


*Peircean Categories: an Old Name for a New Way
of Thinking*



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Abstract:

The evolution of Peirce’s thought seems to go through a series of dramatic turns and breaks, among them the appearance of phenomenology by the turn of the century, along with the emergence of Hegel in place of Kant as a source of inspiration. However, if we take seriously enough the outcome both of his kantian and hegelian efforts, that is, the categories, we can recognize a general continuity in Peirce’s thought. Instead of a maze of “empirical” and “metaphysic” strands in his philosophy, we should see a most consistent empirical transformation of metaphysics.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Metaphysics, Kant, Hegel

In 1903 Peirce came back to Harvard, after almost thirty years of estrangement from the academy, thanks to the diplomacy of his main advocate and best friend William James. His appointment was to offer a first-hand exposition on his already noted doctrine of pragmatism, on which James had been briefing his students and colleagues for some years. However, contrary to what had been Peirce’s habit in his previous academic run, these conferences were so crammed with references to the categories that almost no-one –James included– understood much of what he said. The general surprise was quite unfair with Peirce though, at least on account of the categories, since those had been from the beginning the (more or less) hidden framework behind all his philosophical investigations. What was really new in this presentation was that they weren’t any more the result of a logical analysis of thought, as had been his position until then, in an explicit follow-up of Kant, but of a science allegedly superior to logic. Again, Peirce didn’t claim any originality for the idea: “This is the science which Hegel made his starting point, under the name of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*.” The common ground with Hegel was not limited to the method of investigation, but extended also to its results:

Hegel was quite right in holding that it was the business of this science to bring out and make clear the Categories or fundamental modes... In regard to [which,] it appears to me that Hegel is so nearly right that my own doctrine might very well be taken for a variety of Hegelianism. (CP 5.38)

Surely his audience would have preferred what Peirce had to say of Hegel thirty years before, when he almost overtly despised him as a metaphysical philosopher. And it’s not hard to find Peircean scholars that would add these conferences as another step in Peirce’s late recess into nineteenth-century metaphysics, the same metaphysics that he

had got rid of in his early years. What I want to show here is that there is no such recess, and that the new outlook is the most consistent development of his previous tenets —I’d even say, the surest path to his intended scientific overcoming of metaphysics. What alienated his audience in those conferences, and what continues to alienate many of his readers, is his stubbornness in facing philosophical problems that even then seemed old-fashioned, and to deal with them with a vocabulary that yet then sounded archaic. But as I see it, the Peircean position would rather be that if we don’t want to end up saying the same old stuff, only with new words, we should overcome the received ideas from the inside, and not simply wash them off.¹ In that he was also in accord with Hegel.

In fact, the emergence of phenomenology above logic was only a minor move in the wealth of changes Peirce had introduced a year before in his classification of sciences: logic belonged now with a triad of normative sciences (aesthetics, ethics, logic), which in turn belonged with a triad of philosophical sciences (phenomenology, normative sciences, metaphysics), which in turn belonged with a triad of sciences of discovery (mathematics, philosophy, special sciences) (CP 1.180). We could go on tracing further divisions and subdivisions, but we need no more to see that the new science responsible for the categories is certainly placed above logic, but still under mathematics. With that comes the first nudge to Hegel: “A phenomenology which does not reckon with pure mathematics, a science hardly come to years of discretion when Hegel wrote, will be the same pitiful clubfooted affair that Hegel produced” (CP 5.40).

In the classification of sciences broached by Peirce twenty years before, logic seemed to hold the highest rank as a discipline responsible for the development of the most general hypothesis, that of the categories, which was then to guide every other branch of science, and at the same time be confirmed or dismissed by them (CP 1.354). That was the essence of Peirce’s empirical response to Kant: the categories drawn from the logical analysis of thought could be nothing more than a hypothesis to be confronted with experience. Of course, this implies a denunciation of the whole opposition between a realm of thought-in-itself and a realm of things-in-themselves, but -contrary to the usual procedure- we’ll come to that later. For now we’ll stick to another line of reasoning, as Peircean as that one, and stress that to draw any demonstrative force from the fact that we think one way or another, as did the transcendental argument, betrays the very idea of a category, since these are to describe the most general features of every possible thought, and not of any actual thought. The phenomenological transformation of the project is nothing but a more accurate translation of this idea:

