

# Peirce's lost community of Firstness

## *A comunidade da Primeiridade perdida de Peirce*

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**Abstract:** Charles Peirce openly described two important communities: his well-known community of inquirers and his less well-known church of love. These communities were closely aligned with his normative sciences, addressing logic and ethics respectively. That left a gap in his architectonic; there is a missing community of Firstness that should correspond to aesthetics, the first of the normative sciences. In this essay, I use Peirce's writings to speculate about the nature of such a community.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics. Art. Beauty. Community. Firstness.

**Resumo:** *Charles Peirce descreveu abertamente duas importantes comunidades: sua bem conhecida comunidade de investigadores e sua menos conhecida igreja do amor. Essas comunidades estavam intimamente alinhadas às suas ciências normativas, abordando a lógica e a ética, respectivamente. Isto deixou uma lacuna em sua arquitetônica; há uma comunidade de Primeiridade faltando que deveria corresponder à estética, a primeira das ciências normativas. Neste trabalho, utilizo os escritos de Peirce para especular sobre a natureza de tal comunidade.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Estética. Arte. Beleza. Comunidade. Primeiridade.*

Charles Peirce is probably not the first thinker one might consider in wanting to talk about a community of artists. By his own admission, he was an “ignoramus” in the realm of aesthetics. Nevertheless, as he noted, his first “serious study of philosophy [...] was devoted to esthetics” (MS 310:4). And a convincing case has been made for the claim that the fundamental ground of Peirce's thinking is poetic or aesthetic.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Peirce is reasonably well-known for his focus on a community of inquirers, and within the framework of his overall philosophical architectonic there is indeed room for consideration of a community of artists—an indefinite community of Firstness. And so I turn to Peirce for my initial reflections.

In 1903, in a set of lectures given at Harvard, Peirce gave an account of three normative sciences: aesthetics, ethics, and logic. Those who know Peirce's work will recognize these as corresponding to his basic ontological and phenomenological categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. As he was working on these lectures, he argued that these categories were not his discovery and, “If they were, that circumstance would be an almost conclusive proof of the falsity of the

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1 See, for example, IBRI, 2009, p. 273-307, and GUARDIANO, forthcoming.

list” (MS 310:3). The lecture on the normative sciences followed his lecture on phenomenology, and he found it significant that phenomenology, for which he argued an artist’s talents were requisite, immediately preceded aesthetics in his ordering of the sciences. Their continuity reflected for him the shared talent for perception and observation.

Earlier in his career, Peirce had developed ideas related to his later account of the normative sciences. The first was the notion that reasoning and logicity depended on a particular moral outlook: “He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is, at it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences, collectively” (EP 1:149). The bottom line is that genuine inquirers must be committed to the ideal of truth—not to their own well-being. The second idea was that inquiry toward truth could never be achieved by a single inquirer or a finite group of inquirers and that truth-seeking was therefore dependent on an indefinite community of inquirers. For Peirce, logical inquiry begins with several initial sentiments: “interest in an indefinite community, recognition of the possibility of making this interest supreme, and hope in the unlimited continuance of intellectual activity, as indispensable requirements of logic” (EP 1:150). Reliance on community was a function of human finitude and fallibility; not only do we not live long enough nor could we ever experience enough, we also just get things wrong. “We individually,” Peirce argued in contrast to Descartes, “cannot reasonably hope to attain the ultimate philosophy we pursue; we can only seek it, therefore, for the community of philosophers” (EP 1:29).

These reflections led Peirce to his well-known description and defense of a community of inquirers who would over the course of history work toward improving truth—truth as a “would be” ideal. It also meant that for Peirce the normative sciences, both theoretically and practically, stood in a reciprocal relationship similar to those in Aristotle’s discussion of the modes of knowledge and to those in Kant’s account of causality in his schematism. Logic depends on ethics to accomplish its mission; and at the same time logic’s pursuit of truth enhances humanity’s attempt to ameliorate life by offering ethics some working truths with which to make its judgments and to develop its account of the good life.

Over the course of his career, Peirce also routinely articulated a relationship between his categories and types of persons. In 1896 he described these types as follows:

The first consists of those for whom the chief thing is the qualities of feelings. These men [persons] create art. The second consists of the practical men [persons], who carry on the business of the world. They respect nothing but power, and respect power only so far as it is exercised. The third class consists of men [persons] to whom nothing seems great but reason. (CP 1.43).

