

Peirce's Hermeneutical Circle¹

Círculo Hermenêutico Peirciano

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Abstract: Peirce's generalizing genius can be traced from his "first" classification of fundamental categories to the more mature elaborations of his later career. His self-proclaimed hermeneutical circle consisted of amplifying and ramifying classifications of theoretic issues by an organic or holistic method that is in principle inimical to nominalistic approaches. With its "difference" logic, T. L Short's periodization of Peirce's career-text is an illustration of a nominalistic approach.

Key words: Peirce's career-text. Hermeneutical circles. Peirce's self-understanding of his contribution to systematic philosophy. Homoarchic vs. heteroarchic interpretations. Holistic vs. nominalistic methods. Short's method is nominalistic.

Resumo: *O gênio generalizador de Peirce pode ser traçado desde sua "primeira" classificação das categorias fundamentais até as elaborações mais maduras de sua carreira tardia. Seu auto-proclamado círculo hermenêutico consistiu em amplificar e ramificar classificações de temas teóricos por um método orgânico ou holístico que é, em princípio, hostil a abordagens nominalísticas. Com esta "diferença" lógica, a periodização da carreira textual de Peirce de T.L. Short é uma ilustração de uma abordagem nominalística.*

Palavras-chave: *Carreira textual de Peirce. Círculos hermenêuticos. Auto-entendimento de Peirce de sua contribuição à filosofia. Interpretações homoarquicas vs. heteroarquicas. Métodos holístico vs. nominalístico. Método de Short é nominalístico.*

The front and center problematic of this discussion is that of determining (or denying) the deep current of continuing, consistent, development in Peirce's thought. In my article I underlined the concept of a *career-text* to suggest a *methodological heuristic* that accounts for the *growing* (and *blossoming*) theoretical achievement of Peirce over his half a century involvement in the republic of letters. (I referred to his polymathic range and expertise in general while concentrating on their philosophical trajectory.) *Growing* and *blossoming* are of course organic metaphors—entirely appropriate to the doctrinal commitments of Peirce's text. And my article is keen on associating Peirce with the vitalistic, anti-mechanistic traditions of Romanticism and Idealism that Peirce appropriated out of Goethe, Schiller, Schelling, Emerson, *et al.*

1 I thank the editorial board of **Cognitio** for the opportunity to continue this discussion with T. L Short concerning our trajectories of interpretation of Peirce's objective idealism.

Internally, I further argued, Peirce's own method of articulation prioritizes organic and teleological assumptions in a basically Aristotelian sense of conjugating (marrying) the subject matters of philosophical discourse in their formal and material aspects. Further indebted to Kant, Peirce had a special genius for architectonic classification of philosophical subject matters into their essential forms. He showed that genius from the beginning to the end of his career.

In featuring Peirce's method of holistic articulation—which is at the heart of his Pragmaticism and is consistently subtended by his ontological commitment to a vitalistic, evolutionary universe—we should go back to the very beginning of his career to see how he planted its first *seeds* that were to grow and blossom in the so many ingenious amplifications and ramifications of his philosophical life. Or to change the metaphor, we can reprise certain *pools of thought* which already occupied the young Peirce (to an amazing degree) and to which he returned at various later junctures of his writing. What we are after here is to determine continuing and unfolding threads of his essential thought.

It is of course possible to cannibalize Peirce's thought by virtue of some other methodology that meets some special (non-Peircean) purpose of an individual interpreter. Such interpretations tend to be nominalistic, isolating individual parts, slicing and dicing, or halving, Peirce. Such nominalistic approaches murder to dissect. In effect, their refusal to accept the full generality of his thought runs against the grain of Peirce's professed Scholastic realism to say nothing of the entire gamut of ways he employed his third category.

