

On the “Beauty of the Unbeautiful” in Peirce’s Esthetics

Sobre a “Beleza do Não-Belo” na Estética Peirciana

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Abstract: Peirce’s enigmatic remarks regarding the notion of beauty and its connection to esthetics are explored in light of his classification of the sciences, his system of categories, and his stance on realism vs. nominalism, with a view towards understanding his late efforts at making esthetics a heuristic, or theoretical science.

Keywords: Peirce. Beauty. Esthetics. Aesthetics. Realism. Nominalism. Classification of the Sciences. Categories. Ethics

Resumo: *As enigmáticas afirmações de Peirce a respeito da noção de beleza e sua conexão com a estética são exploradas à luz de sua classificação das ciências, seu sistema de categorias e sua posição em relação ao realismo versus nominalismo, tendo em vista uma compreensão de seus últimos esforços em fazer da estética uma ciência teórica ou heurística.*

Palavras-chave: *Peirce. Beleza. Estética. Realismo. Nominalismo. Classificação das Ciências. Categorias. Ética.*

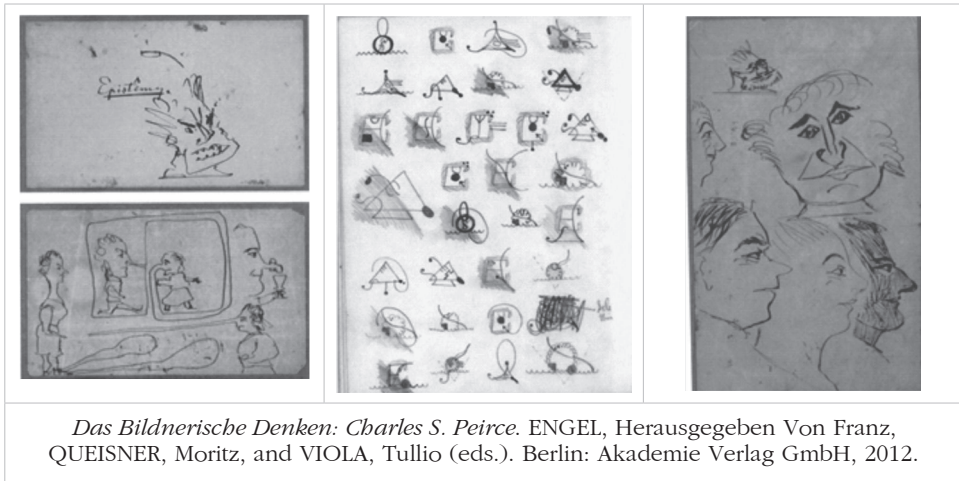
In a compelling letter written in 1896 to his friend Judge Francis C. Russell, where Peirce describes the unfortunate situation in which he finds himself at the end of his life, he gives an account of his modest artistic accomplishments:

I consider myself a well-educated man. Some branches have been neglected. I do not play an instrument, except a *nocturne passionata* of my own composition on the piano forte in which while ten fingers play the treble, five toes do the bas. My efforts in the way of counterpoint are not quite up to Bach,—not Sebastian. If you ask me if I sing, I must reply with Florence in the play that my friends assure me I do not.¹ Though I draw incessantly, I have never drawn a prize. But I have covered a pretty wide field with my studies. (MS L387a.19, 1896).

Indeed, Peirce *did* cover much territory in his studies, and even though he claims not to have been particularly talented as an artist or musician (though a cursory look at

1 Probably a reference to “Our American Cousin” the 1858 play by English playwright Tom Taylor now best known as the play U.S. President Abraham Lincoln was attending in Ford’s Theatre when he was assassinated by actor and Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth on April 14, 1865.

his drawings might persuade one otherwise), we can be sure that as a member of the genteel class in the 19th century, his education included an appreciation for beauty and the arts.² This is evident even more so in other correspondence, especially the letters he wrote as a young man to his family while visiting Europe for the first time in 1870.³ His comments reveal a thorough knowledge of painting, sculpture, and architecture;⁴ apparent, also, is a keen appreciation for the beauty in nature as well as in the artifacts he encounters and which he deftly critiques in his planned visits to museums and famous landmarks.⁵



Das Bildnerische Denken: Charles S. Peirce. ENGEL, Herausgegeben Von Franz, QUEISNER, Moritz, and VIOLA, Tullio (eds.). Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 2012.