Peirce’s community of inquirers (or scientists), as noted, is reasonably well-known and addresses the third type of person. What is less well-known, and less attended to, is the fact that Peirce, by way of his discussion of religiosity, described and defended a second community, one directed at ethics and the ideal of the good life. The practical persons, those he describes as exercising power, have to be interested in ethics just in so far as the ethos of their local societies provides the context for

their exercising of power. However, just as some inquirers are driven by selfishness, fame, or short run goals, these power mongers are not aimed at the ideal. The ideal of practical or moral life is goodness. Those who work for this ideal constitute his second community. In his essay "Evolutionary Love," Peirce distinguished between the "gospel of greed" and the "gospel of love." The first is the dysfunctional gospel of unchecked capitalism with its bastard account of the ultimate good: "Intelligence in the service of greed ensures the justest prices, the fairest contracts, the most enlightened conduct of all the dealings between men, and leads to the *summum bonum*, food in plenty and perfect comfort" (EP 1:354). But, "Food for whom?" Peirce asked: "Why for the greedy master of intelligence" (Ibid.). For Peirce, love as *agape* offered a better road to a better ideal of the good life.

His second community, which he labeled the great church of love, is a community lured by the goal of the best life. Traditional "churches" he rejected because they focused on *excluding* persons. His community of love was to be inclusive of all; it was to "be sworn in as a regiment of that great army that takes life in hand, with all its delights, in grimmest fight to put down the principle of self-seeking, and to make the principle of love triumphant" (CP 6.488). Clearly Peirce drew on his Christian background, but his community of love was not to be limited by any historical creed or set of cultural habits—its reason for being was "to confer upon men [persons] a life broader than their narrow personalities, a life rooted in the very truth of being" (CP 6.451). The common feature of the two articulated communities was a commitment to an ideal and the rejection of selfishness. But, given Peirce's emphasis on his categories, there is a lost or missing community—a community of Firstness, or a community of creators of art. Peirce routinely admitted that he was a friend of poesy and the arts, despite the fact that he was not experientially fully familiar with the world of feeling and the world of artists. As an exercise in Peircean, not so much in Peirce studies, it is of philosophical interest to explore the nature of this lost community.

Among the original pragmatists, Peirce was the least inclined to spend time working out the practical upshots of his theoretical work, but he was also adamant that there was no fundamental divide between theory and practice. He argued that every one of us has a metaphysical outlook; it is just that most people do not make the effort to establish their outlooks intentionally and reflectively. The same may be said of aesthetics. It is not that we are ever unwilling to make aesthetic judgments or to assert our aesthetic ideals; it is simply that we seldom reflect on the ground of our judgments. Or, to avoid the question, we pretend to accept a simplistic relativism concerning our aesthetic tastes, even though we seldom act as if we believe in such a relativism.<sup>2</sup> For Peirce, aesthetics and art, like our metaphysical outlooks, are integral features of the lives of human animals. Taking this as a starting point, I want simply to offer some speculative reflections on what the lost Peircean community of creative artists might look like. I intend it not as a complete picture but as an initial sketch from which to reflect on the very idea of an indefinite community of Firstness.

Both of Peirce's first two communities begin with the requirement that members of the communities be committed to their respective ideals: truth and

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2 For Peirce's response to relativizing aesthetic judgment by way of individual tastes, see MS 310:4-5.

goodness. From a Peircean perspective, because these ideals are general and vague, the commitment is actually to a participation in the specification and growth of the ideals. So, with the community of love we might see “insensibly in course of generations, ideas of rights of man acquiring new meaning” (CP 6.573). Just as truth evolves in the sense that William James intended, so may justice as practiced evolve to better uses. Given our finitude, this ongoing growth could never be the work of a single individual or a local community. Both communities aim at ameliorating our lives, though it is always possible, as we in the U.S. have recently witnessed, that in the short run we may fail or backslide.