Kant’s choice of logic as the discipline charged with developing the categories reflects his mistake of tying them to actuality, not possibility, since there’s only one discipline that works strictly with the latter, and that’s mathematics. In keeping with this more refined approach, the experience relevant to test the categories couldn’t be that provided by any special science, or even by metaphysics –interpreted here as the most general of empirical sciences–, as Peirce had held until then, because strictly speaking the categories couldn’t be proved by their correspondence to the facts of the universe we live in, but rather to the facts of any possible universe. Thus Peirce’s phenomenology was born with the sole purpose of setting the adequate testing field for the categories.

For Peirce, mathematics is the only hypothetical or conditional science, because it’s the only science that defines entirely its object, or because its “only aim is to discover not how things actually are, but how they might be supposed to be, if not in our universe, then in some other” (CP 5.40). This also means that mathematics absorbs a good deal of what had been a part of logic until then, in particular the logic of relations Peirce used to prove his categories in the seventies. In a sense, Peirce was only offering a generalization of the same argument now, on the basis of a graphic model on which he was still working –and would continue to be on end (Peirce Edition Project, 1998, p.173 ff.; see also CP 1.346-347, 1.369-372, CP 4.347 ff.).

It’s quite usual to find critical assessments of both “formal” arguments, as they are taken to be, which end up stating that the proof is inconclusive. Hookway for example concludes his analysis of the original theorem framed on the logic of relations by declaring that it depends on the notation proposed by Peirce, and therefore that the only way of validating it is to independently –which both for Hookway and for Peirce means empirically– demonstrate that the notation chosen effectively corresponds to the deepest structure of thought and/or reality (Hookway, 1985, p.97 ff). The later reworkings of the theorem depend no less upon the specifications of the model in which they are formulated, and that’s exactly how it should be; moreover, the very relocation of the theorem from the field of logic to that of mathematics should be read as the clearest proclamation of the impossibility of establishing any kind of formal demonstration of the categories, but –again– only a hypothesis to be confirmed by experience. The mathematician does no more than analyze the properties of an arbitrarily defined model, whereas we’re aiming well beyond that:

The questions which are here to be examined are, what are the different systems of hypotheses from which mathematical deduction can set out, what are their general characters, why are not other hypotheses possible, and the like. These are not problems which, like those of mathematics,

repose upon clear and definite assumptions recognized at the outset... This much, however, is indisputable: if there are really any such necessary characteristics of mathematical hypotheses... this necessity must spring from some truth so broad as to hold not only for the universe we know but for every world that poet could create. And this truth like every truth must come to us by experience. (CP 1.417)

To obtain a demonstration of the categories, or in other words, to prove that a certain model is able to express every possible thought, the mathematician should analyze every conceivable model to determine whether there is a list of features common to all of them. However, that is a task that plainly exceeds the field of the hypothetical, and thus requires a transition to the first of the positive sciences, or to the new science of phenomenology. But if the mathematician should not speak of any universe in particular, the phenomenologist must make sure that he speaks for every possible universe at the same time. Obviously, that means trading mathematical precision for the greatest indetermination, since the phenomenologist cannot introduce any specification in his object that could constrain the range of his investigation. One can hardly exaggerate the difficulty of doing this: not only should he ignore the difference between reality and fantasy, but also strictly ignore every difference between what an object is and what it seems to be, a requirement that, taken to the extreme, would make it impossible to talk of any object, or of any fact, or generally to say anything in any proper sense of the term, since that would be already introducing an inadmissible distortion in what is presented before the mind. “Phenomenology can only tell the reader which way to look, to see what he shall see” (CP 2.197), concludes Peirce.

You really can't take any further the logic of empirical investigation, and many would say that we have reached absurdity here; but even they should admit that the path we've followed is that of consistency: any assumption that the phenomenologist could bring to his investigation would betray the very experimental principle that he was supposed to apply, precisely because we're dealing with the first of positive sciences, whose function is to investigate the most general of facts —namely, the fact of what's possible, which is also the fact of what's a fact. Peirce is only setting here the conditions for the only valid demonstration of the categories, a demonstration based on experience and nothing more than experience, and reaching thus the natural endpoint of his empirical critique of kantianism. But even if we agreed to this critique, it seems reasonable to think that it amounts to denouncing the whole issue as trivial: once we put in place the necessary corrections to the original metaphysical setup, the project loses all interest, since it can lead us nowhere.