But the Peirce that we all know and love, Peirce the logician, scientist, pragmatist, and semiotician, is not one we normally picture as concerned with the study of beauty and art, the traditional subjects of esthetics; “Peirce the esthetician” is not a phrase heard often, if ever. There is good reason for that; save for an 1857 college paper written on Friedrich Schiller after reading his *Aesthetische Briefe*, Peirce does not broach the subject of esthetics, considering it a “silly science” until a change of heart in his last few years of life.⁶ Peirce repeatedly admits of his lack of knowledge—“Of Esthetics I must confess myself utterly ignorant” (MS 683.15,n.d.); “[...] I am still a perfect ignoramus in esthetics” (CP 5.111,1903); “[...] I do not feel entitled to have any confident opinions about [Esthetics] (CP 5.129,1903); “[...] like most logicians, I have pondered that subject [Esthetics] far too little” (CP

- 2 Peirce’s extensive esthetic education included a professional course in wine tasting (MS 619.5, 1909).
- 3 See Jaime Nubiola’s account of Peirce’s travels in *Das Bildnerische Denken: Charles S. Peirce.* ENGEL, Herausgegeben Von Franz, QUEISNER, Moritz, and VIOLA, Tullio (eds.). Berlin: Akademie Verlag GmbH, 2012.
- 4 His esthetic education and talents, we will see later, would be classified as under practical science.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 See W 1.10-12.

2.197, 1902). When he works through the subject years later, he makes some rather enigmatic remarks about beauty (“bizarre assertions,” as one commentator refers to his observations)—“[Esthetics] has been handicapped by the definition of it as the theory of beauty” (CP 2.199, 1902);⁷ “I have some lingering doubt as to there being any true normative science of the beautiful” (CP 5.130, 1903); “It is a pity that the English language has no more accurate term for esthetic goodness than beauty” (MS 310.8, 1903); and the most shocking (though he claims to not think it so)—

We have not in our language a word of the requisite generality. The Greek {kalos}, the French beau, only come near to it, without hitting it squarely on the head. “Fine” would be a wretched substitute. Beautiful is bad; because one mode of being {kalos} essentially depends upon the quality being unbeautiful. Perhaps, however, the phrase “the beauty of the unbeautiful” would not be shocking. Still “beauty” is too skin-deep. (CP 2.199, 1902).

In this paper, I will attempt to disentangle Peirce’s remarks about beauty and trace some of his pronouncements on esthetics, as seen through his classification of the sciences, his system of categories, and his stance on realism vs. nominalism, with a view towards understanding his late efforts at making esthetics a heuristic, or theoretical science.⁸ Art, of course, is traditionally included within the discipline of esthetics, and there have been noteworthy attempts to connect Peirce’s views with a theory of art,⁹ but I will limit my comments to the concept of beauty and its place in Peirce’s esthetics, an endeavor which is not made any easier due to Peirce’s hesitancy about the subject matter, and his unfulfilled promises of further elaboration. Nevertheless, I do think it is possible to string together some of his disconnected arguments into a coherent view on esthetics, a project I will barely be able to touch upon in this presentation. I should mention at the outset, however, that I share the same assessment as Peirce about my own scarcity of knowledge about the subject. Nevertheless, I will begin with brief, very general introductory remarks about the concept of beauty.

Beauty Through the Ages¹⁰

Along with goodness, truth, and justice, beauty has been one of the most enduring and controversial themes in Western culture, beginning with the ancient Greeks; (it should be mentioned, however, as Peirce was very much aware, that the Greek

7 See Beverly Kent’s “Peirce’s Esthetics: A New Look,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* vol. 12, n. 3, p. 267.

8 I have not encountered an explanation in the literature as to why it took Peirce so long to tackle the subject; Hocutt says it was because Peirce found in logic all he needed, Anderson claims not to know. I propose in this paper that it was probably because of his anti-nominalism stance, which, as I argue elsewhere, he held throughout his whole career.

9 Some examples are Ivo Ibric’s “Peircean Seeds for a Philosophy of Art,” *Semiotics: The Proceedings of the Semiotic Society*, New York Legas Publishing, 2011; Martin Lefebvre’s “Peirce’s Esthetics: A Taste for Signs in Art,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* vol. 43, n.2. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.

10 As already stated, this is a rough sketch, and as such does not include the details and subtleties of the different positions.

word “kalos” is sometimes used more broadly than “beauty,” including the notions “admirable,” “excellent,” and “fine”).

