

# Charles Peirce: “...my brain must be different...”<sup>1</sup>

*Charles Peirce: “... meu cérebro deve ser diferente...”*

**David E. Pfeifer**

Institute for American Thought  
Indiana University - Purdue University  
Indianapolis - USA  
depfeife@iupui.edu

**Abstract:** Charles Peirce regularly stated and complained that his thinking processes were not like those of other people. Peirce accounted for his mental difficulty with the notion that he was left-handed. Neurologists consulted in this study note that one in seven people is left-handed, and that the thought processes of left-handed people are not noticeably different from right-handed people. Joseph Brent in his biography of Charles Peirce accounts for Peirce's mental anomalies with the claim that Peirce suffered from a manic-depressive disorder or what today is called bipolar disorder. This article challenges that conclusion. The argument is that Peirce suffered from Asperger's Syndrome. The hypothesis that Peirce had Asperger's Syndrome results in a slightly different view of Peirce's biography, possibly making him more understandable and possibly a bit more acceptable as a person.

**Keywords:** Charles Peirce. Joseph Brent. Biography. Manic-Depressive Disorder. Bipolar Disorder. Asperger's Syndrome.

**Resumo:** *Charles Peirce afirmou e reclamou, regularmente, que seus processos mentais não eram como os de outras pessoas. Peirce atribuía sua dificuldade mental ao fato de ele ser canhoto. Neurologistas consultados neste estudo notam que, um em cada sete pessoas são canhotos, e que os processos mentais de canhotos não são visivelmente diferentes de destros. Joseph Brent, em sua biografia de Charles Peirce, atribui as anomalias mentais de Peirce à alegação de que ele sofria de um transtorno maniaco-depressivo ou o que hoje é chamado de transtorno bipolar. Este artigo questiona tal conclusão. O argumento é de que Peirce sofria de Síndrome de Asperger. A hipótese de que Peirce sofria de Síndrome de Asperger resulta em uma visão um pouco diferente da biografia de Peirce, possivelmente tornando-o mais compreensível e, possivelmente, um pouco mais aceitável como pessoa.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Charles Peirce. Joseph Brent. Biografia. Transtorno Maníaco-depressivo. Transtorno Bipolar. Síndrome de Asperger.*

---

1 Ms. 632, page 00011, August 29, 1909.

In 1960, Joseph Brent wrote for his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of California Los Angeles a biography of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). The dissertation was published at the urging of Thomas Sebeok by Indiana University Press in 1993. A revised and enlarged edition was published in 1998.<sup>2</sup> This volume is a comprehensive biography of Peirce.<sup>3</sup> Its chronology and narrative are a common starting point for those interested in Peirce's life. Brent is to be thanked and acknowledged for this important work. Brent's trials in researching the biography and the fact that it was not published until 1993 is itself a story worthy of telling, which Brent does ably in two articles, "The Singular Experience of the Peirce Biographer" and "Pursuing Peirce."<sup>4</sup>

Brent's three versions of the biography are quite different. The 1960 dissertation is limited because Brent did not have access to much of the biographical material in the Harvard University archives. The 1993 edition is a complete reworking of the 1960 biography, making use of the materials previously unavailable, while carrying forward many of the themes of the 1960 dissertation. A major change in Brent's thought about Peirce's life came later in 1993 when he read Kay Redfield Jamison's *Touched With Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* (New York: Free Press, 1993). Upon reading this study, Brent concluded that Peirce suffered from manic-depressive illness or what today is called bipolar disorder.<sup>5</sup> Based on the Jamison study, Brent felt he had a new lens through which to view and comprehend Peirce's life which he expressed in the 1998 revised and enlarged edition. However, while Brent makes use of the manic-depressive hypothesis, he does not connect directly Peirce's personal characteristics and life events to the diagnostic criteria for manic-depression, which Jamison lists in Appendix A of her book. Brent's presentation would have been stronger had he referred specifically to these criteria. In conversations during 2011, Brent told me that he still maintains

- 
- 2 BRENT, Joseph. *Charles Peirce: A Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993; revised and enlarged edition, Indiana University Press, 1998.
  - 3 Thomas S. Knight in the Great American Thinkers series did a biography, *Charles Peirce*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1963. Knight wrote this first biography, but presently no one seems to know of its existence. While Knight did not have a great deal of resources available to him, he caught the spirit or feel of Peirce's life quite well. Other biographical studies include: WALTHER, Elisabeth. *Charles Sanders Peirce: Leben und Werk*. Baden-Baden, Germany: Agis-Verlag, 1989; DELEDALLE, Gerard. *Charles S. Peirce: An Intellectual Biography*, Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamin's Company, 1990; KETNER, Kenneth. *His Glassy Essence: An Autobiography of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998. Max Fisch in his numerous articles and introductions to *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce* provides a great deal of accurate information. Nathan Houser, following Max Fisch in writing introductions to *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce* also provides much accurate information. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks in their introductions to *The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce* provide much biographical information; they also did scattered articles and comments on Peirce's life.
  - 4 Both papers can be found on the Arisbe website: <http://www.cspeirce.com/menu/library/aboutcsp/brent/singular.htm>[5/29/2012 2:11:00 PM] and <http://www.cspeirce.com/menu/library/aboutcsp/brent/pursuing.htm>[5/29/2012 2:12:01 PM]
  - 5 BRENT, Joseph, "Pursuing Peirce," 6-7.

this hypothesis, although he acknowledges that others will write about Peirce's life with different hypotheses.

