

Returning to the Unformed: Emerson and Peirce on the “Law of Mind”

Retornando para o Informe: Emerson e Peirce sobre a “Lei da Mente”

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Abstract: Many important figures gave the University Lecture Series of 1870 at Harvard, two of which were an aging Ralph Waldo Emerson and a young C.S. Peirce. This paper will examine the relationship between Emerson's 1870 lecture, “The Law of Mind” and the several drafts that Peirce develops previous to his publishing of the “Law of Mind” in the Monist series in the early 1890s. The similarities are remarkable and highlight the unique metaphysical positions that drew Peirce's interest in his later life. Since the transcript of Emerson's lecture is only partial, I will use *The Natural History of the Intellect* (organized by James Elliott Cabot and published by Emerson in his final years) as supplemental materials for this study. This analysis yields important results concerning the way that classical American pragmatism inherits Emerson's intellectual legacy but also the interest in the “abyss” of Schelling.

Keywords: Peirce. Emerson. Schelling. Ineffability. Fallibility. Sphinx. Formlessness.

Resumo: *Muitos personagens importantes participaram da série de Conferências Universitárias de 1870 em Harvard, dentre eles estavam um envelhecido Ralph Waldo Emerson e um jovem C.S. Peirce. Este texto examinará a relação entre a conferência de Emerson de 1870, “A Lei da Mente”, e os diversos esboços que Peirce desenvolveu previamente à publicação de seu “A Lei da Mente” na série Monist no início da década de 1890. As similaridades são notáveis e destacam as posições metafísicas singulares que atraíram o interesse de Peirce em sua maturidade. Já que a transcrição das conferências de Emerson são apenas parciais, usarei o *The Natural History of the Intellect [A História Natural do Intelecto]* (organizado por James Elliott Cabot e publicado por Emerson em seus últimos anos) como material suplementar para este estudo. Esta análise produz resultados importantes em relação ao modo como o pragmatismo clássico americano herda o legado intelectual de Emerson, mas também, o interesse no “abismo” de Schelling.*

Palavras-chave: *Peirce. Emerson. Schelling. Inefabilidade. Falibilidade. Esfinge. Informidade.*

I. As Difficult as Unnecessary

*The requirement that Art, like everything living, should commence from the first rudiments, and, to renew its youth, constantly return to them, may seem like a hard doctrine to an age that has so often been assured that it has only to take from the works of Art already in existence the most consummate Beauty, and thus, as at a first step reach the final goal. Have we not already the Excellent, the Perfect? How then should we return to the rudimentary and unformed?*¹

Friedrich Schelling, 1807.

Did Peirce recoil from the implication of this return to the rudimentary and the unformed? This is a difficult implication for our age, an age that is defined by its unwillingness to tarry with the ambiguous. After all, it is convinced in *no uncertain terms* that it embodies the culmination of human knowledge and culture. Why revisit rudimentary and unformed beginnings when a promising future appears so clear and distinct? And so the question appears as unnecessary as it is difficult. Surely Friedrich Schelling, who posed it to his age in 1807, hoped that it would not take this long to recognize the value of returning to what he termed “the rudimentary and the unformed.” But it has.

And so we get to return to it again. This essay is about the acknowledgment of vague and rudimentary beginnings and the way that these beginnings provide the ground of freedom, for better or for worse, human or otherwise. It is only by returning to these origins that we see, perhaps for the first time, that things could have been otherwise, can always be otherwise. This is Schelling’s suspicion and one that was extended, I will argue, by C. S. Peirce and Ralph Waldo Emerson in their “Laws of Mind.” Peirce may have recoiled from the unformed—a fact that is reflected in his stubborn refusal to give anything more than a fragmentary and evasive sketch of the laws of mind—but I believe that he recoiled, repeatedly, in just such a way that the value of the unformed can be sensed, if not fully articulated. Peirce’s return to the unformed, through Emerson and Schelling, I will argue, can still help us think through existence in meaningful and creative ways.

