

Anti-Kantism as necessary characteristic of pragmatism

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Pragmatists' anti-Cartesianism had already been defined in the first appearance of pragmatism, in Peirce's cognition series written for the "Journal of Speculative Philosophy" (1867-68). As is well known, the brilliant young scientist stigmatized the Cartesian doubt as a "paper doubt," by opposing it to the scientists' true "living doubt" (*EP* 1, 115). Sometimes readers do not realize the powerful novelty that this opposition implies. According to Peirce, research does not move from the skeptical doubt, which falls under the heading of "paper doubt." More similarly to Augustine, Peirce describes a situation in which you can doubt because you have a previous certainty. Therefore, research moves from one certainty to another certainty, and the abandonment of a first certainty is only due to the occurrence of a real surprising phenomenon that alters one of the pillars on which it stands. Peirce never abandoned this position, even when he corrected the psychologism of his first approach – which paired certainty with satisfaction – toward a realistic direction; he even translated it into a logical pattern when he inserted the "surprising phenomenon" into an actual internal step of the logic of abduction (hypothesis). In these founding papers, intuitionism and introspectivism also ended up in the enemies list with the "paper doubt." In opposition to Descartes, Peirce refused any form of intellectualism and all pragmatism moves in this vein.

However, this argument is still insufficient. Empiricists, existentialists, and hermeneuticians were also anti-Cartesians. Pragmatism clarifies the attack on Descartes with the one on Kant. This second feature has always been overshadowed, primarily because of Peirce. In fact, the founder of pragmatism referred to the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the tables "brought down from Sinai" (*CP* 4.2, 1898). He gave a name taken from the German thinker to his doctrine (*CP* 5.412, 1905) insisting that the Kantian problem of unity of the manifold was the true issue of epistemology (*EP* 1, 1867).

However, this unconditioned appreciation faded away over the years. Moreover, this change emphasized some critical remarks that Peirce had always in his mind. As early as 1868 he said that the real philosophical question was not "**How are synthetical judgments a priori possible?**", "**But before asking that question he [Kant] ought to have asked the more general one, 'How are any synthetical judgments at all possible?'**" (*CP* 2.690). Jean Marie Chevalier (2013) showed that Peirce took Kant in a peculiar way, a Leibnizian way he calls it, from the start.

Now, I will set aside all offenses that Peirce sometimes addresses to Kant in the second part of his life, charging him with superficial or hasty work in logic. I think that we should avoid them because most of them come from manuscripts that Peirce never published. Therefore, they are only half-indicative of Peirce's intention to express himself in that way. Sure enough, they tell us a conceptual direction. I want to follow this direction in the rest of the paper, trying to recapitulate Peirce's remarks.

1. Continuity

Over the years, and starting from 1884, Peirce emphasized his criticisms more and more, particularly in light of the deepening of his idea of “continuity,” the true keystone of his philosophy. He changed his mind on this topic, gradually passing from his original Kantian setting into a Cantorian version. Afterward, thanks to the discovery of Georg Cantor’s theorem and paradox (made independently of the German mathematician), he preferred a unique view that places real continuity beyond any logical or metric calculation.

The concept of continuity, and Kant’s misconception of it, allowed Peirce to understand why in Kant’s thought there is always a “gap” between knowledge and the reality to be known, between the “thing-in-itself” and the “phenomenon.” The distinction had troubled him since his early philosophical studies (*WI*, 37-44). During the last twenty years of his life, Peirce considered the permanence of this schism to be the epiphenomenon of an entire intellectual attitude: nominalism, understood here in a very different way from a mere belief in the existence of universals. It can be believed that universals are real, yet one is still nominalist if he/she thinks that universals are hopelessly beyond the inferential capacities of humankind. Nominalism affirms an unbridgeable gap between reality and reason. In this view realism maintains that reason belongs to reality and in the long run of inquiry, it will know reality. This is a decisive gap that opens up with Kant’s transcendentalism. Peirce synthetizes it in the following way:

The present writer was a pure Kantist until he was forced by successive steps into Pragmaticism. The Kantist has only to abjure from the bottom of his heart the proposition that a thing-in-itself can, however indirectly, be conceived; and then correct the details of Kant’s doctrine, and he will find himself to have become a critical common sensist (*EP* 2: 353-4, 1905)

