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PEIRCE'S PRAGMATIC MAXIM AS A LOGICAL CONSEQUENCE OF SEMIOTIC IDEALISM

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show that the pragmatic maxim can be construed as a logical consequence of semiotic idealism. Peirce proposed his semiotic idealism in the 1860s and based it on two premises: first, that we could know only symbols and, second, that the only things that exist are those that could be known. From these premises, he concluded that only symbols exist. This conception was meant to refute the distinction between the substance and its phenomenal manifestations. If semiotic idealism implies the pragmatic maxim, then it becomes clear why the pragmatic maxim says that the conception of the effects of the object is the conception of the object: it is because Peirce thought that the effects are the object. Furthermore, the close link between these conceptions may account for Peirce's prolonged silence about pragmatism.

Keywords: Peirce, semiotic idealism, Kant, phenomenism, pragmatism

It is tempting to try to present different strands of Peirce's philosophy as a coherent and comprehensive philosophical system. In this paper, I do not claim that Peirce ever created such a system; rather, I claim that his best-known conception, pragmatism, was based on the doctrine of semiotic idealism. I borrowed the term "semiotic idealism" from Jeremiah McCarthy (1984), although it was coined by David Savan (1983). According to McCarthy, this form of idealism asserts that all real things are signs. However, while he used it to describe Peirce's late philosophy, I will try to show that 1) this conception was already present in Peirce's philosophy in the 1860s and 2) the content of Peirce's pragmatic maxim can be traced back to it. In my opinion, the close link between these doctrines may also explain why Peirce forgot about pragmatism for so many years. I argue that the two conceptions were so tightly interwoven that Peirce saw no purpose in defending pragmatism after he rejected semiotic idealism in the 1880s.

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1. THE ORIGINS OF SEMIOTIC IDEALISM

Peirce argued in Harvard Lectures that there are no individual names because every meaningful word has depth (connotation):

even the proper name of a man is a general term or the name of a class, for it names a class of sensations and thoughts. The true individual term the absolutely singular *this* and *that* cannot be reached. Whatever has comprehension must be general. (W 1: 461, 1866)

This amounts to saying that every name is general. Peirce also thought that knowledge is propositional and, thus, we can know things only through general names and concepts (i.e., symbols). Peirce illustrated this point with the example of conjunctive and disjunctive terms. He claimed that we use induction to infer the concept of a herbivore from the concepts of a cow, a pig, a sheep, and a deer and that we use hypothesis to infer the concept of an orange from the concepts of being round, bright, aromatic, juicy, tropical and being a fruit (W 1: 469-470, 1866). Peirce tried to show that the sole function of concepts (symbols) is to unite, through induction and hypothesis, the multitude of sensations (W 1: 471, 1866). According to Peirce, sensations themselves were also symbols, but they were different from sensuous impressions. Peirce stated this clearly in 1866:

We found that the first impressions upon our senses are not representations of certain unknown things in themselves but are themselves those very unknown things in themselves. Our first impressions are entirely unknown in themselves and the matter of cognition is the matter of fact and what is not a question of a possible experience is not a question of fact. These impressions are grasped into the unity which the mind requires, the unity of I think — the unity of consistency, by conceptions and sensations. (W 1: 471, 1866)

It follows that impressions are unknown in themselves; we can know them only through sensations that are inferred from them. On that account, both concepts and sensations are symbols, so there is no real difference between sensibility and intellect in the Kantian sense (W 1: 498, 1866). In the article “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man”, Peirce developed this argument by answering the following question about intuitions:

Whether by the simple contemplation of a cognition, independently of any previous knowledge and without reasoning from signs, we are enabled rightly to judge whether that cognition has been determined by a previous cognition or whether it refers immediately to its object (W 2: 193, 1868).

He thought that intuitive cognition (immediate, particular, self-evident) was different from discursive cognition (mediate, general, requiring translation). He claimed that the terms “intuitive cognition” and “discursive cogni-

tion” were used in the same sense by Duns Scotus and Kant (W 2: 193, 1868). It is worth noting that he preserved in his argument the ambiguity of the term *Anschauung*, since he used it to denote both the very act of intuition and the result of it.

I think we can assume that Peirce ascribed the same meaning to the term “sensuous impression” in 1866 as he did to the term “intuition” in 1868. In his view, intuitions were deemed by other philosophers to be determined by the object of cognition or not determined by any other cognition. He claimed, however, that every cognition is determined by another cognition but never by the very object of cognition (W 2: 195, 1868). He tried to substantiate this claim by adducing some results of psychophysiological studies. Nevertheless, I do not think that he was trying to reduce logical questions to psychological ones. I contend that his purpose was more ambitious. Firstly, he wanted to persuade his audience that we can only think in symbols. We know he had already come to this conclusion in Lowell Lectures, where he was writing about the nature of names and concepts. Secondly, he tried to show that if we think in symbols, the train of thought could be equated with logical inferences.¹

These claims are confirmed by his answer to the question regarding the power of introspection: “Whether we have any power of introspection, or whether our whole knowledge of the internal world is derived from the observation of external facts” (W 2: 205, 1868).² He argued that sensations (i.e., phenomena) are not given in perception, but are inferred from things given in perception. As a result, he claimed that sensations are the conclusions of unconscious and spontaneous hypothetical inferences that make the world intelligible to us (W 2: 206-207, 1868). Peirce also argued that efforts can be construed as the conclusions of another type of inference, namely induction (W 2: 232, 1868).