Most of us are very familiar with Peirce’s “Law of Mind,” an essay that he works and reworks throughout the early 1890s and finally publishes in May of 1892. It is here that he takes account of his inheritance of American transcendentalism, stating that he was born and reared in a neighbourhood of Concord, namely Cambridge, “at a time when Emerson, Hedge, and their friends were disseminating the ideas that they had caught from Schelling, and Schelling from Plotinus, from Boehm, or from God knows what minds stricken with the monstrous mysticism of the East.”² What is less often acknowledged is the specific nature of this reference, the fact that Emerson also had a “Law of Mind,” and that Peirce had been very much present at its formulation in 1870.

1 SCHELLING, Friedrich. *The Philosophy of Art: An Oration on the Relationship between the Plastic Arts and Nature*. Trans. A. Johnson, London: Chapman Press, 1845, p. 30.

2 CP 6.86.

Like I said, this essay is about the value of vague and rudimentary beginnings, in this case, the beginning of Peirce’s thinking on the “Law of Mind.”

In the spring of 1869, Emerson was delighted to receive an invitation from Harvard’s President Charles Elliot to give a series of talks in the University Lectures of 1869-1870. Elliot extended this invitation to several other distinguished intellectuals including Friedrich Hedge, James Elliott Cabot, and a rather young Charles Sanders Peirce. These University lectures, often overlooked in today’s philosophical commentary on Peirce, were a specific point of overlap between the Transcendentalism of Emerson and the pragmatism that would crop up in Peirce’s writings. Emerson opens his University Lectures with a talk entitled “Metres of Mind—The Laws of Mind.”³ It is, no doubt, this intersection that Peirce is referring to when he says that he was brought up in the intellectual culture defined by “Emerson, Hedge and their friends.” It is not an offhanded allusion, but a specific historical reference that deserves much greater attention than I can give it in the next thirty minutes. (Sometimes even the smallest, vaguest historical references are worth revisiting!) Felicia Kruse recently looked at the overlap between Emerson and Peirce, but failed to make the historical connection to the 1870 lectures that provide documentary evidence in regard to these affinities. Fisch misses this point all together in his introduction to Peirce’s early writings.⁴ (CP 2.xxx)

II. Historical Introduction

This comparative analysis begins by a reading of Emerson’s 1870 “Laws of Mind,” which would become the *Natural History of the Intellect*, and then moves to Peirce’s 1892 “Law of Mind.” Peirce, following Schelling’s instruction to return to the murky origins of thought, retraces his early Emersonian introduction to the laws of mind, giving us hints of this introduction’s significance. In truth, Peirce’s extension of Emerson often comes closer to repetition than homage. At the beginning of Peirce’s “Law of Mind,” he makes a statement that all of us know: “I have begun by showing that tychism must give birth to an evolutionary cosmology, in which all the regularities of nature and of mind are regarded as products of growth, and a Schelling-fashioned idealism which holds matter to be mere specialized and partially deadened mind.”⁵ Perhaps we are less familiar with Emerson’s comment at the beginning of his “Laws of Mind” in 1870 when he states that, “I am of the oldest religion. Leaving aside the question which was prior, egg or bird, I believe the mind is the creator of the world, and is ever creating; —that at last Matter is dead Mind.”⁶ Peirce suggests that this intellectual overlap between himself and Emerson—about matter being “deadened mind”—was a function of their shared indebtedness to German idealism, and I would argue, particularly to Schelling.

3 *Papers of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton Library. Harvard University. Sermons and Lectures. MS Am 1280.193-1280.215) Harvard University Lectures (also 1871): XIII. Laws of Mind. The Metres of Mind. 20 May 1870, 28 Mar 1871. 47f. (56p.)

4 CP 2.xxx.

5 CP 6.86.

6 EMERSON, Ralph Waldo. *The Natural History of the Intellect*. In: the *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 12. Boston: Riverside, 1904, p. 16.

