



The Call to Dialogue through Habit



Donna West

The Commens Encyclopedia
The Digital Encyclopedia of Peirce Studies
New Edition

Edited by Mats Bergman and João Queiroz

URL <http://www.commens.org/encyclopedia/article/west-donna-call-dialogue-through-habit>
Retrieved 20.06.2026
ISSN 2342-4257
License Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike

Abstract:

The Peircean concept of habit embodies the kind of novel inferencing which dialogue ultimately affords, especially internal dialogue. This is so, given that Peircean habit defies conformity to conventions/previous paradigms of physical laws, mental representations, and action-based conduct. This non-conformity of patterns applies to living as much as to nonliving systems, in that an alteration in the substance or procedure of any law which is other than random meets muster to qualify as habit for Peirce. In fact, Peirce emphatically asserts that laws (including behaviors, beliefs, event profiles) which persist in mechanistic conformity, such that change is impenetrable to the schema are anything but habits. Peirce's notion of absolute chance permeates every activity for which a commitment is repeatedly made to search out anomalies to one's own expectations (earlier belief systems). Accordingly, the advent of abductive reasoning marshals the ego to view himself as an onlooker to propositions which arise from his own inventive processes. In short, receiving insight from one's own internal constituency goes far to stimulate the state of logic that is later shared with other inventive minds.

Keywords: Habit, Chance, Dialogue

The Peircean concept of habit embodies the kind of novel inferencing which dialogue affords, especially internal dialogue. Habit defies conformity to conventions/previous paradigms of mental and action-based conduct. This non-conformity of patterns applies to living as much as to nonliving systems, in that an alteration in the substance or procedure of any law which is other than random meets muster to qualify as habit for Peirce.

Underlying conformity and non-conformity to the law is chance. As Peirce illustrates in his "Reply to the Necessitarians," there are four arguments in favor of chance, of which the third is most crucial: "...Law, which requires to be explained, and like everything which is to be explained must be explained by something else, that is, by non-law or real chance" (1893: 6.613). In fact, the phenomenon of chance pervades every regularity; and it is just this probability which situates the likelihood of an event to materialize. Peirce equates habit taking with the force of absolute chance, or to the direct point, "Absolute chance is habit taking" (1884: EP 1: 219). This is so, such that independent of the odds, the eventuality of an event happening does not follow a prescribed path. For example, the likelihood of drawing heads twice or more in succession is equally possible to not drawing such sequence; hence absolute chance rears its head to defy

prescribed regularity.

In fact, Peirce emphatically asserts that laws (including behaviors, beliefs, event profiles) which persist in mechanistic conformity, such that change is impenetrable to the schema are anything but habits. If they fail to incorporate, as an intrinsic component of their make-up, a departure from the regular profile, they do not approach habit. Habits, according to Peirce, are "all natural dispositions to feel, act, or think in certain possible kinds of way" (1912: MS 12) in contradistinction to "acquired habits" - they merely prototype cases, which lack the means to unequivocally predict the next consequence or to discern from a consequence the contributing factors. In the same spirit, Peirce claims that "The essence of belief is the establishment of a habit" (1878: EP 1:129). Later in his life, Peirce reiterates and expands this sentiment: "...every belief and every inclination toward belief is a Habit..." (c. 1913: MS 930:32). By the "essence of a belief" Peirce refers to the taking of a belief after forces from within, namely insight from "instinct" convince us that a particular proposal has some merit, and after brief consideration of the merit of competing proposals. Essentially, belief is adopted and may supplant, substantially alter, or merely augment previous beliefs (at least for a time). The newly adopted belief (however revisional and temporary) nonetheless represents a quintessential case of habit, since it incorporates habit's primary characteristic - absolute chance.

Peirce's notion of absolute chance permeates every activity for which a commitment is repeatedly made to search out anomalies to one's own expectations (earlier belief system). Aliseda intimates that the precedent of every newly adopted belief (habit) is a state of doubt (2000, pp. 57-48). Presumably this state of doubt constitutes a precursor to a search for more tenable beliefs; and such is the essence of our call to absolute chance. Peirce impels us to ever recognize the need to strive toward more fitting explanations for surprising consequences. He further contends that the awareness (especially if it rises to the level of conscious awareness) is the hallmark for taking new habits/beliefs, in that it sensitizes the mind to apprehending relevant facts in the external world, in the continua. Peirce specifically makes this argument in connection to doubt as the opportunity to adopt new habits: "...It can be proved that the only mental effect that can be so produced and that is not a sign but is of a general application is a *habit-change*; meaning by a habit-change a modification of a person's tendencies toward action, resulting from previous experiences or from previous exertions of his will or acts, or from a complexus of both kinds of cause" (c. 1906-1907: 5.476).