I have a different hypothesis. While Brent and I agree on far more aspects of Peirce's medical history than on aspects where we disagree, a fundamental difference is present. Brent holds that Peirce suffered from manic-depressive illness; I hold that he suffered from Asperger's Syndrome or what today is called a milder form of the Autism Spectrum Disorder. (I prefer the term 'Asperger's', which many mental health specialists still use.) I hold that Asperger's is a better lens through which to view and comprehend Peirce's life and his many failings and tragedies. I recognize that manic-depressive illness and Asperger's have symptoms in common, and that the distinction between them is a judgment call. Brent has made his case in the 1998 biography; I make my case here.

Some medical history points on which Brent and I agree are: Peirce suffered from trigeminal neuralgia, a painful facial neuralgia for which the nineteenth century had no cure, with the result that many sufferers committed suicide. Peirce used ether and morphine to combat the trigeminal neuralgia, just as his father did for kidney stone pain. We agree that Peirce was an able chemist and had great knowledge of drugs. Peirce earned a degree in chemistry and possessed several volumes on various drugs. (Brent leads one to believe that Peirce was a drug addict relatively early in life; I think Peirce used drugs with care, knowing full well their addictive and negative consequences, becoming addicted to morphine after 1907.) Peirce was sexually active from a young age, consumed alcohol, at times to excess,<sup>6</sup> and was left-handed, but could write with either hand or both hands at the same time. By 1900, Peirce wore reading glasses. After 1905, Peirce had episodes in which he would become stiff and fall, either from epilepsy (Brent) or from alcoholic seizures (Pfeifer). Again, late in life, Peirce would lose consciousness for short periods of time. In his last years, Peirce had congestive heart failure and could not walk very far or ascend stairs. Peirce died of intestinal cancer, what today would be called cancer of the colon.

Some psychological aspects on which Brent and I agree are: From an early age, Peirce was considered intelligent or brilliant. His father, Benjamin, took charge of Charles' education, pushing his intellectual and scientific studies. Benjamin not only pressed Charles; he also separated and to a large degree sheltered Charles from other influences. Peirce could learn rapidly and deeply subjects in which he had an interest. He did not do well in school, because he was not terribly interested. Even so, he excelled in oratory and declamation. Science was an abiding interest throughout life; hours were spent without interruption in his mathematical and scientific endeavors. Peirce complained that he could not learn easily, but left over 100,000 pages of written manuscripts on sophisticated intellectual topics. He said he had great difficulty with languages, yet he could speak, read, and write French and German, and could read Latin and Greek. Peirce could be a fine teacher with a small set of intelligent students, but did not have much success in public lectures.

Peirce liked fine clothes, food and alcohol; he was often extravagant with money and did not handle his financial accounts well. No evidence exists of

---

6 John McDermott, Texas A & M University, holds that Peirce was an alcoholic; he rejects the manic-depressive and Asperger's hypotheses. Some evidence is present that will support the alcoholism conclusion.

numerous friends, but the friends Peirce did have, e.g., F. E. Abbott and William James, had his fierce loyalty. He did not do well in social settings; he was more or less a social misfit. At times, he seemed to act against his own interests. He could offend people with how he treated them or how he spoke to them. Peirce's marriages did not fit the traditional nineteenth century norms. Peirce was released from Johns Hopkins University because of his premarital relations to the woman who became his second wife. He was forced into retirement from the Coast Survey during a politically charged time, because he did not complete his geodetic pendulum work in a timely manner, although he successfully submitted numerous Coast Survey reports.

Brent over the years took copious notes on the manuscripts, letters, and archival materials that were available to him. I went through all of the available Peirce manuscripts and letters, Max Fisch's research notes, and the other archival material available at the Institute for American Thought. I made use of material that Brent may not have had, and Brent made use of material that I cannot presently locate. The general drift of our two sets of sources are quite similar, but have some differences. What emerged from my search was a collection of excerpts from primary source material that runs to one hundred twenty-five pages. These excerpts can be viewed and read at: <http://peirce.iat.iupui.edu/CSPmedical>.

Brent sees depression and manic states in Peirce's life. On the depression, we both agree. Peirce had bouts of severe depression, a few times contemplating suicide, and these events were more common than with the person one usually meets in daily interactions. Brent and I disagree on the manic states. Others, including medical professionals who read my collection of excerpts,<sup>7</sup> are in general agreement that manic states were not present. Brent bases his manic-depressive view on the criteria presented by Kay Jamison, Professor of Psychiatry, Johns Hopkins University. She cites the American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Third Edition Revised* (1987). I recite in full the two criteria for a manic episode which are relevant to this discussion:

- B. During the period of mood disturbance, at least three of the following symptoms have persisted (four if the mood is only irritable [a response to stimuli]) and have been present to a significant degree:
  - (1) inflated self-esteem or grandiosity
  - (2) decreased need for sleep, e.g., feels rested after only three hours of sleep