Let us go back to the beginning. A case in point is the 16-year old Peirce's initial concern to classify the "three worlds" of grammatical pronouns as embedded in the primitive concepts of I, IT, and THOU. Fast-forwarding to the end of his career, the same trichotomic appears in the "three universes" of his "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (1908) as well as in other very late writings. Is Peirce's early classification unrelated to the later ones, or rather another precious example of the power of the "first" in Peirce's way of thinking and its possible unfoldments? I suggest the latter.

Related to Peirce's initial grammatology of the "three persons," we should take note of the influence of Friedrich von Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, which provided Peirce with his first philosophical food for thought (before he tackled Kant's Table of Judgments). Schiller's three impulses of formal, sensuous, and aesthetic drives or dispositions substantially informed Peirce's I, IT, and THOU concepts, respectively. Not only did Peirce say that Schiller was his first philosophical reading,—preceding his almost memorized study of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in both editions,—he called attention to that "first" influence for the rest of his career. As Peirce matured, Schiller's influence surfaced in regard to Peirce's sense of abductive inference, the priority of esthetics in the normative sciences, and in his concept of "Musement" in the "Neglected Argument" essay.²

2 See MS 51 (1859), and a variety of the 1857 MS (55, 12, 21, 20), and MS 65 and 66 of 1861. In 1857, Peirce, not yet eighteen, wrote a small essay on Schiller's *Letters*, commenting on the concept of the play-drive (W.1, 10-12). In 1902 Peirce wrote: "It is now forty-seven years ago that I undertook to expound Schiller's *Aesthetische Briefe* to my dear friend Horatio Paine. We spent every afternoon for long months upon it, picking the matter to pieces as well as we boys knew how to do. In those days I read various

My intention here is not to expatiate on this earliest *seed*, or *pool of thought*, of Peirce's career-text. It is rather to note Peirce's initial *methodic* endeavor to think through a complete set of fundamental concepts which combined the heuristics of Schiller's *Letters* with a variety of considerations of Kant's Table of Categories. Max Fisch provides a succinct analysis of that in his Introduction to volume one of *The Chronological Edition*³; he goes on to make the telling observation that "Though by 1867 Peirce has abandoned I, IT, and THOU as names for his categories, it is only because he has found better technical terms for what he has meant by those more colloquial ones."⁴ Fisch's citation of an early observation of William James is also germane in this regard. After Peirce, in the spring of 1861, began his book entitled "I, IT, and THOU," in which he said the THOU is third because THOU presupposes IT, and IT presupposes I, the next year, 1862, William James wrote in one of his notebooks: "The *thou* idea, as Peirce calls it, dominates an entire realm of mental phenomena, embracing poetry, all direct intuition of nature, scientific instinct, relations of man to man, morality, &c. All analysis must be into a triad; *me* & *it* require the complement of the *thou*."⁵

All this is precious historical and textual evidence of the first budding of Peirce's career-long genius for articulating fundamental categories. Indeed, as I stressed in my previous *Cognitio* article, on more than one occasion he postulated that his maturely developed three categories are more fundamental than those of Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel. Though this claim is a blockbuster, I won't expatiate on it here either.

But it will be germane to our consideration of the blossoming continuity of Peirce's thought to register certain other of his own assertions on the matter. Peirce, in his "Architecture of Theories" of 1891, took pages out of both Kant and Schelling in arguing for the need to build an architectonic system out of an exhaustive compilation

works on aesthetics; but on the whole, I must confess that, like most logicians, I have pondered that subject far too little [...]. And then esthetics and logic seem, at first blush, to belong to different universes. It is only very recently that I have become persuaded that that seeming is illusory, and that, on the contrary, logic needs the help of esthetics" (CP 2.197). In MS 310 (1903) Peirce says Schiller's esthetics contained his three categories in disguise: the I, IT, and THOU triad; it also contains one of Peirce's best characterizations of Esthetics as the first normative science and its ideal of concrete reasonableness. As late as 1908 he wrote: "As to the word 'play,' the first book of philosophy I ever read [...] was Schiller's *Aesthetische Briefe*, where he has so much to say about the *Spiel-trieb*; and it made so much impression upon me as to have thoroughly soaked my notion of 'play' to this day." (PW, 77). MS 683, written in 1913, just a few months before he died, is another draft/version of his unpublished "Reasoning in Security and Uberty" essay which further extends the references to Schiller's influence.