Something of this sort must have been in the minds of those who had come to listen at Harvard, so surprised as James himself that the founder of pragmatism didn't see it as they did. But Peirce didn't see his conclusion as trivial; moreover, he regarded this kind of take on what he said as a fallback into the old metaphysics –prompted, ironically, by the very urge of breaking up with it–, and as an essential misunderstanding of the pragmatic revolution on which he'd been invited to talk. To understand this, let's turn to what Peirce has to answer to the first and most obvious objection emanating from his audience, then and today, which would be to ask the phenomenologist to justify that the way the phenomenon appears to his mind corresponds to the way it appears to the mind of any other –or that the way the object appears to his mind corresponds to the way it is in itself, if we prefer to pose the question in terms of the “thing-in-itself,” which doesn't make any difference to what follows. Peirce's answer seems to be another question, that is ¿why should we ask such a question?

Nothing is more irrational than false pretence (...) Yet the Cartesian philosophy, which ruled Europe for so long, is founded upon it. It pretended to doubt what it did not doubt. Let us not fall into that vice. You think that your *logica utens* is more or less unsatisfactory. But you do not doubt that there is some truth in it. Nor do I; nor does any man. Why cannot men see that what we do not doubt, we do not doubt? (CP 2.192)

There's no other way to overcome the problem of the thing-in-itself than to stop asking for the thing-in-itself, and not only because we can't answer the question –and we can't–, but because that's not the question we really want to ask. We are not interested in justifying the validity of those reasonings of which we don't really doubt, but in correcting those reasonings we do doubt. Peirce remarks that “some writers fancy that they see some absurdity in this,” that is, in the idea that a suspect logic could be able of correcting its own deficiencies; the only way they would see to do so, unless we want to incur in *petitio principii*, is to justify the validity of some of our reasonings by recourse to a previous instance that would prove them right –a move that doesn't hold much promise, since it will only send the issue further and further back. For Peirce, that only proves the “wide-spread tendency (...) to take philosophical propositions in an exaggerated way”: we don't need an unconditionally valid basis to make our first self-correction, we just need something we really don't doubt, if only we consider validity as something that awaits us at the end of the process of self-correction, and not as something that should have been there from the beginning, as those writers would want it. “This is a truer way of stating the question,” says Peirce, “and so stated, it appears to present no such insuperable difficulty as is pretended.” (CP 2.191)

We need only change the timeline perspective on the logic of research, and the project of the categories, as stated by Peirce, escapes the charge of circularity and gets its full credit back. But then again, many pragmatists would rather have the first proposal, without really caring of the last. The answer here can only be that such an attitude simply doesn't add up: the change proposed in the logic of research comes straight from the research done with the categories. And that is exactly how it should be, because a research in the categories is nothing but a reflexive research into the nature of research; moreover, the categories themselves are only a formal presentation of the very process that leads to them. Trying to follow the path of pragmatism, without caring of the project of the categories, or without using them as the vocabulary that makes full sense of it, is a sure ticket to losing track.

That is what Peirce was trying to tell his audience, with little success. This failure though has nothing to do with an inadequate presentation of his ideas, but rather with a much more consistent one than we've attempted here. Peirce was obscure where we and many of his commentators weren't, because he commented on the project of the categories in terms of those very categories; but of course that's the only way of really doing it. As his last and most sophisticated formulation has it, only those who see the same that Peirce sees when he points at the most general features of the phenomenon will be ready to acknowledge the validity of his demonstration, or not to pose the improper objection of its circularity —its inconclusiveness, etc. There's no other option, then, than to actually run the test:

Be it understood, then, that what we have to do, as students of phenomenology, is simply to open our mental eyes and look well at the phenomenon and say what are the characteristics that are never wanting in it, whether that phenomenon be something that outward experience forces upon our attention, or whether it be the wildest of dreams, or whether it be the most abstract and general of the conclusions of science. (CP 5.41)