---

7 The individuals consulted in the preparation of this medical history include:  
Bonssett, Charles, M.D., neurologist  
de Waal, Cornelius, Ph.D., Editor-in-Chief, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*  
Houser, Nathan, Ph.D., Director of the Peirce Edition Project, retired  
Ketner, Kenneth, Ph.D., Director of the Institute for Studies in Pragmatism  
Mallott, David, M.D., University of Maryland  
McGrew, John, Ph.D., Psychologist, Purdue University  
Ochs, Sidney, M.D., neurologist  
Pietsch, Paul, Ph.D., neurologist  
Pitcher, Georgia-Ann, Ph.D., psychologist  
Reynolds, Diana, M.A., Text Editor, Peirce Edition Project, and parent of children within the Autism spectrum including Asperger's syndrome.  
Schwartz, Peter, M.D., Indiana University Medical School

- (3) more talkative than usual or pressure to keep talking
  - (4) flight of ideas or subjective experience that thoughts are racing
  - (5) distractibility, i.e., attention too easily drawn to unimportant or irrelevant external stimuli
  - (6) increase in goal-directed activity (either socially, at work or school, or sexually) or psychomotor agitation
  - (7) excessive involvement in pleasurable activities which have a high potential for painful consequences, e.g., the person engages in unrestrained buying sprees, sexual indiscretions, or foolish business investments
- C. Mood disturbance sufficiently severe to cause marked impairment in occupational functioning or in usual social activities or relationships with others, or to necessitate hospitalization to prevent harm to self or others (Jamison, 262-263).

Let me go through these symptoms one at a time.

B. (1) *Grandiosity*. Peirce had a strong sense of the worth of his work in mathematics and logic, and in some of his scientific endeavors, but he generally did not have a grandiose sense of himself. In some ways Peirce had self-doubts, but never doubted his work. I draw a distinction between doubting oneself as a person and doubting the worth of one's work. Peirce's judgment of his work was correct more often than not. That he compared himself to Aristotle, Duns Scotus, and Leibniz (Letter, likely a draft, June 18, 1909) seems not to be an instance of grandiosity.<sup>8</sup> Peirce's ability to judge himself as a person improved with age; in his later years he became quite introspective and worked at figuring out what he was as a person and why he thought as he did. He knew he was different, and knew he had not succeeded in reaching his life goals. Yet, that inquiry was separate from his sense of the worth of his work. Peirce himself in the letter referenced stated: "Now if I am right in my appraisal [of my intellectual abilities],... such powers have nothing at all to do with the worth of one's character, and are no ground whatever for self-satisfaction..." The fact that Peirce became more self-reflective as he got older is an argument against manic episodes; untreated maniac episodes usually become worse over time.

B. (2) *Decreased need for sleep*. Peirce did not discuss his sleep habits. Thus, I infer they were within a range that could be called normal. At times, he did go without sleep, but that was because of the pressure to complete work that would earn him some money. In his last years, with congestive heart failure and colon cancer, Peirce did not go to bed; he remained upright in a large Morris chair, napping in the chair.

B. (3) *Talkative*. Peirce was a talker; he loved to engage in intellectual conversation. However, when working intensely on a project, Peirce was

---

8 Earlier, Peirce said, "I place myself somewhere about the real rank of Leibniz" (Letter to Francis Russell, November 15, 1904).

quiet, almost non-communicative. I see no record of Peirce being merely or nervously talkative.

B. (4) *Racing thoughts*. Peirce was always full of creative ideas; new thoughts and ideas came to him constantly. Many of his ideas were judged by others as beyond the perspectives of most thinkers, but for Peirce they were part of his grand philosophic system. Peirce spoke of times when ideas came to him swiftly, but those times do not seem to be ideas racing. This criterion seems to imply ideas that come and then go; with Peirce sometimes ideas came quickly, but they stayed. He continually worked on his ideas; he constantly reworked them. He was never flighty with ideas.

B. (5) *Distractibility*. Similar to what was said on B. (3), when Peirce worked on a project he was not easily distracted. In general, Peirce was seldom drawn off topic. His thought was almost always focused. Peirce may have focused on ideas foreign to other thinkers, but he did not bounce from one idea to another idea; Peirce was very deliberate.

B. (6) *Increase in goal-directed activity*. If we focus on the term 'increase,' increased effort is not the correct characterization. Peirce had high levels of effort with periods of reduced activity. With regard to intellectual work, one sees a constant high level of effort with periods of reduced effort. Because Peirce suffered from depression, an accurate statement is that he had constant high levels of intellectual activity interspersed with bouts of depression. Peirce's sexual activity seems to have been at a high level and rather constant; it did not spike or increase and then decrease. Socially Peirce was a misfit; he had difficulty in relating to people. One would not say that Peirce ever increased his social activity. If anything, Peirce was a bumbler in social settings. In general, Peirce did not have episodes of increased effort followed by decreased effort.

B. (7) *Excessive involvement in high risk activities*. Peirce was often involved in risky activities, but they were not always of the pleasurable kind. In the 1880s and 1890s, Peirce tried numerous get-rich-quick business adventures; he was desperate for money and foolishly tried all kinds of things, many of which came very close to being successful.<sup>9</sup> If anything is to be said about these adventures, it is that Peirce did not have a business sense; he had all kinds of ideas that might have succeeded, but his lack of practical experience led to failure. These business adventures were more foolish than risky. One would not be inclined to claim that Peirce engaged in indiscretions at one time and was discrete at other times; his sexual activities were rather constant. The correspondence of Zina, first wife, and Juliette, second wife, indicates that Peirce had affairs outside the marriages. Did Peirce consider these infidelities risky? It seems not. Peirce engaged in on-going buying sprees, whenever he had the money. He loved fine food, fine wine, fine clothing, and first-class hotels. He never had a good sense of money; he spent without a clear picture of what that ultimately meant. Peirce seemed to engage in a constant spree without ever considering it risky.