The community of artists, by analogy and by the ordering of the categories, must begin with a commitment to the aesthetic ideal of beauty. Peirce, like many after him, worried about naming this ideal “beauty.” “It is a pity,” he argued, “that the English language has no more accurate term for esthetic goodness than beauty [...]” (MS 310:5). Peirce recognized that frightful, ugly, and perhaps immoral objects and events could be aesthetically good. He noted that the initial cultural response to the Alps by local cultures was one of fear; only gradually was the sublimity of the mountains noticed (MS 310:9). To try to get around this worry, on occasion he turned to the Greek word *kalos* as a substitute for “beauty.”<sup>3</sup> For my part, I note Peirce’s concern but proceed with the word “beauty,” acknowledging that there may be both light and dark beauties.

Other than this initial commitment to the ideal and to its growth and development in history together with the corollary rejection of self-interestedness, I find no absolutely necessary features for the members of Peirce’s lost community. But his writings do suggest a set of features that are important to such a community. I take these to be Peircean suggestions that we might adopt, modify, enhance, or reject.

I noted earlier Peirce’s division of types of persons: artists, actors, and inquirers. However, it is crucial to remember that they are ideal types and that in the world of human finitude all persons participate at some level in all three types—we are categorially mixed. To say that someone is an artist is to say that they emphasize Firstness and feeling in their life. Artists also act and think, but they often think within the presence of their attention to feeling. As Peirce puts it, “It is truly surprising how accurate their judgments are when they are not warped; but there seems to be nothing but their usual good feeling to prevent their being warped” (MS 604:1).

The community of Firstness is thus comprised in large part of those who are attentive to and receptive to feelings. Feelings, in their purity, are for Peirce whatever appears to be immediately present to consciousness—they are incipient ideas.

This is about as near as may be to a state of mind in which something is present, without compulsion and without reason; it is called *Feeling*. Except in a half-waking hour, nobody really is in a state of feeling, pure and simple. But whenever we are awake, something is present to the mind, and what is present, without reference to any compulsion or reason, is feeling. (EP 2:4).

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3 See CP 2.199.

Again, in our actual experiences, we are artists or inquirers by emphasis not in purity. Our actual experiences are of feelings in context and feelings in transition. These feelings, invariably complex, come to artists with what Peirce called "suggestivity." "There are," he said, "certain combinations of feelings which are specially *interesting*,—that is, they are strongly suggestive of thought" (EP 2:23). Those in the community of artists often seem to have a special affinity for these feelings and also for percepts (unarticulated perceptions) which are often infused with a complexity of feelings. They are, we might say, aesthetically adept—able to read feelings. And, importantly, able to read the feelings of others through a variety of signs, including works of art.

A kind of intelligence is at work here in this sympathetic apprehension of feelings. This may occur with feelings in general or through works of art. "While in esthetic enjoyment," Peirce claimed, "we attempt to 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" (EP 2:190). This intellectual sympathy does not mean, however, that those in the community of Firstness *understand* a feeling or work of art in some clear, reductive, and discursive way. It means that they can feel with the feelings of experience or an artist, and they can "enter into one another's feelings" (EP 2:193). They have a knack for grasping or making acquaintance with feelings.

Philosophers since the nineteenth century have habitually worried about the psychologizing of philosophy—reducing arguments and claims to some specific story of mental states. I prefer to see what Peirce is doing as experientializing. In light of his ontological and phenomenological accounts of life, he is interested to consider the kinds of experience that occur and he is interested in the modes of experience that generate truth, goodness, and beauty. Moreover, he is interested in the modes of experience that enable us to grasp truth, goodness, and beauty when we find them. Aesthetic creativity and enjoyment involve an ongoing engagement between qualities of feeling or works of art and a living sympathizer and interpreter. Working towards our human ideals is always a transactional affair. Not only are those in the community of Firstness likely to have stronger powers of sympathy but they are also, Peirce argued, on the whole better perceivers and observers. This feature links Peircean phenomenology to his aesthetics. For Peirce, immediate perception is a common locus for the presentation of a quality of feeling. In seeing a house fire, for example, we experience more than just what we see. The total feeling quality experienced in a walk through a forest of hemlock or firs is more than the actual sights and odors. Peirce admonished his scientific friends for their habitual arrogance: "And let me tell the scientific men that artists are much finer and more accurate observers than they are, except of the special minutiae that the scientific man is looking for" (CP 1.315). The reason for this, Peirce suggests, is that by nature and/or training, artists learn to live in what Peirce called the "poetic mood"—a mood that "approaches the state in which the present appears as it is present" (CP 5.44). And finding the present in its presentness is precisely to focus on feelings and their qualities.