Peirce tried to create a new logic to solve the epistemological problem of the validity of knowledge about the external world. He propounded a new theory of subjectivity where he reduced all faculties to logical inferences and all inferences to transformations of the symbols. This enabled him to explain

¹ Bellucci (2016) claims that Peirce’s reduction of the logical consequence to the sign relation was inspired by the Greek notion of *σημείον*, especially by the way it was used in Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*.

² Peirce wrote about external facts in a draft from 1868, where he stated that metaphysics should be founded upon research into facts, like dynamics and other natural sciences, and not on pure speculation (W 2:188, 1868). Peirce may have borrowed the term “external facts” from William Whewell, who distinguished between facts and ideas. Moreover, in his lectures on British logicians, Peirce claimed that Whewell’s distinction bears a striking resemblance to the Kantian distinction between sensibility and intellect (W 2:341, 1869). Arguably, Peirce thought that facts were phenomena and ideas were concepts.

why the subject is capable of producing valid cognitions. If the subject is the sum of logical inferences and there are valid inferences, then the subject is capable of creating valid cognitions. Thus, the Kantian question was solved by the radicalization of Kant's view that intellect can be reduced to logical operations. This interpretation is not mere speculation, since Peirce wrote about Kant in his *Treatise on Metaphysics* in 1861:

An inference is involved in every cognition An operation upon data resulting in cognition is an inference. This demonstration is extracted from Kant. (W 1: 75, 1861)

So whereas Kant thought that phenomena are impressions formed by the pure forms of intuition with the help of the transcendental imagination, Peirce claimed that phenomena are sensations formed by logical inferences on the basis of impressions. Whereas Kant wrote about three kinds of synthesis, Peirce asserted that there is only one kind of synthesis, the logical one, which has three following forms: deduction, induction, and hypothesis. Kant claimed that experience has non-conceptual content, whereas Peirce thought that our experience is wholly symbolic.³

Given that all thoughts are symbols, is it possible for us to know the reality in itself? Does the real object of knowledge exist behind phenomena? Peirce gave two answers to these questions. Firstly, he claimed that if every cognition is inferred from the phenomena (i.e., sensations) and phenomena are symbols, then every cognition is a symbol. This means that the thing in itself, as something to which phenomena refer, but which does not refer to anything else, cannot be given in experience (W 2: 174, 1868). Secondly, if we know absolutely nothing about an x , then we know that we know absolutely nothing about an x , so we know something about an x . Therefore, an x is not identical with an x (W 2: 5, 1867). Peirce used this point to show that the distinction between things in themselves and phenomena is misguided because the concept of a thing in itself is self-contradictory:

Thus it appears, that philosophers in endeavoring to erect a division in imitation of that between the I and the non-I, between the objects and things-in-themselves, or the cognizable and the incognizable, are using words totally without meaning. (W 2: 174-175, 1868)

Peirce stated later on that *nothing* cannot be the opposite of *being* because there is no higher kind that encompasses both. Furthermore, if *nothing* is, then it exists — hence, there is no *nothing*. Consequently, *nothing* cannot be known. Peirce thought that this is the rationale for equating being with cognizability. It follows that there is no real difference between being and

³ Murphey (1993) and Apel (1995) provide in-depth discussions of Peirce's reinterpretation of Kant's philosophy. Recently, Gava (2014) has put forward interesting ideas on the same subject.

thought. For this reason, Peirce counted himself among the idealists (W 2: 191, 1868). He claimed that idealism in the modern period was based on the refutation of ontological and epistemological dualism (W 2: 238, 1868). However, what did he mean by calling himself an idealist? I think that his reasoning can be represented as follows: If the only things that exist are those that could be known and we could know only symbols, then only symbols exist.

Peirce did not say this outright in any of his writings in the 1860s. However, this conclusion is concurrent with his thesis that the man is a symbol. He first introduced this claim in Lowell Lectures, where he also presented a proof of it (W 1: 498, 1866). He began by arguing that the man is identical with his faculties. Because, he continued, faculties are logical inferences, the man is the sum of logical inferences. Now, since every inference consists of symbols, it follows that the man must also be a symbol. In the article "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities", he repeated this reasoning when discussing dualism:

We have seen that the content of consciousness, the entire phenomenal manifestation of mind, is a sign resulting from inference. Upon our principle, therefore, that the absolutely incognizable does not exist, so that the phenomenal manifestation of a substance is the substance, we must conclude that the mind is a sign developing according to the laws of inference. (W 2: 240, 1868)

As a result, Peirce claimed that there is no difference between phenomena and things in themselves. If everything we could know is a symbol and there is nothing beyond symbols, then there are only symbols. Peirce also wrote about this claim a few years later in a manuscript in which he used his famous example of a diamond for the first time (W 3: 59, 1872, 3: 31, 1872). This example was meant to illustrate the thesis that the phenomenal manifestation of a substance is the substance; we cannot claim that a diamond is really hard if this quality does not manifest itself.