---

9 An extensive listing of Peirce's business adventures was presented by Christian Kloesel in "Charles Peirce and Honoré de Clairefont," *Versus*, Vol. 49 (Jan-Apr 1988), 11-13.

C. *Mood disturbance causing marked impairment in occupational and social functioning.* Peirce definitely had mental difficulties that caused "impairment in occupational functioning or in usual social activities or relationships with others." Peirce regularly had difficulty in relating to other people. This social difficulty was not episodic; it was constant. Since it was constant, one could not claim it was a symptom of a manic state.

What results from this brief analysis is the conclusion that while Peirce had bouts of depression, he did not have manic episodes.

The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke of the National Institutes of Health (website accessed: 5/30/2012) separates, as a sub-category, Asperger's Syndrome from the Autism Spectrum Disorder. Asperger's Syndrome is a milder version of Autism; some call Asperger's individuals high-functioning autistic. Asperger's itself is a spectrum disorder in that the symptoms are manifest in varying degrees. The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke puts the symptoms for Asperger's Syndrome as (paragraph numbers added):

1. The most distinguishing symptom of AS (Asperger's Syndrome) is a child's obsessive interest in a single object or topic to the exclusion of any other. Some children with AS have become experts on vacuum cleaners, makes and models of cars, even objects as odd as deep fat fryers. Children with AS want to know everything about their topic of interest and their conversations with others will be about little else. Their expertise, high level of vocabulary, and formal speech patterns make them seem like little professors.
2. Children with AS will gather enormous amounts of factual information about their favorite subject and will talk incessantly about it, but the conversation may seem like a random collection of facts or statistics, with no point or conclusion.
3. Their speech may be marked by a lack of rhythm, an odd inflection, or a monotone pitch. Children with AS often lack the ability to modulate the volume of their voice to match their surroundings. For example, they will have to be reminded to talk softly every time they enter a library or a movie theatre.
4. Unlike the severe withdrawal from the rest of the world that is characteristic of autism, children with AS are isolated because of their poor social skills and narrow interests. In fact, they may approach other people, but make normal conversation impossible by inappropriate or eccentric behavior, or by wanting only to talk about their singular interest.
5. Children with AS usually have a history of developmental delays in motor skills such as pedaling a bike, catching a ball, or climbing outdoor play equipment. They are often awkward and poorly coordinated with a walk that can appear either stilted or bouncy.
6. Many children with AS are highly active in early childhood, and then develop anxiety or depression in young adulthood. Other conditions that

often co-exist with AS are ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), tic disorders (such as Tourette syndrome), depression, anxiety disorders, and OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder).

Tony Attwood, Ph.D., Australian psychologist, on the major Asperger's website (OASIS@MAAP, accessed 5/30/2012) puts the characteristics in simpler terms:

Children and adults with Asperger's Syndrome have an intellectual capacity within the normal range, but have a distinct profile of abilities that has been apparent since early childhood. The profile of abilities includes the following characteristics:

- A qualitative impairment in social interaction:
- Failure to develop friendships that are appropriate to the child's developmental level.
- Impaired use of non-verbal behaviour such as eye gaze, facial expression and body language to regulate a social interaction.
- Lack of social and emotional reciprocity and empathy.
- Impaired ability to identify social cues and conventions.
- A qualitative impairment in subtle communication skills:
- Fluent speech but difficulties with conversation skills and a tendency to be pedantic, have an unusual prosody and to make a literal interpretation.
- Restrictive Interests:
- The development of special interests that is unusual in their intensity and focus.
- Preference for routine and consistency.

The disorder can also include motor clumsiness and problems with handwriting and being hypersensitive to specific auditory and tactile experiences. There can also be problems with organisational and time management skills and explaining thoughts and ideas using speech. The exact prevalence rates have yet to be determined, but research suggests that it may be as common as one in 250. The aetiology is probably due to factors that affect brain development and not due to emotional deprivation or other psychogenic factors. The characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome described above are based on the diagnostic criteria and current research and have also been modified as a result of my extensive clinical experience. I would like to provide a personalised description of Asperger's Syndrome that also incorporates the person's qualities as well as their difficulties.

From my clinical experience I consider that children and adults with Asperger's Syndrome have a different, not defective, way of thinking. The person usually has a strong desire to seek knowledge, truth and perfection with a different set of priorities than would be expected with other people. There is also a different perception of situations and sensory experiences. The overriding priority may be to solve a problem rather than satisfy the social or emotional needs of others. The person values being creative rather than co-operative. The person with Asperger's syndrome may perceive errors that are not apparent to others, giving considerable



attention to detail, rather than noticing the 'big picture'. The person is usually renowned for being direct, speaking their mind and being honest and determined and having a strong sense of social justice. The person may actively seek and enjoy solitude, be a loyal friend and have a distinct sense of humour. However, the person with Asperger's Syndrome can have difficulty with the management and expression of emotions. Children and adults with Asperger's syndrome may have levels of anxiety, sadness or anger that indicate a secondary mood disorder. There may also be problems expressing the degree of love and affection expected by others. Fortunately, we now have successful psychological treatment programs to help manage and express emotions.