The first feature we discover after this fashion in the phenomenon is the pure presence of the phenomenon as such, regardless of any other consideration. Peirce's favourite example at this point are colours, or more generally what are known in philosophy as qualia: “[It] might be just an odor, say a smell of attar; or it might be one infinite dead ache; it might be the hearing of a piercing eternal whistle” (CP 5.44). If someone answered that all these qualities only seem simple from a psychological point of view, but that you can easily analyze them in other terms, Peirce would search for an example to show that he means something else: “If a man possessed no other colour-sensation but that excited by this sealing wax... he might devote his life to thinking about it, but he

never would discover that there were those three respects: luminousness, chroma, and hue. They are not seen in the colour taken by itself but only in the colour as it appears in comparison with others” (Peirce Edition Project, 1998, p.366). And if someone answered him that in such a case no colour would be perceived, so that in a certain sense there would be no colour, Peirce could do nothing but look for another example to show that he means something else: “If everything in the world and in the [phenomenon] were precisely of this sealing-wax red, though we should not be distinctly aware of it, I suppose that it would tinge our disposition, and so be, in some sense, in the mind. If it would not, this would be merely a psychological fact: it would have nothing to do with the quality red in itself” (Peirce Edition Project, 1998, p.367). To which someone could still answer, of course, that it’s not at all clear in which sense we can talk of red as a quality in a non-psychological sense, which would leave us exactly where we started, unless Peirce’s gesturing finally attracted his objector to the phenomenological radicality of what he means:

Go out under the blue dome of heaven and look at what is present as it appears... The present is just what it is regardless of the absent... (CP 5.44)

Red is simple not because it is red, but because we consider it regardless of its relation with anything else, and if Peirce has chosen it is only because we understand that more easily with colours. But that’s just another “psychological fact” entirely irrelevant to what we’re discussing here, because the point is that every phenomenon is simple when considered in itself, and just as long as it is so considered; and that’s the only meaning of simplicity. Our objector would say again that this implies linking phenomena to how we consider them, instead of how they are in themselves, to which Peirce would answer again that red is red even if no-one sees it, or even if nothing (or everything) in the world were of this colour. Phenomena are what they are regardless of their relation to us, or to any other phenomenon, a statement that should eventually lead us to the conclusion: what we “do” with a phenomenon when we consider it apart of any other phenomenon is nothing alien to what it is in itself as a pure possibility of being apart of anything else, or conversely, as a pure possibility of getting into a relation with some other. What Peirce is trying to point out with his examples, against all modern common sense, is that every phenomenon is in itself a relation, and as such something possible rather than something determined or “given.” Incidentally, that’s the core of the platonic philosophy to which Peirce eventually traced his own, and what the reader is asked to discover anew by himself, with the only help of the first of the faculties of the phenomenologist, that of “seeing what stares one in the face, just as it presents itself,

unreplaced by any interpretation” (CP 5.42).

Peirce calls this first and inescapable feature of the phenomenon, and thus this first category, firstness. But of course there can be no first without a second, and thus the discovery of firstness, as that which is in itself, cannot but point towards secondness, as that which is in relation to another —or in other words, if being in itself has no more “substance” than possibility, then being in relation to another appears as the whole meaning of actuality. More specifically: “The next simplest feature that is common to all that comes before the mind, and consequently, the second category, is the element of Struggle” (CP 5.45). Peirce talks of opposition as the proper “color” of secondness, though it should be clear by now that secondness as such cannot have any firstness, because in that case there wouldn’t really be a second category. To talk of what secondness is in itself is already losing the whole point in a certain sense, as it was to talk of the relation of the first with anything apart from itself. As it can’t be otherwise, every abstract depiction of the categories sounds more or less tautologous, which is why Peirce reverts again to phenomenological examples to get his point through:

Imagine yourself making a strong muscular effort, say that of pressing with all your might against a half-open door. Obviously, there is a sense of resistance. There could not be effort without an equal effort that it resists... If you find that the door is pushed open in spite of you, you will say that it was the person on the other side that acted and you that resisted, while if you succeed in pushing the door to, you will say that it was you who acted and the other person that resisted. (CP 5.45)

