than Thirdness.<sup>2</sup> The negative continuity of Firstness, like negative generality, indicates a negative possibility or mere "may-be" which contains no positive possibility or "would-be" and which thus provides no positive range for further determinations. As Peirce states the position, "Firstness is essentially indifferent to continuity" (CP 6.205). Just as feeling was seen above to refer to that quale element which in its purity can be related to nothing beyond itself, so the negative generality and continuity of Firstness, which forms the cosmological basis for our experience of qualia, can be related neither to what has been nor to what will be; it has no relatedness, it contains no "would-be". The importance of this continuity of Firstness can be seen in Peirce's claim that "Time as the universal form of change cannot exist unless there is something to undergo change and to undergo a change continuous in time there must be a continuity of changeable qualities" (CP 6.132). Yet, Peirce characterizes such a qualitative continuity as that immediacy that mind has "practically extinguished", for mind separates and orders (CP 6.132). That such qualities cannot be taken as subjective is evidenced through the bringing together of two claims by Peirce, "Not only is consciousness continuous in a subjective sense ... its object is ipso facto continuous. In fact, this infinitesimally spread out consciousness is a direct feeling of its contents as spread out" (CP 6.111). Or, as he states in reference to the "premises of nature" which we "imagine" through comparison with our experience." And, as premises, they must involve qualities" (CP 5.119).

Peirce's discussion of Firstness as ontological possibility (as opposed to ontological generality) has frequently led to its identification with some type of Platonic essence. This approach may at first glance seem a mere repetition, couched in different language, of the points made above in connection with Boler's analysis. However, this approach brings to light an entirely different aspect of the problem of interpreting Peirce's category of Firstness. A "Platonic" line of interpretation points out that "The possible seems to include for Peirce the universe of logical possibility or an ideal world. Some of these ideal, logical possibilities occur in the real world also. 'The sensible world is but a fragment of the ideal world.'" (Haas, 1964, p.99, with quote incorporated from Peirce, CP 3.527) And, as this interpretation stresses,, Peirce insists that "the possible is a positive universe of being." (Haas, 1964, p.99, with quote from Peirce, CP 8.303) Peirce, however, offers a clarification elsewhere which places these statements in a quite different light. He notes that "My old definition of the possible as that which we do not know not to be true (in some state of information real or feigned) is an anacoluthon. The possible is a positive universe ... but that is all. Of course, there is a general logical possible ... but there is also a possible which is something else" (CP 8.308). This possible which is something else is a "positive universe of being". And, this possible as a positive universe of being is the negative possibility of Firstness indicated above. The ideal world is the conceptual world of the logically possible or the consistently thinkable within which the facts of experience must be located. To turn such a "conceptual world" into an "ontological world" is an unwarranted reification which leads to a static conception of the metaphysical possibilities of Firstness.

It has been seen that the real possibility of Firstness is a negative possibility which must be carefully distinguished from the positive possibility of Thirdness and from the logical possibility which belongs in the discussion of epistemological issues. The real qualitative richness of Firstness is the richness of diverse qualitative stimuli which "contain" two distinct aspects, an aspect of total diversity and an aspect of somewhat indefinite unity, characterized by negative generality and negative continuity. These two aspects of the qualitative richness are analytically distinct only, and together they constitute a continuum of qualitative diversity which is the very being of the negative possibility of Firstness. The category of Firstness thus indicates that reality is qualitatively rich, but that its qualitative richness indicates not a realm of sense universals or any sort of determinate repeatables but rather a realm of diverse and somewhat indefinite qualitative stimuli. There emerges from Peirce's epistemic/phenomenal characterization of Firstness in perception, then, a metaphysical category of Firstness which is neither a remnant of traditional conceptions of determinate repeatable qualities, nor a remnant of

traditional conceptions of eternal Platonic possibilities. Rather, what emerges is a Firstness which attributes to reality precisely those characteristics most antithetical to such traditional conceptions. Firstness in this sense not only underlies Peirce's radical rejection of foundationalist-antifoundationalist alternatives in epistemology, but also anticipates his rejection of the ontological alternatives offered by a tradition of substance metaphysics.

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## Endnotes

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1. See also MS 942, p.8 for Peirce's understanding of a first impressions of sense as a limit concept ↵
  2. Elizabeth Flower & Murray G. Murphey (1977) point out that Peirce describes feeling as being at least triply continuous. First, feelings endure and so are continuous in time. Second, feelings admit of continuous variation with respect to their intensity. And third, feelings are spatially continuous. p.609 Feeling, however, is understood by them, as in Murphey's *The Development of Peirce's Philosophy* (1961), in the psychological rather than the epistemic sense. ↵