James Elliot Cabot, the biographer and literary executor of Emerson, had attended Schelling's lectures in 1841 and 1842, taking Schelling's course on the philosophy of mythology and revelation. These lectures stand as a significant watershed in the history of German idealism. For Schelling, they were meant to signal a break from the idealism of Hegel, which involved the working out of a well-articulated notion of reason. Schelling's positive philosophy sought to systematically describe the relationship between the self and the objective world, like most idealist writings of his time, but it also required an account of freedom that was not found in Hegel. For Schelling, as opposed to many other idealists of the time, the "alpha and the omega of philosophy was freedom."⁷ Freedom depended on a type of existential contingency that could not be reduced to Hegelian self-mediation. The emphasis on this understanding of freedom, according to Schelling, is what made his philosophy "positive," but it is also what made his philosophical project so challenging. Schelling attempts to present a defined philosophical system (a sketch, a presentation, an *Entwurf*), but realized that sketching it out in definite and determinate form would run against his hopes for preserving a space for the contingency of existence. And this realization dramatically affects his later writings. According to the later Schelling, such a positive philosophy of freedom would culminate not in the working out of reason over time, but in a philosophy of mythology and revelation. Only the interpretive structures of myth and revelation could provide the appropriate space to get a sense of freedom's sweep. This may seem like an odd culminating point for a philosophy, just as the semiotic may strike some as being a curious terminus of Peirce's metaphysical writings, but the reasons for these conclusions are arguably the same: Schelling's mythology and Peirce's semeiotic can be understood, to use Joseph Brent's words, as "the working out of how the real is both immanent and transcendent and of how the infinite speaker may be said to practice [...] the action of signs in creating our universe."⁸ The turn to mythology and semiotic are not random speculations of elderly philosophers (both Schelling and Peirce were criticized in their later years for giving up philosophy altogether) but rather the admission that analytic philosophy, or discrete analysis, had given up the ghost, or at least run its course. It was not equipped to describe existence in its unfolding. Semiotic and mythology are better suited for they remain, to this day, dynamic and living accounts of the "lubricity" that we experience in our contact with the world at large.

Schelling's 1842 lectures on mythology were the ones that Soren Kierkegaard attended, until he grew impatient with Schelling in February of 1842. He confused Schelling's emphasis on revelation and myth for Christian apologetics. Friedrich Engels and the Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin, were also in attendance, and were equally nonplused. They sided instead with Hegel's language of rationality and the radically transformative element that it implied. Cabot, however, saw something significant in Schelling's writing, namely his unique articulation of freedom and its metaphysical preconditions. For Schelling, as opposed to Hegel, one of these

7 SCHELLING, Friedrich. Letter to Hegel. February 4, 1795. Cited in WIRTH, Jason. *The Conspiracy of Life: Meditations on Schelling and His Time*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2003, p. 157.

8 BRENT, Joseph. *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 212.

preconditions of freedom is difficult to articulate because it is the “unformed,” or what Schelling often calls the abyss or *Abgrund*. It is this abyss of the unformed that serves as the curious ground, or more literally, the groundless ground, of freedom for Schelling. Cabot was fascinated by this idea—one that maintained that there remained something necessarily obscure about the story that modernity could tell about human freedom. With this point in mind, Cabot translated Schelling’s *Essay on Human Freedom* into English in 1842. A century before Žižek and Heidegger were seized by the import of this little essay, a New England Brahmin took the time to translate it, and to disseminate it in the field of American Transcendentalism. This is the translation that Cabot promptly gave to his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, upon his return to New England.