The examples chosen for secondness stand out by their strong subjective character, as opposed to those chosen for firstness, which were guided instead by an effort to escape this way of considering things. Of course the reason is that the phenomenon always appears as a second to us, which is also the reason why human thought is regularly under the spell of secondness: we could only recognize firstness as a pure possibility after discovering that any other definition of what something is “in itself” turns up to be a definition of what it is “in relation with another.” And this route of discovery should also make us aware that the only way to overcome the obstacle of secondness is getting a better grip on that very secondness, by recourse (precisely) to the second faculty any phenomenologist should display: “A resolute discrimination which fastens itself like a bulldog upon the particular feature that we are studying, follows it wherever it may lurk, and detects it beneath all its disguises” (CP 5.42). This is the method that will allow us to uncover the main trap hidden behind our ordinary trades with the world, or the tendency it instils in us to exaggerate:

The main distinction between the Inner and the Outer Worlds is that inner objects promptly take

any modifications we wish, while outer objects are hard facts that no man can make to be other than they are. Yet tremendous as this distinction is, it is after all only relative. Inner objects do offer a certain degree of resistance, and outer objects are susceptible of being modified in some measure by sufficient exertion intelligently directed. (CP 5.45)

On the whole, we could say that all of our experience can be reduced to an extended version of this door-example, at least as long as we regard it as a relation between a first and a second; and Peirce’s point is that if we consider things strictly this way, and don’t let anything drive us away from it, we will reach a more “relative” perspective over who pushes and who resists, what is exterior and what is interior, or generally what is first and what is second in a relation of this sort. Let’s think of an example that doesn’t seem at all relative: one day you are “quietly walking along the sidewalk [when] a man carrying a ladder suddenly pokes you violently with it in the back of the head and walks on without noticing what he has done” (CP 5.45). We should be interested here only in the blow as such, taken as a relation between the ladder and our head, regardless of any other consideration. Peirce takes the pains to underscore that the man carrying the ladder didn’t have any intention of hitting anyone, though it is not clear whether this kind of remarks really help the reader or only lead to confusing him even more, because the point is not only to ignore the intentions of both parties, but to ignore every consideration over who was there before and who later, who ends down on the floor and who on his feet, or more generally any antecedent or outcome of the fact that could bring us beyond the fact itself. And if we do it this way it will become less and less clear that we received a blow, as anyone would have thought at first, because we will discover that the blow existed only in the exact measure that we resisted to it, or in the measure that we hit the ladder. No doubt that is a version of the facts that most people would find unfair, but the whole point is precisely that secondness can never give us the picture we are looking for:

Thus far, gentlemen, I have been insisting very strenuously upon what the most vulgar common sense has every disposition to assent to and only ingenious philosophers have been able to deceive themselves about. But now I come to a category which only a more refined form of common sense is prepared willingly to allow, the category which of the three is the chief burden of Hegel’s song. (CP 5.59)

The fact that someone hits and someone is hit, or that someone pushes and someone resists... is something that can never be a fact: phenomena only start to make sense when we take a third into the picture. But as much as a second cannot be understood by what it is in itself -or as a first- but only by what it is in relation to another -that is, as a

second-, a third can only be understood by its relation with two others, and is nothing apart from that. To find the clearest example of this kind of relation we'll turn now to Peirce's example of a hunter who wants to shoot an eagle, a poor end to which he can choose whatever day he likes, put on a beige jacket or a khaki one, hide behind a rock or under a tree, etc. The variability of the means to reach the end is essential to any relation among three phenomena, or to any indirect relation, as opposed to a direct relation between two phenomena, where by definition there's nothing left to determine. But of course common sense has no real problem with recognizing that some phenomena can be considered from this perspective -most especially, people's intentions-, only with the idea that we can treat this way any phenomena, as must be the case if thirdness is to be a category. The objection can be stated in the terms of the same example:

But after the bullet leaves the rifle, the affair is turned over to the stupid efficient causation, and should the eagle make a swoop in another direction, the bullet does not swerve in the least, efficient causation having no regard whatsoever for results, but simply obeying orders blindly. (CP 1.212)