Both as sympathizers and perceivers, artists are agents of receptivity—they are open to what Peirce sometimes called "the insistence of an idea" (MS 442:n.p.). In one sense, receptivity is, as with Emerson's "passive intellect," a passive experience.

But those in the community of artists are those who, through self-control, learn to be receptive—they are able to bring themselves to be open to feeling and perception. They are actively receptive. We might say that this receptivity manifests the Firstness of the community of Firstness.

The Secondness and Thirdness of this community lie elsewhere. So far as artists and poets give articulation to feelings and create qualities of feelings, they must have the ability to “represent” or “to give sign to” even the most obscure feelings. Recognizing the concern many aestheticians have for the use of the word “represent,” I will only note here that Peirce seldom used the word in the simple sense of copying or imitating. For Peirce, representing is a complex semeiotic process and his semeiotic system is rich enough to encompass a wide range of activities and sign uses. This is a story for another occasion—for now, I direct readers to works by Martin LeFebvre, Alexander Robin, Nicole Everaert-Desmedt, and various others on this issue.<sup>4</sup> For Peirce, “whenever a man feels, he is thinking of *something*. Even those passions which have no definite object—as melancholy—only come to consciousness through the tinging of objects of thoughts” (EP 1:43). Art is precisely where we turn to find expressions of melancholy. Consider, for example, Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah.” The process of embodying feelings by expressing them and creating works of art engages artists in Peirce’s other two categories—thinking and acting. An artist’s creating is enabled by her thinking. The category of thinking plays, in this instance, as in many cases for Peirce, a mediating role. It mediates between an artist’s feeling/perceiving and her making or producing.

An artist’s thinking involves several features. The most straightforward is simple historical study or an acquaintance with one’s artistic or aesthetic tradition. I do not make this a requirement of all artists, but in many instances it is an important feature of creativity. This is clearly true for Peirce’s community of inquirers, and it carries over by analogy to the arts. Picasso notably studied a wide variety of artistic traditions as background and inspiration for his own work. Eric Clapton, Bonnie Raitt, and Robbie Robertson were all close students of the history of American blues guitar. Bob Marley was a student of the cultural lineage of calypso, ska, rock steady, and his own reggae. In many cases, artists are also students of history and culture more generally—Margaret Fuller and T. S. Eliot come to mind as artists who incorporated the history of western culture into their work. In short, artists may pursue historical backgrounds that help develop their own work. Such historical thinking both sets the stage for novelty and opens all the avenues for bringing a history forward in creative ways as, for example, when we trace the lineage of slide guitar from Robert Johnson to Elmore James to Duane Allman.

Peirce also focused on the imagining capacity of many artists. This perhaps seems trivial but Peirce believed that artistic imagining was distinct from scientific imagining because it was freer and wilder. “There are,” Peirce claimed, “no doubt, kinds of imagination of no value in science, mere artistic imagination, mere dreaming of opportunities for gain. The scientific imagination dreams of explanations and laws” (CP 1.48). Imagining, like any process in a Peircean world, comes on a continuum and I would not make wild imagining an absolute prerequisite for all in the community of Firstness. But for many it may be an asset. Scientific imagination,

4 See for example, LEFEBVRE, 2002.

Peirce argued, was necessarily constrained by historical background knowledge and the need to answer specific problems or questions. Abduction, the scientist's mode of ampliative or creative reasoning, includes this imagination in context. Artists, Peirce believed, can allow their imaginations to run free; in searching for what is admirable *per se*, artists may think beyond traditions and conventions—they may imagine possibilities not obvious to a given historical, cultural setting. Drawing on his own experiences, Peirce claimed that “among artists I have known more than one case of downright hallucinatory imagination at the beck and call of these *poetai*” (CP 5.117). In a way, artists may become unhinged from cultural constraints—think perhaps of Paul Gauguin, Patti Smith, Gloria Anzaldúa, or John Cage. This, of course, may be one reason cultures tend to marginalize and to fear artists and poets in specific cultural and historical settings. And it may also be why mainstream cultures often decline to include radically new art as “art.” For example, from the early reception of impressionism to Duchamp, Mondrian, and Warhol, mainstream critics routinely dismissed radical novelty as “non-art.” Rock’n roll in its early days suffered a similar rejection. Peirce’s point is that wild imagining is an important aspect of the community of Firstness, even if it does not apply to all.