I am not suggesting that Emerson’s interest in freedom on the whole can be traced to his exposure to Schelling. Indeed, in the early drafts of “Nature,” (1832) Emerson already underscores the creative potential of nature and gestures toward a mysterious fact, namely that this potential can only be understood against the backdrop of metaphysical indeterminacy. He writes, “The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence.”⁹ What I am suggesting, however, is that Emerson does not focus at this point on the inaccessibility of nature, but rather on its effulgence, its “commodity” and its beauty.¹⁰ Indeterminacy qua indeterminacy becomes a focal point only as Emerson shifts his angle of vision in the early 1840s. This shift corresponds to his reading of Schelling, via Cabot, and to the tragic events that befell his family and friends in 1842. In that year, his five year-old son Waldo contracted a fatal case of scarlet fever and his friend John Thoreau died of lockjaw. He writes to Margaret Fuller on June 7, 1843 that he is “entertained and puzzled” by the “lubricity,” the slipperiness, of nature, and by the “inaccessibleness of its pith and heart.”¹¹ I would suggest that this is the point at which Emerson directs his attention to the darkness of the Schellingian *Abgrund*, which resonates closely with the “inaccessibleness of pith and heart” of nature. Exactly two years later, Emerson elaborates on this point in his journal, writing, “All philosophy begins from Nox & Chaos, the Ground or Abyss that Schelling so celebrates, and in every man we require a bit of night, of chaos, of *Abgrund*, as the spring of a watch turns best on a diamond.”¹² It is this “bit of

9 EMERSON, Ralph Waldo. Nature. Addresses and Lectures. In: the *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903, p. 7.

10 It is certainly the case that this “commodity” aspect of Emerson’s thought continues to permeate the *Natural History of the Intellect* and resonates closely with Peirce’s synechism. For a particularly insightful treatment of this consonance between Peirce and Emerson see DILWORTH, David. Elective Metaphysical Affinities: Emerson’s Natural History of the Intellect and Peirce’s Synechism. *Cognitio: Revista de Filosofia*, v. 11, n. 1, 2010. My focus, however is the way that radical contingency necessarily disrupts the continuity implied by certain readings of Peircean synechism.

11 EMERSON, Ralph Waldo. Letter to Margaret Fuller. June 7, 1843. In: *Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Joel Myerson (ed.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 221.

12 EMERSON, Ralph Waldo. Journal Entry. Saturday June 7, 1845. In: *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820-1872*, vol. VII. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912, p. 61.

night” that interests me in the “Law of Mind” of Emerson and Peirce. For Emerson, it is likely that this “bit of night” seeped into his thought in the twilight of his life, at a time when James Elliot Cabot would once again figure in Emerson’s intellectual development. Cabot and Emerson reunited, personally and professionally, in the last years of the 1860s and the beginning of the 1870s. Cabot undertook the arranging of Emerson’s papers in 1870, a project that allowed him to write Emerson’s memoir and to assist in the publishing of Emerson’s *Letters and Social Aims* (1883) and *The Natural History of the Intellect* (1893). Emerson would often comment to Cabot that *Letters and Social Aims* was “your book,” but the fact remains that Emerson authored both of them and he regarded the lectures on the *Natural History of the Intellect* as “his principal task in life.”¹³

The notes that Emerson took for his 1870 lectures are rather scattered, which implies that Cabot’s was no easy task, but we can reconstruct parts of them by way of comparison with his published writings and also with the help of the notes taken by Francis Greenwood Peabody (founder of social ethics at Harvard Divinity School in the late 19th century) who attended the lectures. Peabody was deeply impressed by the lecture series, stating that the presenters “made a constellation of talent more brilliant than had ever been seen, or perhaps has ever been seen again, in American academic life.”¹⁴ This comment, in addition to textual evidence, suggests that Peirce might have been similarly affected by the lectures, so much so perhaps that Emerson’s reading of Schelling continued to run through Peirce’s thinking in the 1890s. Leon Niemoczynski has recently outlined the correspondences between Peirce’s philosophy and Schelling’s, noting how three common themes appear in their writings on nature. First, Peirce and Schelling supply an “evolutionary idealism and developmental model of nature governed by triadic laws. Second, they both called for a reclassification of the principles of knowledge based on the metaphysical principles of this evolutionary idealism. Finally, they agree that there is an intimate relationship between nonrational insight, aesthetic feeling, and systematic scientific inquiry.”¹⁵ Niemoczynski’s analysis is very helpful, but he seems to miss, or at least downplay, the way that Emerson serves as the intellectual bridge between Peirce and Schelling. I will attempt to construct this bridge in reference to the 1870 University Lecture series, highlighting, to the extent that it is possible, the “bit of night” in their Laws of Mind.