It certainly doesn't seem like the bullet is pursuing any end, nor that anything could be seen as a means here. We have only a chain of entirely determined reactions, with a cast of two characters each time: the finger and the trigger, the trigger and the cartridge, etc. The hunter would be the only one to establish indirect relations among phenomena, or to be influenced by what tradition calls a final cause. However, a closer look would reveal that our picture is distorted again: as far as the reactions prompted by the trigger are determined, they are strictly unrepeatable facts... but if there were nothing else to them, pulling the trigger would also be a completely meaningless action. You can't really have thirdness in one place, and secondness around: hunting is only possible to the extent that the reactions between the hunter and the phenomena that surround him are essentially repeatable, or to the extent that they reveal some form of finalism, even if it is “blinder” than his. That's why Peirce says that the efficient causation that guides the bullet ultimately belongs to the same category as the final causation that guides the hunter —the irony being here that our resistance to seeing it thus is felt as a refusal to admit any magical forces in nature, when it works in fact as defensive preservation of a magical flame in men. To go back to our example, the hunter can only aim at his prey inasmuch the bullet also “aims” at an end of its own, definitely not the eagle but the trajectory that every bullet would follow under the same circumstances.

However, the whole strategy of confronting efficient versus final causation can be misleading. The notion of an end is by no means as relevant to the category of thirdness

as the example above might suggest, and even less so the notion of a cause, which is a vestige of a way of thinking still too steeped in secondness; we discover thus the elusive nature of this and the other categories: in a way, even using the term "third" for a third could turn out to be misleading. In all these cases the mistake is not that the features used to describe a category have nothing to do with it, but that they don't reach properly to its essence. And the only way of reaching there is by a more resolute appeal to the third faculty of the phenomenologist: "The generalizing power of the mathematician, who produces the abstract formula that comprehends the very essence of the feature under examination, purified from all admixture of extraneous and irrelevant accompaniments." Even Peirce accuses himself of a lacking exercise of this faculty, in particular for having drawn too tight a link between thirdness and representation (CP 1.565); and if we look back at the example above we will have to acknowledge that the end is always the fixed part of the relation, which properly brings us back to secondness. The real clue to understanding thirdness is the notion of a means to some end, or what Peirce sometimes calls "betweenness" —as in the last analysis the notion has no more content than the continuing possibility of inserting a third between any first and second. That's the basic model behind Peirce's definition of a sign, his description of a hunting party, etc.

We reach thus the notion of continuum, the great mathematical breakthrough of the era, that Peirce saw as "the keystone of the arch" (CP 8.257) of his philosophical system. Peirce's definition of a continuum, however, differs from that given by Cantor by the same years, which was much more influential to the later development of mathematics; the reason for Peirce's lack of success seems to be, again, the dependence of his brand of continuum on his categories. Since we can't go here into a mathematical discussion (See Murphey, 1961, p.263 ff.; Potter, 1997, pp.194-195; Robertson, 2001), we'll simply point out that the common sense idea that one can always draw a third point between any two points in a line can only be consistently developed, according to Peirce, if we take the less obvious stand that in a line, strictly speaking, there are no points, at least not until we "determine" them as such. Only thus can be true, according to the definition, that a continuum is "something whose possibilities of determination no multitude of individuals can exhaust" (CP 6.170). What's continuous (or third) is defined thus, in the most literal sense, as a mediation between what's possible (or first) and what's actual (or second). Maybe we'll see it a bit clearer with an example that explicitly includes a blackboard and a piece of chalk, but that implies the whole of cosmic evolution:

Let the clean blackboard be a sort of diagram of the original vague potentiality... This blackboard is a continuum of two dimensions, while that which it stands for is a continuum of some indefinite multitude of dimensions... I draw a chalk line on the board. This discontinuity is one of those brute acts by which alone the original vagueness could have made a step towards definiteness. There is a certain element of continuity in this line. Where did this continuity come from? It is nothing but the original continuity of the blackboard which makes everything upon it continuous. (CP 6.203)