One of the key issues since ancient times is whether beauty is subjective (“in the eye of the beholder”), or whether it is an objective property in things; another focuses on the effect of beauty on the beholder, ranging from pleasure, desire, admiration, love, or delight. As we would expect, Plato’s account in the *Philebus* (59B-C, 65D) locates beauty itself in the realm of the Forms, with beauty of particular things participating in the Form Beauty. Though Aristotle disagreed with Plato’s account of the Forms, he too regarded beauty as objective (*Metaphysics* 1078b) in the sense that beauty is not localized in the response of the beholder, although it does provoke a response.¹¹ The classical conception eventually came to be that beauty consists of an ordered and symmetrical arrangement of integral parts into a coherent whole, instantiating specific harmonious proportions or relations among its parts into one unity (*Metaphysics* 1078a), as exemplified by the perfect proportions of the Parthenon.¹²

In the *Ennead* (I, 6) Plotinus echoes Plato’s notion that beauty calls out for love or adoration, and associates it with the “Divine-Thought,” giving rise to a mystical vision of the beauty of God. Pseudo-Dionysius continues this tradition, by portraying the universe as yearning towards God its creator, and all sensual and aesthetic pleasures as a result of the spiritual union with the vast plethora of God’s creation. Augustine, in *De Veritate* (247), asks in typical Socratic/Platonic fashion, whether things are beautiful because they give delight, or whether they give delight because they are beautiful, deciding for the second option. Aquinas, as an Aristotelian, claims in *Summa Theologiae* (1, 39, 8) that beauty has three requirements—integrity (or perfection), due proportion, and clarity.¹³

The notion that beauty is subjective is more common by the 18th century, probably influenced by Locke’s distinction of primary and secondary qualities, where color, as a secondary quality, is located in the perceiver’s mind and not in the object itself.¹⁴ Pleasure, then, is seen more as the origin of beauty than as its product. This was seen as problematic by some, since it would then seem that the word has no meaning except perhaps as an expression of a kind of personal approval. But that did not seem quite right, since it does not explain the fact that many coincide in an opinion of the beauty in a flower or a sunrise. On the other hand, it seemed wrong to deny that there is a real element of subjectivity, since pleasure is an individual sensory experience.

Hume, while acknowledging *de gustibus non disputandum est* (there is no disputing about taste), argues for an objective standard in “Of the Standard of Taste” (144), which those with “delicate sentiment” and free from prejudice, can perfect through acquaintance with objects, and improve through practice. He argues that those who possess these qualities will approach unanimity, and the long-run consensus of such people is the standard of taste, and the means to justify judgments of beauty.¹⁵

11 SARTWELL, Crispin, “Beauty”. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. ZALTA, Edward N. (ed.). Fall 2012 edition.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Ibid.*

Kant also agrees that judgments of beauty or taste are fundamentally subjective and based on feeling (and not judgments of cognition), and that if people did not experience certain kinds of pleasure, there would be no beauty.¹⁶ The kind of pleasure involved in experiencing the beautiful is one that depends on the “free play” of the faculty of the imagination and understanding. However, the judgment that something is beautiful is different from the judgment that something is agreeable, since the former is a “disinterested” judgment, focused on the form of the mental representation of the object and independent of any specific interest or desire (economic, sexual, etc.) towards the object of beauty. A genuine judgment of taste, then is “universalizable,” in the sense that anyone in similar circumstances would have a similar experience, since particular interests and desires have been ignored. (This “universalizability” is akin to that in ethical judgments, though these are always objective since they are based on reason). In addition to the experience of beauty, there is the experience of the sublime. This experience consists in the feeling of pleasure in the superiority of our own power of reason, as a faculty, over the rest of creation. We have this feeling when we come face-to-face with some of mankind’s achievements, such as the Egyptian pyramids. This pleasure, however, is also mixed with the displeasure that comes from the awareness of our own powerlessness over the forces of nature.

Schiller and Hegel emphasize the connection between beauty and the spiritual. For Schiller, beauty (he also calls it play, or art) is a bridge between the material and the spiritual, the sensuous and the rational, and only when we are in that state, he declares, are we truly free. For Hegel, the beauty of art is superior to the beauty of nature; although the natural world is “born of God,” it is man’s spirit that transforms natural materials through art, so that nature is “born again.” (HEGEL, 1835, 2).

Peirce, as we know, was an avid reader, and almost certainly was acquainted with most of these ideas, although, as he tells us, after reading “various works on esthetics” as a young man, he found the books “so feeble” that he turned his attention elsewhere, namely to logic (CP 2.197, 1902). Almost fifty years later, however, he returns to the subject for another look, and, as was not unusual for him, finds that with some retooling and adaptation, some of his predecessor’s theories will add important elements to his own system.¹⁷

Normative Science as a Theoretical Science

Peirce recognized “two general branches of science: [the] Theoretical, whose purpose is simply and solely knowledge of God’s truth; and [the] Practical, for the uses of life”

16 *Ibid.* Of course, this is but a very brief sketch of Kant’s complex theory (indeed, this is the case for all the theories discussed here).