III. A Bit of Night in Peirce and Emerson

Emerson opened his lectures in the spring of 1870 with a warning to his listeners: “System-makers are gnats grasping at the universe. All these exhaustive theories appear indeed a false and vain attempt to introvert and analyze the Primal Thought. That is

13 Quoted in EMERSON, Ralph Waldo. *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1. R. Bosco and J. Myerson (eds.). Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001, p. 132.

14 PEABODY, Francis Greenwood. The Germ of the Graduate School. *The Harvard Graduates Magazine*, 27 (1918), p. 176.

15 NIEMOCZYNSKI, Leon. *Charles Sanders Peirce and the Religious Metaphysics of Nature*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Press, 2011, p. 112.

up-stream, and what a stream! Can you swim up Niagara Falls?”¹⁶ This reference to the “Primal Thought” is most likely a reference to Schelling’s *Essay on Human Freedom* where he describes the “primal ground” of existence as *Abgrund*, or groundless. On the heels of this allusion, Emerson is more specific about his skepticism in regard to the investigation of this primal thought, stating, “I cannot see that any analysis can carry us far into the secret of the mind.”¹⁷ This could express Emerson’s desire to avoid a futile philosophical project, but this would only make sense if he did not immediately take up this project. I suspect that it is rather a necessary remark—ironic and self-effacing—about what the elderly lecturer was about to undertake. It anticipates, and prepares us for, the recoil from the unformed. Such an anti-rationalist sentiment that admits of an unavoidable “secret of the mind” sprung from Emerson’s romantic leanings but also, I would argue, from the strain of German idealism embodied in Schelling’s writings. When Friedrich Engels described the 1842 lectures that he and James Elliot Cabot attended, he writes of a similar ironic turn:

The first thing Schelling did here on the rostrum was that he immediately and with open visor attacked philosophy and cut away its ground, reason, from under its feet. With the most striking arguments, taken from its own armouries, he proved that natural reason is incapable of proving the existence of even a blade of grass; that all its demonstrations, arguments and conclusions do not hold water and cannot lead up to the divine, since in its heaviness it always remains prostrate on the earth.¹⁸

In contrast to Engels, American thinkers such as Cabot, Emerson and Peirce did not see the emphasis on epistemic fallibility and metaphysical ambiguity as a weakness, but rather as the most interesting aspect of Schelling’s thought. This becomes clear as Emerson opens his “Laws of Mind.”

Peirce follows suit in several versions of his essay in 1892, echoing Schelling in his “cutting away the ground” of philosophy, in bringing into question the powers of analytic reason. In Peirce’s words at the beginning of one draft of the “Law of Mind:” “No completely satisfactory formulation of the law of mind has ever been made as far as I know. Nor can I pretend to be able to make such a statement.”¹⁹ This might be true, but as we will see, recognizing the limitations of a subject does not preempt its repeated investigation. Indeed, as Plato, Aristotle, and Kant recognized, outlining the boundaries of inquiry, by means of the *aporia* that set its limits, is a meaningful mode investigation. Indeed, these thinkers often suggest that tracing out the limits of inquiry may be the only way to investigate the unfolding of existence. Similarly, Emerson and Peirce wanted to see exactly how

16 EMERSON, Ralph Waldo. *The Natural History of the Intellect and Other Essays*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894, p. 15.

17 *Papers of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton Library: Harvard University. “Sermons and Lectures.” MS Am 1280.193-1280.212 (1). “Harvard University Lectures (also 1871): I. Introduction, In Praise of knowledge.” [26 Apr 1870] 43f. (61p.)

18 ENGELS, Friedrich. *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*, vol. 2. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975, p. 248.