The irony of the quote lies in the “only”. To abjure from the bottom of his heart the “thing in itself” is to abjure the entire distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, which is the kernel of Kant’s Copernican revolution. When you abandon it, you will have either a profound idealism or a profound realism. In fact, Peirce thought that there was no difference at all between those two possibilities (Lane 2017, conference at Sheffield University). He called his doctrine “real-idealism” and he boasted that “**My philosophy resuscitates Hegel, though in a strange costume**” (*CP* 1.42).

This first theoretical point underlines also another characteristic of Peirce’s thought and the treatment of it in the scholarship. You can read the first part of Peirce’s production as an idealist view that would have been corrected in the second half of his life by a sort of transcendental realism. However, manuscripts seem to indicate a different path. If these readings were true, it is difficult to read Peirce’s philosophy as a unity. In fact, Tom Short (2007) has to split up Peirce’s work in two halves: the idealist one and the (transcendental?) realist one. There is no clue of such a self-critique in Peirce’s texts that sometimes present corrections to some previous views. Of course, one can say that Peirce moved into that change without noticing. However, setting aside Peirce’s self-knowledge, texts show another direction. As far as Kant is concerned, they go from an explicit appreciation to increasingly stronger critiques. Moreover, Peirce considered his early papers to be a kind of realism even in the preparatory texts for the Metaphysical Club in the early 1870s. Besides, he considered his second production more in accordance with Hegel’s monism than with Kant’s transcendentalism. About the latter, he thought that its logical bases were weak (*CP* 2.31) and that the crucial distinction between synthetic and analytic judgments was “**so utterly confused that is difficult or impossible to do anything with it**” (*EP* 2:218). In the last part of his life, Peirce only appreciated Kant’s schematism (*CP* 5.531) because it is the tool for a real synthesis, respectful of common sense. However, he also notices that “**His [Kant’s] doctrine of the schemata can only have been an afterthought, an addition to his system after it was substantially complete. For if**

schemata had been considered early enough, they would have overgrown his whole work” (*CP* 1.35, ca. 1890).

This interpretative option accepts that there is a profound unity between the different parts of Peirce’s production. His initial take on Kant had a Hegelian leaning but it contained already a phenomenological basis for semiotics. In the following years, on the one hand he deepened that view giving the precision of his studies on continuity to the somehow vague idea of the dialectical development of the Spirit. On the other hand, by precisising the “outward clash” of secondness and the role of the dynamic object he strengthened the importance of first two phenomenological categories. Peirce did not consider the two characteristics of continuity and plurality of categories as opposed to one another, as De Tienne’s studies on phenomenology in early and late writings confirmed. As a proof, you can read the manuscript 642, written in November 1909 where Peirce distinguish reality from subjective perception, genuineness, and exteriority. He takes the example of a Jacqueminot rose, possibly something that he could find in his garden in Milford Pennsylvania. Peirce considers the attribute of “being red” of the rose. First, he introduces the idea that the color would not be less real, if we mistook in pointing it out. If we maintained that it was yellow, the red color would not be less real. Second, if we then say that the color is only relative to our retina, we would not admit anything but that there is a real object, which is the red rose. These two points amount to say that there is a «hard kernel» (Eco 1993, p. 36) of reality that is independent from any ancient skepticism. So far, Peirce accepts what someone has recently called a «minimal realism» that goes very well also in relation to recent philosophical moods and with the idea of a transcendental realism (Ferraris 2012). However, this is not the kind of reality useful for our cognition and science. We need to investigate what this hard kernel consists in. That is why Peirce makes another distinction: reality is not only genuineness. Something is genuine when it has a description, which corresponds to its supposed definition.