17 I am not the only one to notice these similarities. See, for example, Richard Atkins’ “The Pleasures of Goodness: Peircean Esthetics in Light of Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment,” *Cognitio*, vol. 9, n. 1, for similarities with Kant, Jeffrey Barnouw’s “The Place of Peirce’s ‘Esthetic’ in His Thought and in the Tradition of Aesthetics”. *Peirce and Value Theory*. PARREL, Herman (ed.) for similarities with Schiller.

(CP 1.239, 1902)¹⁸; where the first is concerned with having knowledge of theory as its ultimate end, while the second has to do with results that relate to the conduct of life. For many years, Peirce says, he doubted whether ethics was anything more than a practical science, concerned with “morality, virtuous conduct, and right-living,” a “traditional standard, accepted, very wisely, without radical criticism, but with a silly pretence of critical examination” (CP 1.573, 1910); he also had the same doubts regarding esthetics, traditionally concerned with beauty and the production of works of art. He eventually came to see, however, that the fundamental problem of ethics “is not, What is right, which is what a practical science would endeavor to answer, but, What am I prepared deliberately to accept as the statement of what I want to do, what am I to aim at, what am I after? To what is the force of my will to be directed?” (CP 2.198, 1902). Peirce soon came to realize that the normative aspect of ethics as self-controlled, or deliberate action was “intimately related” to logic as self-controlled or deliberate thought, and although there is a practical side to ethics as well as to logic, it is the theoretical that is of import to the philosopher—

The practical side of ethics is its most obviously important side [...] All that is one side of the shield; but the other side is quite equally important. We are too apt to define ethics to ourselves as the science of right and wrong. That cannot be correct, for the reason that right and wrong are ethical conceptions which it is the business of that science to develop [sic] and to justify. A science cannot have for its fundamental problem to distribute objects among categories of its own creation; for underlying that problem must be the task of establishing those categories [...] Now logic is a study of the means of attaining the end of thought. It cannot solve that problem until it clearly knows what that end is (CP 2.198, 1902).

Philosophical (theoretical) Ethics, then, studies conduct conforming to an end, or ideal, while logic studies the thought, or right reasoning, conforming to an end or ideal. The next move, of course, is to ask what this end, or ideal, is. Now this is not just any end; it is the ultimate aim, the highest ideal, the *summum bonum*, that which is admirable in itself. This falls within the traditional purview of esthetics—

So, then, we appeal to the esthete to tell us what it is that is admirable without any reason for being admirable beyond its inherent character. Why, that, he replies, is the beautiful. Yes, we urge, such is the name that you give to it, but what is it? What is this character? If he replies that it consists in a certain quality of feeling, a certain bliss, I for one decline altogether to accept the answer as sufficient. I should say to him, My dear Sir, if you can prove to me that this quality of feeling that you speak of does, as a fact, attach to what you call the beautiful, or that which would be admirable without any reason for being so, I am willing enough to believe you; but I cannot without strenuous proof admit that any particular quality of feeling is admirable without a reason. For it is too revolting to be believed unless one is forced to believe it. (CP 1.612, 1903).

18 He later divides Theoretical Science into Science of Discovery and Science of Review (EP 2 258, 1903); he also uses “science of fact,” “positive science,” interchangeably.

What is “revolting” to Peirce, I want to claim, is the assertion that an ultimate end or ideal would be reduced ultimately to pleasure—“a certain bliss” (recall Kant and Hume), which for Peirce amounts to “hedonism, which no man in his senses, and not blinded by theory or something worse, can admit” (CP 1614; 1902). One reason Peirce objects to identifying the admirable in itself as beauty or pleasure is due, I want to argue, to Peirce’s life-long stance against nominalism, which unduly emphasizes individualism (Secondness) and does not properly recognize the element of Thirdness. I have argued that this is one way of making sense of his cryptic comments regarding morality, ethics, and “vitaly important topics” in his 1898 Cambridge Conference lectures.¹⁹ To say, then, that the *summum bonum* is reduced to an individual’s particular sensation, that of pleasure, is a grave error, for

Individual action is a means and not our end. Individual pleasure is not our end; we are all putting our shoulders to the wheel for an end that none of us can catch more than a glimpse at—that which the generations are working out. But we can see that the development of embodied ideas is what it will consist in. (CP 1.615, 1906).

The “development of embodied ideas” as the *summum bonum* reflects Thirdness, and is therefore more in tune with realism, the position Peirce endorsed throughout his career (more on this below).