19 W 8.126.

far such an analysis of the mind—by the mind—could go. So with his initial caveat expressed, Emerson welcomes his listeners to the subject at hand: “I hope to invite your attention to the Laws of Mind,” and to suggest that, “certain laws of thought [can] be recorded.”²⁰ And Francis Peabody, like any good student, records them assiduously in his notes: “individuality, imagination, memory, gravity, polarity, bias, common-sense, and veracity.”²¹

It is precisely here where we expect a systematic theory of mind, but we do not get one from Emerson or, for that matter, Peirce. What we get are tidbits and aphorisms, bits and pieces of the natural history of mind. Looking back on the 1870 lecture series, Peabody writes that Emerson relayed the laws of mind in “Delphic sayings (that) recall to the mind the boyish bewilderment with which they were heard and the futile attempts which a youthful hearer made to translate them into academic terms.”²² This is precisely the attempt that Peirce made in his “Law of Mind” two decades later. Peirce begins his essay at the point that Emerson chooses to open his University Lectures: the individuality of ideas. Echoing Emerson’s later writings, Peirce maintains that “taking the word ‘idea’ in the sense of an event in an individual consciousness, it is clear that an idea once past is gone forever, and any supposed recurrence of it is another idea.” So the problem then emerges: how do these individual thoughts “hang together?” Emerson, in 1870, suggests that his audience should turn their attention to the imagination to answer this question, and Peirce, in the “Law of Mind” takes his cue, suggesting that to say that ideas are “similar can only mean that an occult power from the depths of the soul forces us to connect them in our thoughts after they are both no more.”²³ This, of course, is an indirect reference to Kant’s rendering of the imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason* in which Kant states that the schematizing function of the imagination is a “hidden art (often translated as an occult power) in the depths of the human soul.”²⁴ Emerson then gestures to the power and significance of memory; twenty years later Peirce immediately turns to the possibility of past ideas being present in experience. The rest of Peirce’s “Law of Mind” could easily be read as an attempt to unpack the aphorisms that Emerson offered his listeners in 1870. This is not to say that Peirce is Emerson warmed over (after all, no two ideas are perfectly alike) but Peirce replays and exemplifies the gestures that Emerson makes. Unfortunately, that is not the point.

What is interesting about these exemplifications is not the way in which they give detailed illustrations of Emerson’s aphorisms. Instead, what remains puzzling and therefore fascinating, is the way that Peirce *fails* to capture and articulate the secret of existence. What is important is not the propositional content of the bits and pieces that Peirce strings together in his “Law of Mind,” but rather it is their

20 PEABODY, Francis Greenwood. The Germ of the Graduate School. *The Harvard Graduates Magazine*, 27 (1918), p. 180.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 W 8.136.

24 Translated provided by FISCHER. Kuno. *Commentary on Kant’s Critick of the Pure Reason*. London: Longmans Green, 1866, p. 96.

fragmentary and provisional character. In Peabody’s words, Peirce’s was a futile attempt to analyze the flow of existence from its source. It remained too far upstream. Perhaps this comes as a disappointment in an age that has forgotten that struggling with ultimately futile projects can be philosophically and existentially meaningful. Too bad that forgetting is not the same as escaping this fact. Peirce attempts to demonstrate, exemplify, explicate, graph, quantify, infer, and scrutinize something that defies objective explanation. Readers of Peirce are all too familiar with the way in which he begins in a detailed, almost poetic, rendering of phenomenal experience, only to veer wildly into the most arcane analysis of logic and the empirical sciences. The “Law of Mind” is a case study in this type of veering argument. More often than not, he cuts himself short after a few pages or a few paragraphs, as if he has decided that saying more would do little to address the futility of the project he has undertaken. To an outside observer, this appears to be some sort of confused self-sabotage, but to anyone who has thought about the “unformed” of existence for any amount of time (and now, you too have thought about it for at least a few minutes) this veering form of argument that ends abruptly in a moment of frustration is understandable if not instructive. At the very least, Peirce shows us the difficulty, nay impossibility, of explaining *once and for all* the nature of existence.