A third mode of thinking, one that involves imagining and also parallels the thinking of scientific inquirers, is what we might call artistic abduction. Abduction (hypothesis, or retroduction) was Peirce’s name for the originary mode of inference in standard inquiry—the Firstness of inferencing. Scientists must hypothesize or intelligently guess at plausible answers to their questions, given whatever background knowledge they have. As just noted, Peirce identified abduction as the only ampliative or creative mode of inference. Artists, he believed, carried out their own version of abduction when creating. Artists are “those whose thought, if it can be called thought, Firstness has a relative predominance. It is not that they are particularly given to hypothetic inference, though it is true that they are so given; but that all their conceptions are relatively detached and sensuous” (MS 439:8). Abductive or creative reasoning is the preeminent mode of reasoning for the community of artists. Abduction for an artist is a kind of hypothesizing about how one might best express or represent, in Peirce’s wide sense, a quality of feeling. But, again, their hypothesizing is detached from the sorts of constraints under which science operates. They must just imagine the possible solutions for the expression of the feeling under whose “insistence” they are working. We might say, in another way, they are “abducted” by a feeling.

In all of their modes of thinking, artists have the opportunity to be essentially outlaws. Their abductive reasoning is about possible ways of articulating or embodying feelings and qualities of feelings, and they consider everything from medium and materiality to modality and meaning. In their creative process a vague and general feeling is given specificity and concreteness. Not all “hypotheses” work equally well; for artists and poets, as for scientists, failure is a real possibility. And it is the community of Firstness who, across history and cultures, sort out, in a rough and pragmatic way, levels of artistic success and failure.

I do not take these to be the only modes of artistic “thinking” but they are the ones Peirce seemed to focus on. The door remains open to develop his account and I think the details might be much richer than his introductory story. This, I think, is why it is fascinating to explore the self-descriptions of artists’ creative

experiences. And this is why I think, at some level, biography can occasionally assist us in grasping an artist's work. The aim is not to reduce art's meaning to some fixed account, but to explore the indefinitely varied and nuanced ways an artist may think. And even as artists are thinking in various ways, they are also engaged in "making"—or as Peirce routinely called it "embodying." Sketching, modelling, experimenting with sounds and relations of sounds to text or film or dance, all serve as makings. Unless one agrees with the young Benedetto Croce that artistic creation can take place strictly in a mental realm, those in the community of artists must have some facility for production. In today's language, we might say they have to have "skills." At one extreme there is Michelangelo's perfectionism in layering the paint surfaces of the Sistine Chapel; and there is his immense gift of touch in "David." And in some cases, the production is idiosyncratic and occurs in spite of, or perhaps because of, aberrant skills, such as the singing of Lucinda Williams and Neil Young.

The ultimate test for an artist is the ability to produce a work that expresses or represents the quality of feeling at hand. In Peirce's world this is a fully semeiotic activity and should not be confused, as noted, with simple imitation or copying, though these too may play a role in expression of some kinds. The world of Peircean signs is rich enough to include everything from stick figures to opera to film and to performance and conceptual arts. Consider, for example, the complexity of films like *Rear Window*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *No Country for Old Men*. "In light of the doctrine of categories," Peirce maintained, "I should say that an object, to be esthetically good, must have a multitude of parts so related to one another as to impart a positive simple immediate quality to their totality" (CP 5.132). If he were right, it would help explain why we use various art works as one-off exemplars, as *sui generis*. A work of art is an interweaving of semeiotic threads that in their unity create a whole that presents observers with a single, nameable sign. Peirce's long version of this description is as follows:

[...] the esthetic Quality appears to me to be the total unanalyzable impression of a reasonableness that has expressed itself in a creation. It is a pure Feeling but a feeling that is the impress of a Reasonableness that Creates. It is the Firstness that truly belongs to a Thirdness in achievement of a Secondness. (MS 310:9).

Here, then, we have three general features of the Peircean community of artists: receptivity and perception, artistic imagining and abduction, and an ability to make or embody one's feeling by way of one's thinking. The question that remains for me is what makes this community distinctive? Why does it have any importance for human cultures? I raise this question in conjunction with a related question that is perhaps more pressing: how does one defend the importance of arts and humanities in a culture that is driven by short run science and a peculiar if not dangerous reliance on technological invention and the conducting of business? How do we, as humanists and artists, make sense of our cultural role in colleges and universities in a world driven by the Secondness of business and the Thirdness of science? In terms of Peirce's outlook, why should we be concerned to sustain and develop a community of Firstness within our present cultural and historical setting?

