

Preface



Philosophical discussion proper only succeeds between intimates who have learned how to converse by months of weary trial and failure.

—William James to H. N. Gardiner, November 14, 1901

Carl Hausman was initially my teacher and later my colleague for several years prior to his retirement. Together we have explored the issues in this book in a wide variety of settings. We have co-taught classes on Peirce and American philosophy; we have co-written essays and talks; and we have spent countless hours in coffee shops arguing and sketching our ideas for each other. I remember, for example, a long spring afternoon when the two of us worked our way through an example of a Peircean “object” provided by Chris Hookway. We did not reach agreement, but the version of the argument Carl later published revealed its trial by fire in our discussion. Our philosophical styles are a bit different; I tend to work historically, and Carl’s work is more thematic and directly argumentative. But we share a great many philosophical interests, and our interpretive study of Peirce is among these.

The chapters of the present text track conversations Carl and I explicitly opened in 1991 when we co-taught a seminar on Peirce’s thought. I was then interested in Peirce’s various claims that he was an

“objective idealist” or “Schellingean.” I was curious to see how this idealist history informed Peirce’s pragmatism. Carl, on the other hand, was attracted by Peirce’s ability to hang on to a non-foundationalist yet rich conception of truth and to an evolutionary cosmology that provided grounds for genuine creativity. Consequently, he was led to focus on the constraints on human reasoning and creative endeavors. During the fall of 1991 we therefore began a conversation—or “discussion”—concerning whether Peirce was an idealist. I argued for the claim and tried to see Peirce’s work in light of German and American idealist thought of the nineteenth century; Carl argued against it on the condition that being an idealist entailed the absence of non-mental constraints on human reasoning. In short, he worried that the lack of secondness or otherness with which Peirce occasionally charged Hegel might reappear in Peirce’s own idealism. The result here is a collection of essays—some older, some newer—that have developed out of this generative conversation on Peirce.

The initial debate led us into an ongoing dialogue regarding Peirce’s conceptions of realism and idealism. And this, as the chapters here reveal, led to future conversations with each other and with other colleagues. I went off in exploration of what Peirce called his scholastic realism, where general ideas and possibilities are to be considered as real as any physical object. Carl’s focus on the non-idealist strands of Peirce’s thought led him to explore what we call Peirce’s metaphysical or scientific realism—his claim that human reasoning is constrained by something other than mind, something “extramental.” The chapters here represent our own takes on Peircean thought and are not meant to provide a systematic or an exhaustive account of Peirce’s notions of idealism, realism, inquiry, and so on. Nor do we claim radical novelty for all the ideas herein; many good Peirce scholars have taken up these issues in ways similar to our own. What we do offer is an angle on these issues marked by our ongoing discussions and by our shared philosophical interests. Each essay was written to stand alone. Here we have arranged them around themes—perception, inquiry, religion, historical setting—but always with an eye toward the initial issue concerning the ways in

which idealism and realism affect the development of Peirce's philosophy. We hope that taken as a whole they might exemplify something of a Greek philosophical endeavor in which friends engage in serious reflection together. We do intend these chapters, at the least, to invite others into our discussion and we hope to make some initial suggestions about the ways in which Peirce was—and was not—both an idealist and a realist.

One important upshot of our conversations is to see that though Peirce in many ways looks like a straightforward transitional figure between modern and contemporary philosophy, he is more than this. His scholastic realism in particular, as John Boler, Susan Haack, and others have tried to show, stands in deep opposition to the nominalistic tendencies of both modern philosophy and most twentieth-century analytic philosophy. In embracing his realism, one is forced to rethink the most basic philosophical conceptions. What is real, what is continuity, what is an individual (a thing), and how is it that we know anything? Peirce's own explicit transformations of such basic concepts are well known—his reconceptions of truth, inquiry, semiotic theory, and God, for example. But the relation of these reconceptions to Peirce's realism and idealism has not always been well documented. One of our aims is to explore some of those relations here.

Perhaps the most fundamental reconception that Peirce made was that of a "relation." As is well known, the moderns had difficulty handling relations because, like the Parmenides figure in Plato's dialogue of that name, they individualized or "thingified" relations and treated them straightforwardly as other entities in the cosmos. Others of course treated them simply as useful fictions. For Peirce, relations are first and foremost instances of real generality. As he points out in his basic semiotic work, signs or representamens are general in nature—they mediate between an object and an interpretant, and they cover a multiplicity of particulars. Semeiosis, for Peirce, involves exemplary instances of relations. Without a thoroughgoing reconception of the nature of relations, Peirce suggested, all of the problems of modern philosophy remain intact and, argue as we may, we will remain stuck

with the disjunctive dilemma of Cartesian foundationalism or Humean skepticism. For Peirce, a realistic reconception of relations is pragmatic, and practical, because it makes better sense of our actual scientific practices as well as of our actual normative hopes in both ethics and logic. It is in any case an avenue worth exploring given the dead ends of modern thought so openly exposed by the likes of Martin Heidegger and John Dewey. We would invite readers to join the conversation we have enjoyed for the last twenty-five years.

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