Here we begin to get a sense of what Peirce meant by “being stricken” by the “monstrous mysticism of the East.” With these eastern traditions comes a monster: the unspeakable notion that appears in Schelling’s *Essay on Human Freedom*, namely the idea of the *Abgrund*. Commentators of Peirce, such as Niemoczynski brush up against the meaning of the *Abgrund* (which I think he accurately identifies, following Heidegger, as the ontological difference between nature natured and nature naturing), but he then quickly turns to the closely related concept of Firstness, which he defines as the “potentiating ground” of existence. A surprisingly large amount is then said about Firstness—how it is possibility, potentiality, “an infinitude that sustains, enables, and empowers all else”. By the time we return to the topic of the *Abgrund*, we find, according to Niemoczynski, that “like Firstness, it remains a pre-rational ground of feeling and possibility lying incomprehensibly at the basis of all things.”²⁵ But then he goes one step further, and perhaps one step too far: the *Abgrund* is the place where the “life of God swells and surges forth from within ontological difference.”²⁶ I believe that this theistic reading of the *Abgrund*, which is certainly consonant with Boehm and Schelling, is misleading if attributed to Peirce. Certainly, Peirce writes the “Law of Mind” on the heels of his often-cited mystical experience, at a point where he even self-identifies as a religious man, perhaps for the first time. That being said, I am uncomfortable, deeply uncomfortable, with something about this reading, namely that it invites to us rest in rather comfortable philosophical conclusion, to develop a system of religious naturalism with clean hands.

Peirce was many things, but he was not restful, and he did not have clean hands. Indeed, a quick look at his papers at Houghton Library makes one thing perfectly clear: his hands were *always* dirty and *always* moving. Approaching, experiencing, recoiling from the *Abgrund*, the name of the unnamable. Repeatedly.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

26 *Ibid.*

Ceaselessly. If Peirce regarded the *Abgrund* as the locus of God's life, this fact did not translate into his development of a well-articulated religious naturalism or a systematic philosophy. No, the *Abgrund* remained, for Peirce at least, necessarily *monstrous*. It repels and repels repeatedly. This explains why Peirce and Emerson remained unwilling to systematize existence. They believed that the "unformed" of existence called for a particular kind of response. Emerson writes that "To Be is the unsolved, unsolvable wonder. To Be, in its two connections of inward and outward, the mind and nature. The wonder subsists, and age, though of eternity, could not approach a solution."²⁷ Analysis is not sufficient to approach a solution. *The best that one can do is dwell in the problem*. Again, this may seem like a cop out in an age obsessed with determinate solutions, but figures from Plato, to Aristotle, to Kant, to Camus have suggest that it is perhaps the only consolation for being human. To cherish this consolation, one might say, requires what Keats so aptly described as a negative capability, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."²⁸ But this would not be wholly accurate. After all, Peirce was nothing if not irritable. And he made a life of reaching after fact and reason in the face of the monstrous. This was why he was repeatedly repelled, brought up short, forced to abort his analytic mission, only to begin once again. I believe that we get something very unique in Peirce's failures to describe existence. We get a dynamic silhouetting of existence, the way that a circle is outlined by tangents.

IV. Monsters and Warnings

So what of the monster in Peirce's "monstrous mysticism of the East?" Figuratively speaking, a monster can be any object of dread or awe, anything with a repulsive character. The *Abgrund*, however, is no object. In fact, it is no-thing at all. How can no-thing at all be monstrous? Perhaps a word from Emerson in 1870 might help us understand: "*Silent...* Nature offers every morning her wealth to Man. She is immensely rich; he is welcome to her entire goods. But she speaks no word, will not as much as beckon or cough only this—she is careful to leave all her doors ajar, —towers, hall, storeroom, and cellar. If he takes her hint, and uses her goods, she speaks no word. If he blunders and starves she says nothing."²⁹ To one that listens with all ears (to a listener like Peirce) "saying nothing" and being-silent is *truly* monstrous.