Peirce’s aversion to nominalism can explain his initial reticence to consider seriously a science of esthetics, as can be seen below where he describes the sequence of his realization of the connection between ethics and logic, and eventually, of aesthetics:

This last objection [that the Good and Bad originate in Esthetic Feeling] deceived me for many years [...] I was led by this objection to a line of thought which brought me to regard ethics as a mere art, or applied science, and not a pure normative science at all. But when, beginning in 1883, I came to read the works of the great moralists, whose great fertility of thought I found in wonderful contrast to the sterility of the logicians—I was forced to recognize the dependence of Logic upon Ethics; and then took refuge in the idea that there was no science of esthetics, that, because *de gustibus non est disputandum*, therefore there is no esthetic truth and falsity or generally valid goodness and badness. But I did not remain of this opinion long. I soon came to see that this whole objection rests upon a fundamental misconception. To say that morality, in the last resort, comes to an esthetic judgment is not hedonism—but is directly opposed to hedonism. (CP 5.111, 1902).

Peirce saw that if ethics (with its attendant notions of Good and Bad) on which logic was based, was in turn dependent on what amounts to mere individual (subjective) feelings, or sentiments (taste), in other words, a nominalistic foundation, the relationship would be based on a false theory. The solution was to see if esthetics can be described in non-nominalistic terms, that is, in realistic terms, which is what I think Peirce tried, in several ways, to do.

19 I have written on the subject of nominalism and realism in “From Realism to ‘Realicism,’” *The Metaphysics of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Lanham: Lexington Books/Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007, and in “Peirce’s Moral ‘Realicism,’” *The Normative Thought of Charles Peirce*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

Now that Peirce is open to the consideration that the normative sciences of esthetics, ethics, and logic are interconnected and are theoretical sciences, not just practical sciences, and hence are worthy of philosophical study, he can proceed to argue the point of what the ultimate end or ideal is (or ought to be).

The Classification of Sciences

In order to begin the process of analysis, Peirce incorporates the Normative Sciences within his scheme of the Classification of Sciences, formulated on Comte's system whereby the areas of study are arranged in a series with reference to the abstractness of their objects, each science drawing regulating principles from those superior to it in abstractness, while drawing data from the sciences below. Furthermore, Peirce's new classification is ordered according to his categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, as we will see below.

Mathematics is the first science and hence the most abstract, so it depends on no other science. Idioscopy is the third and last, encompassing the Physical and Human Sciences, the least abstract. Between Mathematics and Idioscopy is Philosophy, which studies the elements of familiar experience. It has three divisions; the first of these is Phenomenology, which studies phenomena in their Firstness, that is, as they present themselves to us in experience. It observes the content of the phaneron, whatever is present to the mind in any way at any time.

The Normative Sciences form the second division within Philosophy, and as such they examine familiar phenomena in their Secondness, that is, in so far as we can act upon the phenomenon and it can act upon us. Normative science distinguishes what ought to be from what ought not to be; Secondness is the category of effort and resistance, so it exemplifies self-controlled actions.

The third division is Metaphysics, which seeks to give an account of the universe of mind and matter; it is therefore concerned with the study of reality, of Thirdness as Thirdness, that is, in its mediation between Secondness and Firstness.

Classification of Sciences	
I.	Mathematics
II.	Philosophy
	A. Phenomenology
	B. Normative Sciences
	1. Esthetics
	2. Ethics
	3. Logic
	C. Metaphysics
III.	Idioscopy
	A. Physical Sciences
	B. Human Sciences

Peirce can now analyze the specific normative sciences under his own terms, that is, within the rubric of his phenomenology (his categories).

Logic, Ethics, and Esthetics According to Peirce

Normative Science in general, then, can be described as “being the science of the laws of conformity of things to ends, esthetics considers those things whose ends are to embody qualities of feeling, ethics those things whose ends lie in action, and logic those things whose end is to represent something.” (CP 5.129, 1903).

Since esthetics deals with those things whose ends are to embody qualities of feeling, then some account of the first category of Feeling is in order.

Recall that Peirce claims that “to say that morality, in the last resort, comes to an esthetic judgment is *not* hedonism.” Since hedonism involves the feeling of pleasure Peirce needs to say a bit more about this, and he does—“It is a great mistake to suppose that the phenomena of pleasure and pain are mainly phenomena of feeling.” (CP 5.112, 1903). Peirce then argues that pleasure and pain, though “states of mind in which Feeling is predominant,” are nevertheless perceptual judgments, and not percepts (feelings in their Firstness, an element of the percept).²⁰ He cites the fact that there is no quality of feeling common to all pains, (or pleasure). Rather, one judges that one is feeling pain or pleasure, and this occurs not at the level of Feeling, or Firstness, but at the level of Representation, which is a third—

[...] any common Feeling-quality of Pleasure and any common Feeling-quality of Pain, even if there are such Qualities of Feeling; but they mainly consist [in a] Pain [which lies] in a Struggle to give a state of mind its quietus, and [in a] Pleasure in a peculiar mode of consciousness allied to the consciousness of making a generalization, in which not Feeling, but rather Cognition is the principal constituent. (CP 5.112, 1903).