In dialogue (inter-actional or intra-actional), conscious deployment of habit is vital.

Peirce terms "the consciousness of taking a habit" as "habituescence" (c. 1913: MS 930: 31). Peirce claims: "Some undisciplined young persons may have come to think of acquired human habits chiefly as constraints; and undoubtedly they all are so in a measure. But good habits are in much higher measure powers than they are limitations..." (c. 1913: MS 930: 31). Good habits provide us with powers—a sustained pattern of belief which is open to alteration via absolute chance; they supply new mental dispositions to search for plausible explanations of unexpected consequences to enhance the effectiveness of a particular strategy within certain contexts. Well-placed rationale for anticipated behavior within certain scenarios can facilitate well-formed inferences to assist in interpreting deictic features of dialogue, e.g., prediction of who will be the next speaker/addressee, what will be the next topic/focus, whether speaker's location/orientation will change, and the like. The deictic features which frequently control the complexion of speech events defy mere regularity— they unquestionably represent a forum pervaded by change, hence chance. Although conversations (with others or the self) may proceed according to some general principles (one person typically speaks at a time), a host of factors critical to sign interpretation are known to shift: topic, referent object, locations of speakers/landmarks, and orientations of non-stationary objects/persons, militating in favor of generating creative strategies.

The indispensability of habit to interpret frames of dialogue is obviated in the myriad of novel competencies which it fosters on the interactional and intraactional planes. In interactional dialogue scenarios, habit culminates in a host of new/modified skill-patterns. One of such states of readiness is receptivity to diverse perspectives created by placement and orientation alterations in the physical surround - impelling a transition from assuming an egocentric reference point to allocentric ones. A second competency entails recognition of the influence of partners' imperatives to those within and without the dialogue. A third illustration of habit's imposition of chance in establishing new behavior patterns is its renovation of a personal house of logic to incorporate more public forums - determining the merit of partners' affirmative and negative propositions about states of affairs. Another, more linguistic adjustment accorded to the influence of habit/absolute chance affects decisions about which label would enhance interlocutors' search for meaning associations within his mental lexicon. In some cases, substituting explicit nouns for pronouns minimizes collaborative effort (West, 2013, p. 41)¹, since rapid sign-referent associations often substantially reduces repair for the speaker and sign-object-interpretant fit for the hearer. Finally, the primary ampliative change which habit fosters is an intimate respect for the utility of the imagination in situating the self in places occupied by his interlocutors.

Implementing this mental habit permits the self to guard his current place, while transferring himself to the location and orientation of the interlocutor. This novel competence grounds the viewpoint of the momentary self, while sustaining deictic vantage points of others, thereby legitimizing perspective differences and ultimately facilitating modal logic. This novel skill, to perspective-take, makes way for a mental operation of still more abstract proportion - when self meets self in intraactional dialogue.

In intraactional dialogue, habit affords the self a new mode of logical operation. It validates the principle of abductive reasoning—to ascertain the most plausible explanation (from competing ones) for consequences which produced a puzzling effect. The means to supersede consideration of one or two perspectives simultaneously and embrace several seemingly equally viable options (absent a partner to embody each position) constitutes a significant change in mental operation. This new mental pattern requires collaborating with the self to arrive at abductions. The procedure may require the self to reject some contenders, even when other explanations fail to supply a satisfactory solution. In these intraactional scenarios, the self becomes an object to the self, despite their intimately connected nature. Accordingly, the advent of abductive reasoning marshals the ego to view himself as an onlooker to propositions which arise from his own inventive processes. In short, receiving insight from one's own internal constituency goes far to stimulate the state of logic that is later shared with other inventive minds. At this juncture, intraactional dialogue qualifies as a deictic forum (ratifying propositions internally and externally) where creative answers for states of affairs acquire some objective reality.

References

- Aliseda, A. (2000). Abduction as epistemic change: A Peircean model in artificial intelligence. In P. Flach and A. Kakas (Eds.), *Abductive and Inductive Reasoning: Essays on their Relation and Integration*, (45-58). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- West, D. (2013). Peircean index in the naming process: Nouns, pronouns and proper names. *Public Journal of Semiotics*, 5(2), 31-46.

Notes

1. "...there is no reason saying that 'I' 'thou' 'that' 'this' stand in place of nouns; they indicate

things in the directest possible way. It is impossible to express what an assertion refers to except by means of an Index. A pronoun is an Index. A noun, on the other hand, does not indicate the object it denotes; and when a noun is used to show what one is talking about, the experience of the hearer is relied upon to make up for the incapacity of the noun for doing what the pronoun does at once. Thus, a noun is an imperfect substitute for a pronoun" (1893: 2.287 fn1). ↵