3 W 1, xxv.

4 Ibid., xxx. For an excellent update on this material, see Tullio Viola, "Philosophy and the Second Person: Peirce, Humboldt, Benveniste, and Personal Pronouns as Universals of Communication," TCSJP, vol. 47-number 4, 2011, 389-420. Viola explicates Peirce's youthful grammarology via Humboldt's et al. in the direction of ordinary language philosophy; my own approach—a task for another day— would be to develop further the deeper impact of Schiller's *Letters* (on the idea of Beauty functioning as the perfection of humanity) with respect to Peirce's "tuism" reappearing in his doctrine of metaphysical agapasm and in the normative priority of Esthetics.

5 Ibid., xxix.

of the necessary materials—another illustration, incidentally, of his Aristotelian method of form/matter conjugation. Prior to that, he announced his own self-understanding of his unfolding career-text in “A Guess at the Riddle” of 1887-88: “The undertaking which this volume inaugurates is to make a philosophy like that of Aristotle, that is to say, to outline a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical science, in history, in sociology, and in whatever other department there may be, shall appear as the filling of its details, The first step toward this is to find simple concepts applicable to every subject.”⁶

To cite just two other stages along the way, Peirce’s private notebook on 23 March 1867 says his “New List of Categories”—the transfiguration of his I, IT, and Thou concepts into the trichotomic of firstness, secondness, and thirdness— is “[...] the gift I make to the world. That is my child. In it I shall live when oblivion has me—my body.”⁷ In a letter thirty-eight years later, Peirce. referred back to May 14, 1867, the date of his original publication of the “New List,” indicating that his contribution to philosophy in the “New List” corresponded to Hegel’s “three grades of thinking,” though not to his other categories.⁸ These words convey Peirce’s own claim as to his contribution to philosophy, with particular emphasis on his method of classification. It follows that tracing the continuous thread of his own self-understanding of his paradigm-changing achievement becomes the ultimate task of the serious reader of his unfolding career-text.

These are only some of a greater number of pronouncements that corroborate the import of Peirce’s remark in his correspondence with William James of November, 25, 1902—a remark with which I began my previous article—that “I seem to myself to be the sole depositary of the completely developed system, which all hangs together and cannot receive proper presentation in fragments.” All these passages, and many others of the same gist, can be marshaled in support of establishing the deep current of continuous—unfragmentable—development of Peirce’s methodic conjugation of his three foundational categories from the “three worlds” of his earliest writings to the “three universes” of his later ones.

In this regard, my *Cognitio* article takes note of Peirce’s objective idealism and its provenance in American Transcendentalism (Emerson) and German Idealism (Goethe, Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, et al.). Its thrust is to observe that Peirce’s own “Schelling-fashioned” objective idealism (which he famously opined is “the one intelligible theory of the universe”) and such interlinked concepts as the connaturality of the human mind and nature and mind’s energizing reasonableness in the objective nature of things, subtend his Pragmaticism. And all these interlinked concepts were Peirce’s way of explicating the three component (tripresent) categories which also subtended the trichotomicity of his semeiotics Accordingly, as my own conviction, based on Peirce’s

6 EP1, 246-47. Hauser and Kloesel indicate that “A Guess at the Riddle” of 1887-88 is “perhaps Peirce’s greatest and most original contribution to speculative philosophy, and marks his deliberate turn to architectonic thought”; and they note Peirce’s similar claim on a variant opening page, EP1,245.

7 FISCH, W 1, xxvi.

8 FISCH, loc. cit. I pass over here Peirce’s articulations of the way he also differed from Hegel.

own doctrinal articulations, I set this presuppositional heuristic in play in the interpretation of Peirce's objective idealism.