I assume that Peirce meant the same by the term "sensation" in 1866 and the term "phenomenal manifestation" in 1872, both terms denoted symbols. Therefore, if every manifestation is a symbol and there are only manifestations, then only symbols exist. This amounts to saying that being is identical with being represented. Peirce referred to this view as an "idealistic theory of metaphysics" (W 3: 59, 1872). It should be noted that this theory implies a kind of phenomenalism. Peirce accepted this consequence, although he thought that this was the phenomenalism of Kant (W 2: 470-471, 1868). He elaborated on this claim in 1871, when he wrote the following:

the appearances of sense as only signs of the realities. Only, the realities which they represent would not be the unknowable cause of sensation, but *noumena*, or intelli-

ble conceptions which are the last products of the mental action which is set in motion by sensation. (W 2: 470, 1871)

2. THE IDEALISTIC FOUNDATION OF THE PRAGMATIC MAXIM

I think that this conception is essential for understanding the content of the pragmatic maxim:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (W 3: 266, 1878)

Sometimes this maxim is thought to be either unclear or convoluted. I contend that it is neither as long as we consider it in the context of Peirce's early philosophy. To understand it, we only need to assume that the term "effects" is synonymous with "phenomenal manifestations" and "sensations". Then we can answer the question of why the conception of the effects is the whole of our conception of the object. Because there is nothing beyond the effects. To put it another way, there are no substances but only relations between symbols.

This semiotic idealism may also explain why Peirce hardly ever mentioned the maxim after 1878. I contend that this was because the pragmatic maxim was inextricable from semiotic idealism at the time. In the 1870s, the maxim was based on the conception that excluded individuality in all its forms and rejected the distinction between thought and being. However, Peirce changed his views radically in the 1880s. Firstly, while working on the algebra of logic, he discovered that individuals are necessary to express all kinds of relations. He acknowledged that his rejection of individuality was motivated by the problems that had puzzled logicians since Boole. Finally, he completely rejected his earlier views on individuality when he discovered the quantification theory in 1885.⁴ Secondly, in his lecture "Design and Chance", Peirce put forward the idea that chance may be operative in the universe and explains the origin of the laws of nature. He later claimed that this view was a refutation of the principle of sufficient reason, since if there is absolute chance, then some phenomena do not have a cause and therefore we cannot explain everything. For this reason, we also cannot know everything.

⁴ Parker (1998: 219-222) discusses the problem of extra-semiotic entities. He claims that Peirce was not a semiotic idealist because indices point to some elements of the universe that are not semiotic in nature. The problem is that Peirce acquired a proper understanding of the nature of indices quite late because in 1885.

Peirce thus changed his logic in the 1880s, which led to changes in his metaphysics. I submit that he was silent for many years about pragmatism because he thought that there was no place in his philosophy for a doctrine that was based on spurious logic.⁵ Although he came back to the maxim after 1898, this renewed interest is more easily explained by the vicissitudes of his life, especially his friendship with William James, than by the evolution of his thought from the 1860s onwards.

CONCLUSION

In the 1860s, Peirce tried to circumvent the problem of particular judgments posed by the algebraic notation of logic. He argued that there is no difference between particular and general judgments or between individual and general names; rather, there are only general judgments composed of general names (i.e., symbols). Thus, Peirce excluded the possibility of the existence of individual representations. He called them “sensuous impressions” in 1866 and “intuitions” in 1868. Nevertheless, when he wrote about “sensations”, he had lower-order concepts in mind. I claim that he used the term “external facts” (“phenomena” and “phenomenal manifestations”) to denote these kinds of concepts embedded in the network of logical inferences.

Furthermore, Peirce argued that every thought is a symbol. This thesis was the radicalization of an aspect of Kant’s philosophy. He also claimed that being is synonymous with being represented and, thus, that there is no real difference between being and thought. This amounted to the rejection of one of the main features of Kant’s philosophy, namely the distinction between phenomena and things in themselves. Both these premises allowed Peirce to draw the conclusion that only symbols exist, which is precisely the doctrine of semiotic idealism.

If we dismissed this speculative context, the content of the pragmatic maxim would seem mysterious. Even though Peirce was writing about the “effects”, it is highly unlikely that he ascribed some special meaning to this term. It is more probable that he used it in the same sense as the terms “manifestations”, “phenomena”, or “facts”, which all denoted symbols. The pragmatic maxim was thus a logical consequence of semiotic idealism, since if the sum of the effects is the object, then the whole conception of the effects must be the conception of the object.

⁵ Short argues that Peirce’s overcame his idealism in the 1880s, and this enabled him to develop his mature semiotics and pragmatism (Short 2007: 28). However, he does not notice that Peirce’s pragmatic maxim was founded upon his idealism in the 1870s.

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