Now perceptual judgments, Peirce claims, are the “first premises” in reasoning (normative judgments), which is thought under self-control. But perceptual judgments are not under our control, just as the percept is not under our control—

Reasoning cannot possibly be divorced from logic; because, whenever a man reasons, he thinks that he is drawing a conclusion such as would be justified in every analogous case [...] Any operation which cannot be controlled, any conclusion which is not abandoned, not merely as soon as criticism has pronounced against it, but in the very act of pronouncing that decree, is not of the nature of rational inference—is not reasoning. Reasoning as deliberate is essentially critical, and it is idle to criticize as good or bad that which cannot be controlled. (CP 5.108, 1903).

Deliberate conduct in thought, or reasoning, begins then, after perceptual judgments (this is when inference kicks in, and Peirce then provides separate arguments for those). But if we have no control over perceptual judgments, on which all reasoning is based, how can we be assured that there is such a thing as logical goodness or badness (Truth or Falsity)? Peirce claims that the “occult” or “mysterious” process of

20 See CP 7.625

perceptual judgment is “analogous” to abduction, one of three inferences (in addition to induction and deduction) which most of the time results in correct guesses due to the similarity between our thought processes and the laws of nature (Peirce’s theory of synechism, or continuity in nature).

[...] In the little bit that you or I can make out of this huge demonstration [God’s creation], our perceptual judgments are the premisses for us and these perceptual judgments have icons as their predicates, in which icons Qualities are immediately presented. But what is first for us is not first in nature. The premisses of Nature’s own process are all the independent uncaused elements of facts that go to make up the variety of nature which the necessitarian supposes to have been all in existence from the foundation of the world, but which the Tychist supposes are continually receiving new accretions. These premisses of nature, however, though they are not the perceptual facts that are premisses to us, nevertheless must resemble them in being premisses. We can only imagine what they are by comparing them with the premisses for us. As premisses they must involve Qualities. (CP 5.119, 1903).

From a phenomenological point of view, then, ethics and logic can be described as involving Thirdness, or generality, which is opposed to a nominalistic “hedonism” which focuses on individual (subjective) feelings of pleasure—

If you admit the principle that logic stops where self-control stops, you will find yourself obliged to admit that a perceptual fact, a logical origin, may involve generality [...] Generality, Thirdness, pours in upon us in our very perceptual judgments, and all reasoning [...] (CP 5.149, 1903).

The same can be said for esthetics. Peirce describes what he calls “esthetic enjoyment” in terms of Thirdness, of representation; even though it “feels” like a feeling, there is “a kind of consciousness,” which makes it a third—

[...] in esthetic enjoyment we attend to the totality of Feeling—and especially to the total resultant Quality of Feeling presented in the work of art we are contemplating—yet it is a sort of intellectual sympathy, a sense that here is a Feeling that one can comprehend, a reasonable Feeling. I do not succeed in saying exactly what it is, but it is a consciousness belonging to the category of Representation, though representing something in the Category of Quality of Feeling. (CP 5.113, 1903).

Beauty According to Peirce

Let us now turn to beauty again. Peirce sees the sense of beauty as phenomenologically similar to the sense of pleasure and pain, the sense of good and bad, as well as emotions in general; the sensation we call beauty, then, is a perceptual judgment, a predicate of an object, as is seen in this excerpt where Peirce is arguing for the claim that consciousness is the result of the continuity in our perceptions (as opposed to being an instinctive faculty)—

[...] there are certain other feelings—the emotions, for example—which appear to arise in the first place, not as predicates at all, and to be referable to the mind alone[...] The question is whether this is really so [...] it must be admitted that if a man is angry, his anger implies [...] that there is some relative character in the outward thing which makes him angry, and a little reflection will serve to show that his anger consists in his saying to himself, “this thing is vile [...] and that it is rather a mark of returning reason to say, “I am angry.” In the same way any emotion is a predication concerning some object [...] What is here said of emotions in general, is true in particular of the sense of beauty and of the moral sense. Good and bad are feelings which first arise as predicates, and therefore are either predicates of the not-I, or are determined by previous cognitions (there being no intuitive power of distinguishing subjective elements of consciousness). (CP 5.247, 1903).

and

That a sensation is not necessarily an intuition, or first impression of sense, is very evident in the case of the sense of beauty [...] When the sensation beautiful is determined by previous cognitions, it always arises as a predicate; that is, we think that something is beautiful [...] The sensation of beauty arises upon a manifold of other impressions. And this will be found to hold good in all cases. (CP 5.291, 1903).