Not to say more about that here, I pass on now to my colleague T. L. Short's way of "Reading Peirce Differently." Short begins with a fairly hefty "preliminary" statement of the "hermeneutic circles involved" in his and mine. That "first" statement launches his own text's interpretive direction. All this is to the good: it states the *differences* in abductive interpretive hypotheses informing our competing readings of Peirce's text. The interesting question becomes; then, what is Short's interpretive hypothesis, which, I note in passing, at this preliminary stage is tied to no particular passage in Peirce's own text.

It turns out that Short's approach is expressly *heteroarchic* from Peirce's self-understanding and my own. Short's disquisition focuses upon the issue of *periodization* of Peirce's text with the express intention—what he first calls a "suggestion"—that any such periodization of Peirce's thought "will be to a degree arbitrary if his thought was, as I believe it was, always in flux." Which is to say, he both takes up and *prejudges* the issues. His "flux" (category of secondness?) displaces my "growth" (category of thirdness) metaphor. He wants to insist on "major changes" in Peirce's thought, that is, "major differences" qua fundamental discontinuities "in what is said in one and what is said in another of the alleged periods."⁹ Short announces his further intention of working the pluses and minuses of specific theories that he alleges are discontinuously embedded in Peirce's "vague" general system— (which he rejects and even portrays Peirce as having rejected, by way of "putting minor missteps aside and taking into due account of irony, hyperbole, and the like").¹⁰

In all this I admire Short's clarification of his own hermeneutical circle; similarly, I appreciate the degree of *systematic consistency* with which he methodically employs his own heuristic in reinterpreting Peirce "differently." Skipping over all the tit-for-tat (the dreadful battle of the books) that ensues—all of which are functions of Short's cannibalizing Peirce's text under the influence of his guiding principle—I jump to Short's conclusions in sections D and E of his paper. The gist of these is to pick a quarrel with my conjoining of the terms "precise" and "vague" in describing the flexible powers of Peirce's three multidimensional categories. (Though it seems to bother Short, "vague" is indeed a precious positive word in Peirce's philosophical vocabulary; it is intrinsically linked to his anti-nominalist sense of generality in architectonic elaborations, beginning with his phaneroscopic descriptions and extending to his objective idealism, pragmatism, fallibilism, and semeiotics.)

Short's overall contention is that Peirce's trichotomy of the three categories are "differently developed in different periods"; the tripartite conception of signs "also differently developed in different periods"; and again, his evolutionary cosmology "differently fleshed out in different years." Or again, "a heuristic, differently followed at different times—a pattern differently realized at different times—does not a system

9 See "Reasoning and the Logic of Things," 115, 117-8, and 121 on Plato's teacher Cratylus and Heraclitus' "great error" that "continuity implies transitoriness. The things of this world, that seem so transitory to philosophers, are *not* continuous."

10 To Peirce the origin of the universe is in the vague, namely "the *uralt* vague generality of the most abstract potentiality" (RLT 254). He identifies vagueness with generality (thirdness) in numerous articulations.

make.” (This last line I take to be aimed at my article’s initial sentence which quoted Peirce’s 1902 letter to William James concerning his “completed developed system that all hangs together and cannot receive proper presentation in fragments.”) In short, Short has thus set his agenda at loggerheads with Peirce’s own self-understanding of his “completely developed system.”

Now, in its own systematic consistency, in what does Short’s *logical or methodic operator of interpretation*, traceable to the word “differently” in the title of his new article, consist? (*Consist* is another Peircean word for thirdness). In the “preliminary” stage of his argument, Short appears to employ the standard nominalistic method of analytic philosophy which parses subject matters by, in his own words, a reductive method of “arithmetic and subtraction.” This is a method that zooms in on *parts outside of parts* (described by Kant as an “aggregational method” in contrast to a holistic one). It doesn’t see the woods for the trees. In this methodic way Short fashions a so-to-speak pile-on account of A, B, Cs, as well as of X, X(A), X(B), X(C)s, to factor his theory of discontinuous periodization of Peirce thought.