In other words, a continuum is not so much defined by some determination of its parts, but for being itself a determination (or a part) of a continuum of more dimensions, from where we could draw a model defined by two limits: to one end, that continuum not limited by any superior continuum, which is no longer a continuum but the very notion of indeterminacy; to the other end, that continuum that doesn't limit any inferior continuum, which is no more a continuum but the very notion of determinacy.² Both extremes match the first and second categories discovered before, confirming that this is the mathematical model that best translates the conclusions of the phenomenologist, or conversely –as we ideally should see it– the hypothesis of the first rank of generality that has found better empirical evidence so far, and that should therefore guide any lower level investigation. In this vein, Peirce advances the idea that the continuum model suggests a cosmos limited by a beginning and an end, or following an irreversible course from indeterminacy to determinacy;³ thus we should see the chalk line on the “original” board as a diagram of the first law of nature, and so on (CP 6.191 ff.). To sum up: the existence of one continuum implies in this model the continuity of everything else, as suggested by our examination of the case of the hunter; on the other hand, everything that is continuous (or third) is also in some measure determined (or second) and in some measure undetermined (or first), as also suggested by our other excursions in the field of phenomenology.

Anyone with a familiarity with Hegel's work will see that nothing of what we've said so far really matches with what the German philosopher understood by phenomenology. And we don't take any great risk if we say that Hegel's opinion of Peirce's performance in this science would have been rather poor. In a way, he would have considered that his American counterpart hasn't gone one step further from the transcendental outlook he was set to overcome, that is, he is still trapped by the way things appear to his mind, unable to prove that it effectively corresponds to how things are in themselves, as Hegel thought he had done. In fact, Hegel only assumed a phenomenological perspective, or took an interest in how the object appeared to his mind, to show that this very enterprise leads by internal necessity to an overcoming of any difference between what

an object is and what it appears to be —which means, of course, the overcoming of phenomenology itself in a knowledge that can only be called absolute.

What has Peirce to answer to this objection? Well, his answer would probably be that Hegel is the one trapped in a transcendental position, on account of his “fatally narrow” (CP 5.37) way of considering phenomenology. Not that Peirce objects to the idea that the way of overcoming the breach between subject and object, or between thought-in-itself and things-in-themselves, is construing their relation as a process —or the notion that a partial knowledge is only conceivable in such terms as would eventually lead to its overcoming. That’s exactly what thirdness, or what Peirce sometimes calls Hegel’s “Secret” (CP 1.40), added to the picture some lines above. Peirce’s point would rather be that the very idea of reaching this end deprives it of all meaning, or plunges the whole project back to secondness; the identification of what an object is and what it appears to be will always be a desideratum for the Peircean phenomenologist, not an accomplished fact as it is for the hegelian. So instead of the protracted history of human experience that Hegel’s phenomenology inevitably becomes, Peirce’s version of this science would rather be the scribbled notepad of the philosopher seeking for the most general, or in other words, the “next” configuration of experience —and that’s exactly what he produced.

We see thus that Peirce uses against Hegel the same objection that he had used before against Kant, based on the very notion of category: sticking to what’s possible, not to what’s actual. That’s also the idea that kept Peirce always in motion, and prevented him from settling for any definitive version of his position. We have then a most compelling answer to metaphysical dogmatism, expressed in the very terms of that metaphysics; but as the audience in Harvard made clear, those terms seemed suspect enough to avoid much toying with them. In fact, no one really wanted to hear any more of that. It is our opinion though that James’ refusal to take those terms into his picture, and that of many others after him, could explain why their brand of pragmatism is to a great extent a mere new name for the old empiricism —sometimes rather the old skepticism— instead of an entirely new understanding of it.

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Endnotes

1. That would be the most metaphysical of attitudes, that of Descartes; see CP 5.264 ff. We use here the term “metaphysics” in the sense of “modern metaphysics,” as Peirce did quite often, ignoring his own revised version of metaphysics as an empirical endeavour, most akin to science. ↵
2. According to a famous definition by Richard Dedekind: “A system S is said to be *infinite* when it is similar to a proper part of itself, in the contrary case S is said to be a *finite* system” (as cited in Robertson, 2001). Robertson contends that Peirce had established the same relation before (CP 3.288), and that he had disclosed it by letter to Dedekind. Be it as it may, the crucial difference between both authors remains in the way they use this insight: whether they tend to define the whole by the part, or rather the part by the whole. ↵
3. Notice that the notions of the beginning and the end of the universe have no more content in this model than indeterminacy and determinacy respectively, despite more colorful speculations on their account advanced by Peirce. Those speculations remain lower-level hypothesis over the nature of the universe, consistent with the general scheme of his categories, but not required by it. ↵