The two descriptions of Asperger's move from rather technical language to more descriptive language. The National Institutes of Health gets close to what the layperson can comprehend, while the Tony Attwood description of Asperger's uses descriptions with which most of us can identify.

I will go through some of the key points in the Attwood Asperger's description.

*A qualitative impairment in social interaction:*

Peirce was known to have poor social skills. Here are two examples: The first is from a letter of September 19, 1883, from Sarah Mills Peirce, Charles' mother, to his sister, Helen Peirce Ellis. Peirce had married Juliette, his second wife, but many people knew of and spoke of their living and traveling together prior to the marriage, a genuinely unacceptable social act according to the norms of the time. Sarah Mills Peirce writes "Poor Charlie is like a child about conventionalities & has no idea that any thing stands in the way of her [Juliette] being received every where!!"

The second involves Charles' brother, Herbert Henry Davis Peirce (Bertie), who tried to help Peirce obtain employment. But Charles defeated the effort, acting against his own self-interest. Here are Bertie's accounts of the incident:

I have just had a session with Col. Paine and Montgomery during which in the midst of a warm defense of your position on the part of the Col., Montgomery produced a letter from you advising him to have nothing to do with Col. Paine in this bleaching matter and expressing views as to his integrity, and square dealing which might well lay you open to an action for libel — Whatever may be your views of Col. Paine I cannot conceive how you could have entrusted an expression of such an opinion in writing to Montgomery. It has of course killed you with Col. Paine and if it has not cost me my position it will be fortunate — (Letter to Peirce, August 16, 1892).

Letter to Helen Peirce Ellis, January 22, 1907, on the same event, fifteen years later:

...he has lost the perception of what the world demands and has become more than ever set in his opinion of what it ought to want. Besides this, he has lost, if he ever had it, a certain perception of the right of others which seems to ensure his making enemies of those who try to help him. I had experience of this once myself when I put him in a position

in which he owed it to me to carefully observe the responsibilities and the confidence reposed in me. The thing I threw in his way offered him a fair compensation for his work and scientific knowledge but without consulting me he undertook to make my employers a proposition which not only defeated all of his own ends but entirely upset my relations with them, they holding me responsible for his employment as my brother. I never spoke to you of this nor did I so far as I can remember to Jem (Peirce's older brother, James Mills Peirce), but it cost me my place in New York, such as it was.

Many more examples are found in the excerpts.

*A qualitative impairment in subtle communication skills:*

In March 25, 1909, Peirce bemoans his lack of understanding words.

...I am naturally deficient in aptitude for language. When a new bit of slang comes into vogue, I am about the last person who discovers what it means, and when I come to do so, it is by requesting somebody to explain it to me. I am very frequently in such doubt about the shade of meaning of some common word, such as "lovely," that I am obliged to hunt it up in concordances and in the poems to which they relate, and scarcely a day passes that I do not resort, once or twice, to the quotations in the Oxford Dictionary. Unfortunately for me, that work does not seem to have been designed for such defectives as I am, and familiar quotations, which have oft-times had decisive influence upon the shades of meaning, the associations of words are distinctly avoided there. (Ms., 619, page 00008).

Peirce wrote in a letter of April 12, 1902, to Alice James, wife of William James:

In this life I find I lost all discernment of grades of expression; and, in particular, in endeavoring to express my divergence of views use language that is adapted only to convey the idea of utter hostility...

In a note written in 1904, Peirce stated: "I am aware that my modes of thought and of expression are peculiar and gauche, and that twenty years of a recluse life have made them more so..."

Here is an example wherein Peirce acknowledges that he cannot grasp what Juliette wrote him, an indication that he did not understand the subtleties of her language, although married to her for over twenty-five years:

I cut off all drugs except a little coffee and tobacco and little strychnine which my heart warns me to take it... When you want me to do anything, if you will try to write a brief letter, leaving out all upbraiding, which drives me frantic, and just confine yourself to saying what you want me to do; it will be done... But when you write as in this last letter, my poor girl, I am put almost out of my wits & can understand only that you are very angry about I know not what... (Letter to Juliette, April 15, 1907).

In August 29, 1909, Peirce wrote:

I can imagine one of my readers saying to another, "Why can he not express himself naturally?" I can supply the answer to that. It is because no linguistic expression is natural to him. He never thinks in words, but always in some kind of diagrams. He is always struggling with a foreign language; for to him every language is foreign... (Ms., 632, pages 00010-00011).

Another aspect to this discussion is that Peirce stated he thought in diagrams and that his diagrams and Existential Graphs expressed his thought most clearly. "My natural mode of utterance, which I always practiced before knowing that is a system having rules of its own, is Existential Graphs..." (Letter to Francis Russell, January 23, 1909).<sup>10</sup> In any case, Peirce struggled with language although he could speak, read, and write French and German, and could easily read Greek and Latin. As the criterion states, his struggles were with subtleties.

*Restrictive Interests:*

The common claim is that Peirce was consumed with the study of logic. But that is not accurate. Peirce did substantial work not only in logic, but also in mathematics, scientific classification, spectroscopy, chemistry, engineering, astronomy, mapping, gravity, semeiotics, and philosophy. On the lighter side he loved to read aloud, recite poetry, participate in amateur theatrical productions, and was excellent at charades. Max Fisch characterized Peirce's focus as being "primarily a student of the 'logic of science'" (unsigned article in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15<sup>th</sup> edition, 1974, p. 1109). Peirce did have a central interest, but it was rather broad and constituted a theme that ran through all of his work.