Beauty, then, is a product of cognition just as pleasure and pain, and good and bad, and therefore a general, or third.

Peirce objects to the English word “beauty,” though, because it lacks the “requisite generality” for the esthetic ideal. He finds that the “Greek {*kalos*}, the French beau, only come near to it, without hitting it squarely on the head. ‘Fine’ would be a wretched substitute.” (CP 2.199, 1902). Peirce claims that the question of esthetics, upon which “ethics must depend, just as logic must depend upon ethics” should be, “What is the one quality that is, in its immediate presence, {*kalos*? Upon this question ethics must depend, just as logic must depend upon ethics.” (CP 2.991, 1902).

From a phenomenological point of view, according to the architectonic of the classification of the sciences, in line with the categories, since esthetics is concerned with the quality of feeling, then, “in order to state the question of esthetics in its purity, we should eliminate from it, not merely all consideration of effort, but all consideration of action and reaction, including all consideration of our receiving pleasure, everything in short, belonging to the opposition of the ego and the non-ego.” (CP 2.199, 1985). In light of the categories, Peirce attempts to describe that quality which is in its immediate presence, for lack of a better word, “beautiful” (or *kalos*) as one having “a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a positive simple immediate quality to their totality” (CP 5.132, 1903). Since Category the First, as exemplified by Feeling, is not dyadic in nature, the term “Beautiful” is “bad” since the notion implies a duality, that is, its opposite, ugliness, which would be associated with esthetic “badness.” But, Peirce tells us, there cannot be such a thing as a *positive* esthetic badness at the level of a First, even

If that quality be such as to nauseate us, to scare us, or otherwise to disturb us to the point of throwing us out of the mood of esthetic enjoyment, out of the

mood of simply contemplating the embodiment of the quality—just, for example, as the Alps affected the people of old times, when the state of civilization was such that an impression of great power was inseparably associated with lively apprehension and terror—then the object remains none the less esthetically good, although people in our condition are incapacitated from a calm esthetic contemplation of it. (CP 5.132, 1903).

That is why, I think, Peirce momentarily suggests the enigmatic phrase “the beauty of the unbeautiful” since it tries to be an all-encompassing monadic term; however, it is still “too skin deep” to truly capture Firstness, and ultimately unacceptable for Peirce. We can see the monadic feature of Firstness in Peirce’s recommendation for approximating a pure esthetic state of mind—

I venture to think that the esthetic state of mind is purest when perfectly naive without any critical pronouncement, and that the esthetic critic founds his judgments upon the result of throwing himself back into such a pure naive state—and the best critic is the man who has trained himself to do this the most perfectly. (CP 5.111, 1903).²¹

In another passage, Peirce suggests that there is no esthetic worseness or betterness in itself (at the level of Firstness), only

[...] various esthetic qualities; that is, simple qualities of totalities not capable of full embodiment in the parts, which qualities may be more decided and strong in one case than in another [...] innumerable varieties of esthetic quality, but no purely esthetic grade of excellence in itself. But the instant that an esthetic ideal is proposed as an ultimate end of action, at that instant a categorical imperative pronounces for or against it. (CP 5.132, 1903).

I read this to mean that the “good” associated with an esthetic quality comes not at the level of Firstness, since at that level there is no duality, but at the level of Thirdness, “when an ultimate end of action *deliberately* adopted—that is to say, *reasonably* adopted—must be a state of things that *reasonably recommends itself in itself* aside from any ulterior consideration.” This is where ethics comes into play, since it is “the study of what ends of actions we are deliberately prepared to adopt.”

Now Peirce does speak about an object being esthetically good, which seems to conflict with what he says about there being no esthetic betterness or worseness. This sounds like a contradiction, and Peirce does express uncertainty about his views throughout, so he could have changed his mind or just not thought out all the details. I will not try to salvage the point here; however, I suspect that a possible answer lies in the difference between “pure esthetics,” the theoretical science, and practical esthetics, this latter the kind that Peirce no doubt was no stranger to (as we saw when he humbly recounts his artistic accomplishments). Peirce makes a similar distinction between *logica utens* and *logica docens*, and between pure, or philosophical ethics and “vitally important matters.”²²

21 This is reminiscent of Kant’s notion of disinterestedness.

22 See my “Peirce’s Moral ‘Realism,’” *The Normative Thought of Charles Peirce*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012.