"Monster" comes from *moneo/monere* a Latin word that begins to make sense of where the "unformed" lies in Peirce's thought. *Monere* has three meanings, one of which is well-known; the other two are more obscure. First, it means to warn or guard against, as in to *admonish*. The sight of monsters are signs or omens that tell

27 EMERSON, Ralph Waldo. *The Natural History of the Intellect and Other Essays*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894, p. 15.

28 KEATS, John. *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*. Horace Scudder (ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1899, p. 227.

29 *Papers of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton Library: Harvard University. Sermons and Lectures. MS Am 1280.193-1280.212 (1) Harvard University Lectures (also 1871): I. Introduction, In Praise of knowledge. [26 Apr 1870] 43f. (61p.).

of impending trouble (that is what the word *monstrum* means). *Moneo* warns, but it also, perhaps more importantly, reminds and instructs. For Peirce, the groundless ground, the *Abgrund*, serves as a warning and reminder to those that would like to tell exhaustive and determinate stories about existence, human or otherwise. It poses an unshakable question to those in search of hard and fast answers.

By this point, you probably know that I am talking about the Sphinx. If you don't, let me be as clear as I can: I am talking about the Sphinx, that monster with which Schelling, and Emerson, and Peirce were obsessed. The Sphinx is a sign of the *Abgrund*, a sign of the unsayable. It says in no uncertain terms: “You cannot get there from here.” When Peirce wrote “A Guess at the Riddle” at the end of the 1880s, he asked that a small vignette of the Sphinx be placed under the title. But why? I suspect that Schelling (who used the image of this monster as his literary seal) and Emerson (author of “The Sphinx” written in the midst of reading Schelling in 1841) had a pretty good idea. I suspect that we, as a culture, generally haven't a clue. Once again, the “Guess at the Riddle” was Peirce's rough outline of the way that triadic relations obtained first in metaphysics and psychology and then in the natural world (physiology, biology, and physics). In traversing these fields, Peirce was intent on showing how chance, law and habit formation were operative in the processes of mind and matter. This essay amounts to his response to the question of the Sphinx, to that riddle that continued to nag Peirce about the relationship between mind and matter. In short, it was Peirce's shot at answering the riddle of existence. No small task.

A quick lesson in mythology: The Sphinx—partly wild beast, partly civilized woman—guarded the gates of ancient Thebes. It would ask travelers to answer an unshakable question, and when they were unable to do so, the monster would kill them. You can't get there from here. One day a powerful man approached the Sphinx and was greeted with the following question: What travels on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening? He responded: “Man, who crawls as a child, walks as an adult, and uses a cane in old age.” Upon hearing this answer, the Sphinx threw herself into the ocean, freeing Thebes of her harsh rule. This man was Oedipus, who, thanks to the slaying of the Sphinx, was brought into Thebes as a hero and soon to be king. We all know that things ultimately do not go well for Oedipus. Indeed, his guess at the riddle of the Sphinx eventually reveals itself as partial, or incomplete, or inadequate, or disastrous. Even in providing a seemingly satisfying answer to the Sphinx, Oedipus commits unknowing, and ultimately fatal, mistakes. This is what we human beings do, and do with stunning regularity. The Sphinx was supposed to stand guard over Peirce's “Guess of the Riddle” as a warning and a reminder of how mistaken seemingly good answers can be. It serves as a symbol of caution that the unformed entails, and such caution may continue to might serve us well as we attempt to provide our own answers to the question of existence. As Emerson says to his audience on the evening of May 20, 1870: “A man never gets acquainted with himself but is always a surprise and a problem.”³⁰

30 *Papers of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Houghton Library: Harvard University. “Sermons and Lectures.” MS Am 1280.193-1280.215 “Harvard University Lectures (also 1871): XIII. Laws of Mind. The Metres of Mind.” 20 May 1870, 28 Mar 1871, 47f. (56p.)

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