*A strong desire to seek knowledge, truth and perfection:*

I do not believe anyone claims that Peirce did not meet this criterion. The manner in which he returned to topics and reworked topics is widely acknowledged. The multiple manuscript versions of published papers prove that Peirce sought to get his ideas correct and stated accurately.

*Solve a problem rather than satisfy the social or emotional needs of others:*

While one might at first glance say "Yes, Peirce does fulfill this criterion," finding specific examples is more difficult. One possible case is an incident wherein Juliette Peirce was traveling for her health. Peirce gave her very precise instructions for accounting for the money he was sending her (See primarily letter of February 21, 1907). He even wished a copy of her handwriting prior to leaving to enable him to compare the signature on the receipt he asked her to complete. Reading these letters leads one to infer that Peirce was more concerned with the financial accounts

---

10 Peirce considered his Existential Graphs or diagrammatic logic "a useful model for studying the overall nature of intelligence and reasoning" (KETNER, Kenneth L.. *Elements of Logic: An Introduction to Peirce's Existential Graphs*. Texas Tech University Press, 1990, p. 2).

than with Juliette's health and well-being. Another example is Peirce pushing the Coast Survey to provide him with better pendulums to do his gravitation work. Peirce never seemed to recognize the social, political, and financial context of the Coast Survey; he only wished to resolve problems with the pendulum work. Letters indicate that Peirce complained about instruments to the superintendents, but never took the time to consider the challenges with which the superintendents dealt daily. A person with social and political skills could have approached the issue in a manner that would have led to a better resolution; Peirce did not have these skills. The superintendents got frustrated and then angry.

Peirce's relation to his siblings is a potential case. His two brothers, James Mills Peirce and Herbert Henry Davis Peirce, along with his sister, Helen Peirce Ellis, all sought to assist Charles. In later life, Charles' pressing problem was little to no income; he consistently harassed his siblings for loans that were never repaid. Charles never recognized that Jem (brother, James) had personal difficulties at Harvard; Charles did not follow the behavioral and social instructions of Bertie (brother, Herbert Henry Davis) which could have aided Charles' financial situation; and Charles never seemed to recognize that Helen (sister), when a widow, had little money and troubles of her own. Charles seemed unable to recognize the social setting of his family and the emotional needs of his siblings.

*Values being creative rather than co-operative.*

While Peirce was a creative thinker, he was not much of a collaborator; his lack of cooperation usually appeared in circumstances in which he believed he was intellectually correct. An example is when he was asked to translate an English language scientific book into German. Peirce was doing translation work, because he desperately needed money. Yet, when doing the translation Peirce changed the text to what he thought the text ought to read. The author, William Hirsch, wrote to Peirce and said:

In the first place, please bear in mind that the object, to have a Translation and not a critic of my book. To combine the two is impossible. If somebody wants to criticize the book, it must be done at some other place, but not in the book itself... In some instances you did not catch on to the meaning, but expressed by your translation just the contrary of what I meant to say... (Hirsch letter to Peirce, January 22, 1896).

At times, on problematic issues, Peirce had his wife Juliette send messages to his correspondents. In this case we have a letter that Juliette was to send to the publisher, Appleton & Company, but the draft is in Peirce's handwriting. "When he [Charles] did something like it [correct mistakes], in order to avoid some strange blunder in the book he thought critics would laugh at, he wrote and said what he had done and requested the manuscript should be submitted to the author" (Letter of February 6, 1896). The author and publisher did not appreciate Peirce's "too great zeal to improve Dr. Hirsch's work" (Letter Appleton & Co. to Juliette Peirce, February 5, 1896). If Peirce desired to gain more translation work, more cooperation and following instructions was in order.

Another example comes in Peirce's writing definitions for James Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1901-1902). He could not do all the work himself; he enlisted the assistance of one of his students from Johns Hopkins University, Christine Ladd-Franklin. Through the years she was one of his most stalwart supporters. Yet, in reviewing one of her definitions, he was most unkind.

I have read your article *Syllogism*, which is certainly very original. But it would be next to an impertinence for me to expatiate on its good points. My business is to carp about the smallest faults, as long as carping can do the least good; if need be, even to set down a *veto* (Peirce letter to Ladd-Franklin, May 1, 1901).

Peirce did alienate Ladd-Franklin. His lack of cooperation led to his losing friends and jobs.

*Problems expressing the degree of love and affection expected by others:*

A leading example of meeting this criterion came in 1860-1861 when Peirce had a "secret marriage" to Carrie Badger. They never married, but signed a "marriage contract." (See letters from Carrie Badger to Peirce in 1860-1861, well chronicled in KETNER, Kenneth. *His Glassy Essence*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998, pp. 213-222.) In this brief relationship, Peirce obviously saw Carrie often and sexually took advantage of her. When the affair was ending, Carrie cajoled, begged, and pleaded that her love letters to Charles be returned. Peirce kept Carrie's letters, which is how we know of the affair. But, it is very clear from Carrie's letters that Charles was taking advantage of her, acted in an arrogant manner, and ignored her requests. Early in the relationship, the affair was torrid, but Peirce's affection, if it was ever present, waned quickly. An interpretation of the letters concludes that Carrie was a loving, but possibly high strung, individual; Charles did not return her affection. Peirce's attitude can be seen in two entries in a notebook of the time period. "You may do anything with a person who is in love with you" (Private Thoughts, 1855). "The art of Love has for its object, not love, but the Enjoyment of Love. The enjoyment of love is produced by the mixture of body and soul..." (Private Thoughts, July 21, 1855). These thoughts are not those of one who is concerned with the expectations of the other person in the relationship.