The Summum Bonum

If the answer to the question of “what it is that is admirable without any reason for being admirable beyond its inherent character” is not “the beautiful,” then what is it? Peirce’s answer is “Reason itself.” By “Reason” Peirce is not referring only to the faculty of reason that humans possess, but rather to that which permeates all of nature (including us)—“the very being of the General, of Reason, is of such a mode that this being consists in the Reason’s actually governing events; So, then, the essence of Reason is such that its being never can have been completely perfected. It always must be in a state of incipiency, of growth” (CP 1.615, 1903). The analogy of Reason here, of course, is with God, as can be seen in the passage below; we can detect the influence of Aristotle and Kant in the emphasis on reason, and of Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Schiller, Hegel, and others in the association of the divine with beauty or the admirable in itself.

[Development of reason] requires, too, all the coloring of all qualities of feeling, including pleasure in its proper place among the rest. This development of Reason consists, you will observe, in embodiment, that is, in manifestation. The creation of the universe, which did not take place during a certain busy week, in the year 4004 B.C., but is going on today and never will be done, is this very development [sic] of Reason. I do not see how one can have a more satisfying ideal of the admirable than the development of Reason so understood. The one thing whose admirableness is not due to an ulterior reason is Reason itself comprehended in all its fullness, so far as we can comprehend it. Under this conception, the ideal of conduct will be to execute our little function in the operation of the creation by giving a hand toward rendering the world more reasonable whenever, as the slang is, it is “up to us” to do so. (CP 1.615, 1903).

Now Reasonableness seems an odd choice for a *summum bonum*, as opposed to say, love, or justice, or creativity.²³ I believe Peirce would agree that they could be ideals to have in practical esthetics. However, I want to argue that in theoretical esthetics, Peirce was struggling for a concept that was more monadic (to reflect Firstness). Concepts like love and justice (and beauty) are, of course, more dyadic (love/hate, just/unjust, etc.). Since for Peirce Reasonableness encompasses all the workings of the universe (not just human reason) it is harder to think of it as dyadic—what would “Unreasonableness” in this context mean? This is probably one of the reasons why Peirce describes Reasonableness as in a continuum.²⁴

23 Matthew Moore brings up this point in his comments on this paper.

24 Peirce tries several ways to explain this difficult concept, and why it is the highest ideal. In another attempt, he wonders what we would wish for if a fairy grants us a dream that would last only a fraction of a second, and that we would forget as soon as we would wake, but would leave a “perfectly unanalyzable impression of its totality” (MS 310, 1903). Peirce contends that instead of choosing a dream of pure pleasure or bliss, it should rather be one of “[...] extreme variety and must seem to embrace an eventful history extending through millions of years. It shall be a drama in which numberless living caprices shall jostle and work themselves out in larger and stronger harmonies and antagonisms, and ultimately execute intelligent reasonablenesses of existence more and more intellectually stupendous and bring forth new designs still more admirable and prolific” (Ibid.)

If Reason is what is most admirable in itself, then the highest of all possible aims is to further Reasonableness. We are co-creators of the universe (here we see shades of Hegel) as we make new connections, increasing our knowledge and improving our values, adding concretely to Reasonableness. The artist, though concerned with practical esthetics and therefore different from the scientist, or philosopher, nevertheless adds to Reasonableness by proposing through her art new connections, in a process analogous to abduction—

But the highest kind of synthesis is what the mind is compelled to make [...] by introducing an idea not contained in the data, which gives connections which they would not otherwise have had. This kind of synthesis has not been sufficiently studied, and especially the intimate relationship of its different varieties has not been duly considered. The work of the poet or novelist is not so utterly different from that of the scientific man. The artist introduces a fiction; but it is not an arbitrary one; it exhibits affinities to which the mind accords a certain approval in pronouncing them beautiful, which if it is not exactly the same as saying that the synthesis is true, is something of the same general kind. (CP 1.383, 1890).

Conclusion

Once Peirce is convinced that esthetics is connected with ethics and logic and can be approached as a theoretical science (and not just as a practical science), he proceeds to provide an analysis based on the classification of sciences. His puzzling remarks about the concept of beauty, its eventual rejection as the admirable in itself, and the subsequent adoption of Reasonableness as the esthetic ideal can be understood as an exercise in retooling and adapting traditional concepts into the philosophical framework of his categories, all the while tempered by his theories of realism and synechism. Although Peirce did not produce a comprehensive theory of esthetics, nonetheless it is obvious that he was working his way towards integrating esthetics into his architectonic, and this paper is a first attempt at unraveling some of his initial steps towards that goal.²⁵

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