Perhaps this sounds a bit old and tired, but I intend it in a provocative way. Our culture, in the U.S. at least, has given “exceptional” status to science and technology in a variety of ways from celebrity to funding to “expert” judgment. We expect to be saved by some combination of computers, scientific studies, and endless economic expansion. In this same culture, arts and artists are treated as incidental and accidental. In Peirce’s world outlook, there were some answers.

## Final Reflections

So what? What is distinctive or significant about Peirce’s community of Firstness? It is, I think, of historical interest, but, more importantly, Peirce suggests that “community” is not just one sort of thing—communities come in different shades, with different emphases, and with different possibilities. In his categorial arrangement, each community pursues a different ideal by way of everyday human experiences. This lost community of Firstness pursues beauty in all of its varieties. In historical practice, it aims at developing the growth or evolution of beauty through embodying feelings and their qualities in works of art. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for humans to explore what is admirable *per se* in all aspects of our experience. This community may incorporate features of truth-seeking and goodness-seeking, but it is not bound by either.

The community of Firstness is freer than the other two Peircean communities. It is much more open to spontaneity and it lives with a focus on the *absence* of constraints. It enables wide-open imagination, creative production methods, and full experimentation. This is why, I think, this community so often seems to outstrip its traditions. It is also why persons more focused on the communities of truth and goodness often fail to grasp what artists are doing. And it is why cultures so often ignore, marginalize, or excommunicate their artists.

Spontaneity enables local communities of the larger community to develop organically. In a short frame, we might consider the improvisation among members of a jazz ensemble or a comedy team. In a longer view, we can see in art history many radical shifts in phase: impressionist painting, the birth of blues, Rembrandt’s use of everyday affairs. The community of Firstness exhibits a genuine wildness that is anathema, in local practice, to the other two Peircean communities.

The community of Firstness may pursue truth; as Peirce occasionally remarked, “true poems” are like arguments and nothing is truer than a true poem (MS 309:50). But it is not constrained by historical “truths” in a narrow way—it can engage in science fiction, fantasy, and all the things that exhibit the hallucinatory imagining that he described. Artists may also pursue goodness of a conventional morality if they are not too heavy-handed, but again, they are not constrained to do so. As Peirce pointed out on several occasions, immorality—even perhaps sociopathic amorality—may have significant aesthetic value. The virtue of this community’s spontaneity, wildness, and absence of constraint, it seems to me, is its ability to catalyze significant cultural change. This need not be a matter of intention. Art can simply be provocative and provide cultural critique just by expressing and embodying feelings that challenge cultural conventions in some way or other. The Viet Nam Wall in Washington, DC was not intended to be as controversial as it became; but it opened doors to new ways of seeing memorial art and has literally

transformed the way we think of such things. Artists are not committed to a method to truth or to the slow development of moral instinct—they imagine and surrender to the insistence of a feeling or an incipient idea. They may live as “outlaws.” So, when we are not threatening these members of the lost community, we often are engaged in “forgiving” their eccentricities, their lack of concern for conventional morality, and, perhaps, their blind driven-ness. The fundamental point is that amelioration of human life requires the historical growth of our ideals; it requires the fracturing of our historical instantiations of our ideals and the opening of avenues to new and better instantiations. Artists are good at this!

One feature of artistic outlawry, Peirce suggested, was art’s ability to focus on diversity and difference. Scientific inquirers, for example, focus on lawfulness and only turn to outliers when they need to modify “laws” and general claims. As Peirce put it, “the diversities are usually of small use to us scientists, and attract the attention of poets mainly” (CP 6.100). The community of Firstness goes after the thickness of everyday experience, as William James might have put it. It tackles character traits, particular events, and the little things that affect life. *True Grit* does not tell us about bounty hunters in general or about strong women in general—it tells the story of particular individuals in a particular historical situation. We may generalize features of the film or the characters, but the artwork itself brings us to the little things, the little differences that affect the development of our lives and our cultures. And these little differences may expose problems in the working ideals of a culture. For example, in John Ford’s *The Searchers* we are faced with the experiential damage of an unthinking generic hatred for Native Americans—and this confrontation is not only within the film but also *within* the way the damage is actually portrayed by Ford.