Another example appears late in Peirce's life, when he became very aware he was physically and emotionally dependent upon Juliette, his second wife. Early in their marriage, Peirce spoke harshly of Juliette. Here are two examples:

Uncle Sam [the Coast Survey] and Juliette are enough to drive me out of my wits. I have not learned to calculate in any measure what the former will do; but from the latter I can expect with confidence 30 different lines of conduct per month, of which 25 will be in one way or another impedimentary to my success. (Letter to brother James Mills Peirce, January, 1887)

... Juliette I am quite sure will give me no help of any kind. She will just promise to do so for a few days, — long enough to cause a loss of time, — nothing more... Juliette's skill in deluding people is shown by her

persuading most of my friends that I am trying to attain sudden wealth instead of industriously earning what I can...The most extraordinary idea which I understand Juliette has talked is that I am an idler...My difficulty is that I have no capital & can't find remunerative work requiring none; and if I had any, Juliette would bend all her great ability to prevent my succeeding, (Letter to brother James Mills Peirce, April 5, 1894).

In his growing self-awareness, Peirce recognized that he did not express his affection appropriately. Here are some examples:

It is with deep emotion that I find myself in this hotel which I have not been in since we were here together in the old days when you were, oh, so sacred to me, before the City Hall rowdy had put things on a different footing [married us]. Oh my dear love, it makes me want to fall on my knees & worship you to remember all that, my pure devoted friend. Alas, I fear that of late years I have sometimes most dreadfully forgotten the deep deep worship and honour that I owe you. But this brings it all back to me; and I pray I never may forget it any more. (Letter to Juliette, March 3, 1893)

Peirce did see he was wrong in criticizing Juliette.

I have made up my mind that I have been utterly wrong-headed about the most important point of all. I blame myself bitterly for harboring the idea the Juliette did not love me... I am convinced that I have been totally wickedly wrong on this vital point. (Letter to James Mills Peirce, July 31, 1894).

You have suffered so terribly physically, morally, — with a husband generally inattentive & sometimes very foolish & sometimes even worse, — you had had so much to put up with in every way that I feel if ever I can come by some money, as the prospect is I shall very soon know, why the greatest part of my exertions must then be devoted to seeing how far I can recompense you for all your noble life... (Letter to Juliette, March 15, 1898.)

Peirce did have moments of regret.

Here I am on thanksgiving day, sick and kept away from my dear wife by wicked conduct. Dear, dearest, love. My own sweet wife! I cannot tell you how I grieve. Believe me, my own sacred one, that I am entirely faithful to you. Yesterday, somebody tried to lead me away; but it was no use. I love my own sweet and divine little wife, and I am faithful to her. I love her more than tongue can tell... Dearest Love! I long for you! I love you. I worship you. (Letter to Juliette, November 15, 1891)

Finally, Peirce recognized that Juliette sought to support him. "...dear Juliette[,] who has stuck by me through thick & thin & has voluntarily embraced & shared my extreme poverty for love of me, and has submitted to the cold cruelty of a family widely notorious for that quality[,] has as a consequence of the hard work & privation been attacked by three successive diseases under any one which a less noble nature would have given up thinking of anything but self and suffering" (Letter to sister,

Helen Peirce Ellis, January 3, 1902). The general conclusion is that Peirce early in their marriage did not see that Juliette genuinely loved him. Later in life he saw that she did love him, but realized he had never really met her expectations. Whether Peirce could have responded to Juliette's affection and in a consistent manner is an open question.

Later in life, Peirce recognized his own emotional failings.

From time to time, he [Benjamin Peirce, Charles' father] would put me to the test by keeping me playing rapid games of double-dummy from ten in the evening until sunrise, and sharply criticizing every error. He also stimulated me to train my sensuous and esthetic discrimination, in the broadest sense of the later adjective. He specially directed my ambition to delicacy of palate; so much so, indeed, that I subsequently placed myself, for two months at monstrous expense, in tutelage to the *sommelier* of Voisin opposite the church of Ste. Roche, to learn the red wines of Médoc, and at the end of which time I was almost fit for the profession of a wine-taster in the particular line. But as to moral self-control, he unfortunately presumed that I would have inherited his own nobility of character, which was so far from being the case that for long years I suffered unspeakably, being an excessively emotional fellow from ignorance of how to go to work to acquire a sovereignty of myself. (Ms. 619, pages 00006-00007, March 26, 1909)

Collectively, this analysis and selection of excerpts from manuscripts and letters supports the claim that Peirce had Asperger's Syndrome.<sup>11</sup> Peirce did not understand social mores, was unable to grasp the meaning of behavioral social gestures and expressions, missed the subtleties of social discourse, acted against his own interests in telling people exactly what he thought, was uncooperative when following his own ideas, did not understand the unintended consequences of his behavior toward other people, and did not have a strong moral sense early in life. Peirce did terrible things to people, took advantage of them, acted in an arrogant manner, at times was dishonest, had a violent temper, and could be most unpleasant. These attitudes and behaviors led to Peirce alienating people and frustrating his employers. He was a social misfit. The result was that Peirce did not gain the professorship he so dearly sought, lost his jobs, and was not recognized for the fine work he did.