Short inscribes several full pages of this kind of *logistic computation*, a staple of analytic philosophers, to produce a “full account” in which each X(i) requires taking every X(i) into account, and therefore $X(A) = X(B) = X(C)$. This notation is supposed to clarify that “Dilworth assumes consistency,” whereas Short sees it “differently.”

Grateful though I am for this logistic clarification, I still venture to say that all this algebraic denotation runs against the grain of *organic* formulation of the essential concepts and issues. Its *mechanism* of procedure is *heteroarchic* with respect to Peirce’s own holistic method of conjugation and classification of essential theoretical variables in architectonic fashion. And as we see from a former citation from the opening paragraphs of “The Architecture of Theories,” Peirce’s interest in architectonics envisions laying the basis of discovery along the entire gamut of future philosophical and scientific disciplines. (It is a function of the open-ended category of thirdness to embody this character and function of *esse in futuro*.) In essential contrast, Short is a nominalist eschewing the holistic and generalizing genius of Peirce’s text.

But in fact, I think that Short’s articulation of his own hermenutical circle—in which he so consistently alleges differences in periods and inconsistencies of conceptualization in Peirce’s career-text—goes beyond the standard *logistic* form of contemporary nominalistic analysis. Short, I believe, is in effect complicit with the *postmodern* (e.g., Derridean) playbook of parsing Peirce’s text by the logic of “differences” (that is, *differance*). This is the logic of irreducible presences and absences, the function of which is to deny in principle a “final signified,” rather remaining committed heuristically to the “flux” or “play” of signifiers without a final interpretant. If I may say so, Short’s reinterpretation of Peirce has a bottom line of skeptical nominalism. It does not matter how many periods in which Peirce’s career-text is discontinuously “periodized.” The bottom line is that the “periods” amount to an “unsystem,” that is, in Short’s own words, patterns of categories “differently developed in different periods.”

“On so many matters,”—Short goes on to insist,—Peirce “gave contradictory answers.” To take a variation on this, in problematizing the concept of final causation in Peirce’s text, Short’s own example of a carpenter building a house (reminiscent of Peirce’s example in “The Architecture of Theories”?) comes to the conclusion that

besides the carpenter having a guiding purpose in adding a bay window, the various efficient causes employed add up to "too many causes here!" Again in the evolution of biological species and in the maturation of an individual of a species, Short finds it problematic that "Again, we seem to have a superabundance of causes. This is a familiar problem not unique to Peirce." As I understand it, Short's complaint here is a variation on his skeptical "difference" logic. It multiplies the material differences and efficient causes while failing to generalize their formal coherences and guiding purposes (the formal causes).

Furthermore, Short's approach to Peirce trends toward becoming a variation on the postmodern concept of the "absent author." In this form of contemporary language game the literary critic replaces the author. Peirce, we have seen, *authored* his own text in his claim as to its bottomline classification of three fundamental philosophical categories. Short's allegation as to discontinuous periodization and incoherent patterns of concept formation in Peirce's thought has in effect absented Peirce's authorial authority, replacing it with his own.

In one instance Short complains that I have not paid attention to a contemporary article *of his* appearing in another journal that is the companion to his previous *Cognitio* article. But that would simply be opening another can of worms. In the present article he exclusively draws his sole authority for asserting discontinuous periodization in Peirce's thought from *his own* previously published book (2007). But such advertisements of other publications—(we all do it in our writings!)—only return us to the central problematic of this discussion, namely the issue of how each interpreter's hermeneutical circle determines the outcome of interpretation. Short's systematically employed hybrid of denotatively aggregational and postmodern *difference* logics would presumably apply to his other Peirce studies as well. This leads to my abductive inference that they are mis-readings, valuable for those who want to go there but distortive of Peirce's gradually unfolding career-text, the internally consistent generality of which remains as a paradigm-changing contribution to the history of philosophy.

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