The focus on diversity and difference that Peirce noted is related to his concern for the use of the word “beauty.” He worried that its meaning would become too conventional and would constrain artists’ abilities to work outside convention and keep its meaning growing. In its conventionality “beauty” might divert cultures and their artists away from the diversities as avenues to aesthetic experience. Peirce, interestingly questioned whether there was something we might call negative aesthetics: “That a word for esthetic badness is still more strikingly absent I do not regret so much, because I do not feel sure that there is any such quality” (MS 310:5). He was more concerned that we might limit our own abilities to feel and to perceive—that we might live with an “Unfeelingness resulting from observations due to our own moral and intellectual aberrations” (MS 310:9). The community of Firstness, then, in both creating and enjoying, keeps alive “feelingness” and our ability to move past our personal aberrations. Peirce put this in a very down-to-earth way:

If one abstracts from moral considerations a clever thief or a naughty woman may be a very pretty spectacle. Even downright vulgarity and bad taste is not without its charm, if I can get over the shudder which comes from imagining myself as imitating them. In short I am inclined in my esthetic judgments to think as the true Kentuckian about whiskey: *possibly* some may be better than others, but all are esthetically good. (MS 310:6-7).

Keeping me from becoming dogmatically faddish about liking or disliking specific bourbons is helpful, but this passage points in the direction of what for Peirce is the instinctive importance of a community of artists.

The reasons for the lost community's importance I have provided so far are quasi-instrumental reasons. I say "quasi" because it is not clear that these instrumentalities are what motivate artists. For Peirce, these reasons are ancillary to or derivative from the fundamental importance of the lost community—its intense focus on what is admirable *per se*. In many of my classes I run the following thought experiment, which I occasionally try to implement. Imagine your world for three days with absolutely no music—how would this change or affect your life? In larger scale, imagine the complete absence from our cultural history of Beethoven, Mozart, Joni Mitchell—take your pick. Or within the realm of philosophy, eradicate the Firstness philosophers—Parmenides, Plato, Augustine, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Margaret Fuller, bell hooks, Heidegger, and so forth. What are we left with—the conventional, the methodical, the constrained, the unameliorating, and the unameliorable. For Peirce, the very aim of the community of Firstness was to fill our cultures and our lives with exemplars of what is admirable *per se*. Forget for a moment the accidental instrumentalities. To provide for the wholeness of human life, the community of Firstness is essential precisely because we *are not* merely scientists and moralists. This is, of course, a difficult claim to sell in our world, even within our universities. It interests me that Peirce, a self-proclaimed logician, scientist, and mathematician, authored this claim. The same can be found in the work of both William James and John Dewey, but it is Peirce who finds in himself, while acknowledging his esthetic ignorance, the need for this feature of human experience. And so I close with a Peircean story.

Suppose a fairy were to say to you, "You have put me under such an obligation to you that now I will wave my wand and you shall have any dream you like. This dream shall occupy a thirtieth of a second of your life, but it shall seem to you as long and varied a history as you like, but it shall be utterly disconnected from your past and future experience, shall produce no effect, medicinal or magical. You shall never remember a single detail of it. You shall only know you had it and bring along from it a perfectly unanalyzable impression of its totality. Now what will you dream? How would you like to have a dream of the perfume of attar of roses, or just a pure unalloyed sense of bliss?" If it were me, I should say "Not a bit! On the contrary, it must be a dream 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 reasonableness of existence more and more intellectually stupendous and bring forth new designs still more admirable and prolific. And if the fairy should ask me what the *denouement* should be, beyond what I conceive and let me at last find that boundless reason utterly helpless to comprehend the glories of the thoughts that are to become materialized in the future, and that will be *denouement* enough for me. I may then return to the total unanalyzed impression of it. [MS 310:8].

This is a story of in-itself-ness—and a story of aesthetic openness. It is a history of variety that is aesthetic, sympathetic, and intellectual—it is an ongoing drama. There is no *denouement*; there is no final analysis; there is no final clarity—there is

only a feeling of wholeness amidst harmony and antagonism. It is, I think, Peirce's dream of the companion to his indefinite community of inquirers; it is, perhaps, a description of the experiential work of the community of Firstness.

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