

# Introduction

Herman Parret

 <https://doi.org/10.1075/sc.6.02par>

Pages xi-xiii of

**Peirce and Value Theory: On Peircian ethics and aesthetics**

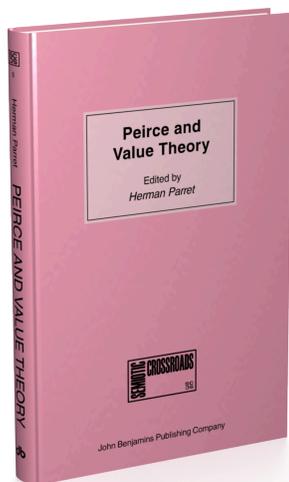
**Edited by Herman Parret**

[Semiotic Crossroads, 6] 1994. xiii, 381 pp.

© John Benjamins Publishing Company

This electronic file may not be altered in any way. For any reuse of this material written permission should be obtained from the publishers or through the Copyright Clearance Center (for USA: [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com)).

For further information, please contact [rights@benjamins.nl](mailto:rights@benjamins.nl) or consult our website at [benjamins.com/rights](http://benjamins.com/rights)



## Introduction

As Kenneth Laine Ketner mentions in his “Preface”, this volume originated during the Charles S. Peirce Sesquicentennial International Congress held at Harvard University in 1989. A decision was taken to gather together in a thematic volume all of the contributions related to Peirce’s *value theory*. However, in addition to the papers read during the Congress on this subject, I have included a number of original essays by Peirce scholars not present at the Harvard meeting, but who were especially invited to contribute to this book. In all, this work contains twenty four studies covering four different domains. Seven articles are explicitly related to the Peircean conception of *ethics*, its status as a normative science, its relationship to logic and to certain intuitions that are central to psychoanalysis, as well as its possible application to medical clinic [Section I: **Peirce on Ethics**]. Seventeen contributions must be situated within the domain of *aesthetics*, and these are assembled in three groups. The first consists of texts where Peirce’s aesthetic is situated within the context of American philosophy, essentially dealing with art and beauty, and where Peirce’s conception is contrasted with what phenomenology (Husserl) and structuralism (Saussure, Jakobson) could thematize on the subject [Section II: **Peirce’s Aesthetics in the Context of Philosophical Thought**]. The authors of this second group deal more with the internal architecture of Peircean philosophy in order to situate his aesthetics and determine its nature, function and role. It is obviously of the utmost importance to identify with as much precision as possible the fragile and, at first glance, marginalized position of aesthetics in this huge tentacular construction of Peircean philosophy. Moreover, it is salutary, and even necessary to systematize somewhat the very contents of Peirce’s aesthetic thought and to gather together the fragments dispersed in numerous disciplinary perspectives: epistemology, semiotics, and even theologico-metaphysics [Section III: **Peirce’s Aesthetics in the Context of his Thought**]. The most courageous contributions, those proposing applications to the arts of music and painting as well as literature, were assembled in the last section. It has often been said that Peirce’s semiotics and a priori his

aesthetics were merely speculative, that they proposed a much too powerful model and that they generated no methodology whatsoever. But, though the descriptive and explanatory strength of Peircean aesthetics remain limited, it does seem to me that, locally, one can obtain analytical results. It is up to the reader to judge [Section IV: **Peirce's Aesthetics and its Applications**]. The **Bibliography** covers the entire volume and I established a **Name Index** as well as a **Subject Index** which, I hope, are complete and will prove to be useful.

To endeavour to resume the positions presented in each study of this volume is not particularly tempting. I feel that the articles, in their order of presentation according to the 'logic' suggested by their classification into four sections, speak for themselves. I can only outline my own conclusions after having studied the texts assembled here. And these are twofold. First of all Peirce is part of the history of philosophy — of the great tradition of Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, especially Kant, as well as, more specifically, of the dominant ambience of American philosophy, when he formulated his thought in his own voluminous and particularly astonishing work. One should not therefore read Peirce as though his thought were completely idiosyncratic — one does not find in him an explicit will to philosophize *tabula rasa* but, on the contrary, a dialogue maintained with the great thinkers of the history of philosophy and with his closest contemporaries, the pragmaticist logicians and epistemologists. Obviously the terminology forged by Peirce is very personal, daunting in part though always consistent, but the idiosyncrasies of Peircean discourse cannot dissimulate the solid embedding of his thought in the great philosophical tradition. Though, one cannot contend that Peirce's Kant and Hume happen to be orthodox and globally integrated. In this sense, Peirce is not a neo-Kantian, or even a post-Kantian, especially with respect to aesthetics since the *Critique of Judgment* is almost completely absent from the Peircean scene. Breaks with tradition are profound, and yet: Peirce is a *classical* philosopher, an important and necessary link in the great chain of Western metaphysical uneasiness and its semiotizing rationality.

The other conclusion implies a second strategy for reading Peirce's monumental work. There is a tendency to fragment Peircean thought: one finds the theologian, the metaphysician, the aesthete (who considered himself however as *ignorans* in this domain), the logician, the epistemologist, the semiotician.... This spirit of fragmentation can be found especially with semioticians: they act as though Peircean semiotics can be isolated from

other perspectives and philosophy in general. This leads to the worst interpretations. It is as though the taxonomies of signs and the semiotic triads has a value in themselves, independent of their philosophical motivation and their profoundly speculative inspiration. Nothing can be more dangerous and reductive. Peirce offers us a cathedral the architecture of which is neither proportional nor harmonious but solidly based on a vision of the world and of man that is perfectly homogenous and non-contradictory. His ethics and aesthetics demonstrate in an exemplary fashion how his work is rooted in a holistic vision of reality (whether it happens to be sensible and/or supra-sensible). Consequently, those in semiotics who feel inspired by the so-called "Peircean paradigm" should not dread plunging into this oceanic philosophy that plumbs the greatest depths of metaphysics.

In his ethical and aesthetic reflexions, Peirce presents a theory of *valorization* and not only of value and norm. Valorization is a question of experience and attitude, a question of interpretation and humanization. And the pragmaticist maxim reigns here as everywhere where semiosis occurs. The good and the beautiful are not Platonistic ideas but rather effects of valorization that is motivated by the production of significance. The sensible — *aesthèta* — forms a semiosis correlated with human sensibility fusing sensation, imagination and sentiment. Evidently, Peirce integrated the Copernican revolution of Kantian philosophy without for all of that falling into subjectivism. His path is original and today one must take into account his remarks that are often disconcerting, always intelligent, sparks of thoughts that inflame our souls as philosophers made uneasy — ethically, aesthetically — before such a great mystery, that of the good and the beautiful. The collection in hand simply pays tribute to that Peirce, the most uneasy, the most reflexive and the most profoundly human Peirce.

*Herman Parret*

[Translated by Paul Perron]