Why is it important to show that Peirce had Asperger's? How is that different from claiming that he was manic-depressive? In either case, Peirce had an illness, a mental/brain condition that impacted his life and work. Peirce did not have the success that his family had expected of him. He was brilliant, came from one of the well placed families in the scientific and academic community, and made major contributions on a variety of scientific endeavors, but acted towards other people in a manner that negatively impacted how they reacted to him. Either one of the named conditions would have had that effect. Why then Asperger's?

The manner in which Brent presents the manic-depressive hypothesis leads to a view that is quite negative. In simplistic language, Brent presents a picture wherein

---

11 The medical professionals consulted who had experience with Asperger's agree that Peirce likely had Asperger's.

Peirce is a brilliant individual who does not have self-control; Peirce is someone admired at times for his work, but not for his character or personality; he is taken to be a person easily disliked. The picture seems to be that Peirce's situation was hopeless; he himself was hopeless.

The Asperger's hypothesis leads to the view that Peirce was brilliant, had a mental condition over which he had little control, but which, far from making him a hopeless case, may have actually been a significant contributing aspect of his brilliance — albeit with unfortunate social and personal consequences. Since Asperger's was unknown in Peirce's lifetime, the measures that can mitigate the effects of Asperger's were not available. Late in life Peirce recognized that he was different; he struggled mightily to determine why he thought as he did. As Attwood stated, individuals with Asperger's think in a different manner, have different mental processes. These individuals are not to be judged negatively because of their thought processes; they are just different, which of course means that they do not fit in well with other people, although they might be able to see and reach conclusions of value that others do not see. The point is that if indeed Peirce had Asperger's, a reason for his brilliance is present, a reason for his differentness is present, and an explanation of his unusual and at times unacceptable behavior is present. The Asperger's hypothesis fits Peirce well and makes Peirce a bit more acceptable as a human being.

The diagnosis and treatment of Asperger's did not exist during Peirce's life. That he became more self-aware through his own efforts, saw that he was different, and tried to alter his behavior based on his new insights into himself, is a major achievement. The result is that, instead of saying "Poor Charley" along with his family and Brent, we should be saying "Amazing Charley." Given the obstacles in front of Peirce, that he achieved so much is a credit to his mental strength and intelligence. Thus, although Peirce did terrible things which cannot be denied or condoned or explained away, we can think that had he not been afflicted with Asperger's he might have achieved even more and received some of the recognition his genuine achievements warrant. The Asperger's hypothesis makes Peirce more understandable and allows for a more charitable assessment of him.

One might claim that I am just putting a positive spin on Peirce's life instead of a negative spin. As I interpret Peirce's struggles, especially later in life, he sought mightily to determine why he was so different. He recognized he did things that other people found unacceptable. Credit is due Peirce for becoming self-aware and seeking to alter his behavior. This dawning self-awareness is no small feat. He thought and acted alone; he did not have help from others. He sought to change and be better. Peirce was really a remarkable person.

The time has come to re-evaluate Peirce's character. The Asperger's hypothesis is a step in this direction.

## References

ATTWOOD, Tony. Asperger's OASIS@MAAP. Available at: <[www.aspergersyndrome.org](http://www.aspergersyndrome.org)>. Visited on: 30 may 2012.

BRENT, Joseph. *Charles Peirce: A Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993; revised and enlarged edition, Indiana University Press, 1998.



\_\_\_\_\_. The Singular Experience of the Peirce Biographer. Available at: <<http://www.cspeirce.com/menu/library/aboutcsp/brent/singular.htm>>. Visited on: 20 may 2012.

\_\_\_\_\_. Pursuing Peirce. Available at: <<http://www.cspeirce.com/menu/library/aboutcsp/brent/pursuing.htm>>. Visited on: 29 may 2012.

DELEDALLE, Gerard. *Charles S. Peirce: An Intellectual Biography*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamin's Company, 1990.

FISCH, Max. Introduction. *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, Volumes 1-3. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982-1986.

HARTSHORNE, Charles, WEISS, Paul, and BURKS, Arthur. Introduction. *The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, Volumes 1-8. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958.

HOUSER, Nathan. Introduction. *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, Volumes 4-6, 8. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986-2010.

KETNER, Kenneth. *Elements of Logic: An Introduction to Peirce's Existential Graphs*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1990.

\_\_\_\_\_. *His Glassy Essence: An Autobiography of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998.

KLOESEL, Christian. Charles Peirce and Honoré de Clairefont. *Versus*, v. 49, p. 11-13, jan./april 1988.

KNIGHT, Thomas S. *Charles Peirce*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1963.

PEIRCE, Charles S. Copies, at the Institute for American Thought, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, of manuscripts and letters from the Harvard University archives.

WALTHER, Elisabeth. *Charles Sanders Peirce: Leben und Werk*. Baden-Baden, Germany: Agis-Verlag, 1989.

## **Endereço / Address**

David E. Pfeifer  
Institute for American Thought  
ES0010 – IUPUI  
902 W. New York Street  
Indianapolis, IN 46202 USA

Data de recebimento: 15-02-2013

Data de aprovação: 12-04-2013