We must not confound Reality with Genuineness. A thing is Genuine or not according as it is or is not of the description it professes or is supposed to have: a false diamond may be genuine paste. Thus Genuineness belongs to an object as the Subject of Attributes. **But Reality is not relative to any professions or suppositions.** Nor [...] is it relative to any Respect (Robin 1967, MS 642, p. 8. 1909)

Peirce presents two reasons against this view: first, this view reduces reality to dependence to the mind, falling again into intuitionism and infallibilism; second, it would reduce reality to actual happening, depriving it of the infinity of possibilities. Therefore, the hard kernel is not relative to any form of linguistic or mental description. If the former exclusions singled out reality as something independent from errors and perceptions, now Peirce claims that reality is independent from the single mind or from the majority of minds as well. The topic is the same that he stated frankly also in the 1860s: reality is independent from an individual mind.

At this point, one might say that reality amounts to exteriority and Peirce hurries up to make also this distinction. It is true that exteriority is independent from individual and social mind’s definitions and perceptions, but it is not independent from the relationship to the mind itself, or as Peirce says, to «any mind» (*MS* 642, p. 10). Exterior is something that we can predicate insofar as we are thinking of something. The red color of the rose is not itself because our retina perceives it, not because our description agrees with the definition of red, and not because our mind can think about it now. The red color is «interior in respect to its Formal Essence», where other realities like the poetical power and beauty are. «Its color, too, is External in Respect to what it (the color) inheres in, but it is Internal (i.e. not External) in Respect to its Formal Essence; while the Jacqueminot’s poetic power (if it has any) and some part of its beauty are still more unquestionably Internal» (*MS* 642, p. 9). Is Peirce here going back to the ancient idea of eternal essence? No, he is not. He makes it clear by quoting immediately the idealist position and maintaining that idealism

was very good in explaining the dependence of exteriority from mind and in distinguishing it from reality. For idealists as for Peirce, reality is a rich continuity of developing essences.

I will not, however, go so far as to say that an External Fact would remain unchanged no matter what conceivable change should take place in what it should be possible for any human mind to Feel, Think, Do or Suffer; because that would make most of the well-known forms of Idealism deny the Externality of these ordinary External Facts which, as it seems to me, those forms of Metaphysical opinions just as sharply distinguish from Internal Facts as Common Sense does, and in the very same way, too. If any disciple of mine were not clearly to apprehend this, I should say to him: **“My dear friend, you do not understand Idealism. Read Berkeley again, putting yourself in his intellectual shoes as you read, and as you reflect. Think as much further deep as you can, but do not fail, this time, to apprehend his Thought”** (*MS 642*, 10-11, 1909)

There are essences, but they are not eternal. They coincide with the dynamic object that we can indefinitely communicate. If you think about it attentively, you will see that Peirce is not far from the idealist tone of his 1860s conclusions, even though he broadened immensely the range of what reality is. As in the 1860s, reality coincides with the general mind, with the Spirit, but this coincidence is not limited to actual facts that could be easily read either as genuine or exterior.

In order to clarify what he was saying, in the same series of manuscripts Peirce explains the logical-ontological difference between Occurrence and Fact. An occurrence is a “slice” of our experience: it implies an infinite number of details and relationships. A fact is the small portion of an occurrence that can be represented in a proposition (*MS 647*, pp. 9-10). When we think of reality we have to consider occurrences, and we should admit that they are utterly inexhaustible. They correspond to what in semiotics Peirce calls dynamic object. Moreover, according to different logical modalities, we also have to think of possible occurrences and necessary occurrences. Necessary occurrences can be thought of as a development of the infinite relations of the actual occurrence, but potential occurrences involve such a proliferation of infinity that fades away into a deep vagueness.

So far I have only defined an Actual Occurrence. As to a merely Possible Occurrence, when we try to think even of an Actual Occurrence we can at best but think of a Fact with the vague supplementary reflection that countless circumstances remain unthought of. But a Possible Occurrence, if there be such a thing, is vague in its own nature. As Occurrence, it is essentially Actual, or, at least, circumstantial to the degree attained, as only by the Actual, and as Possible, where should it get such an investment of circumstances? If a Subject only possibly possesses a given character, it also possibly possesses the negative opposite character, which is what I mean when I say that the Principle of Contradiction does not apply to the Possible, nor the principle of Excluded Middle to the Necessary. For I regard the Impossible as having the Modality of Necessity and the Necessary having the Modality of Possibility. (*MS 648*, pp. 5-6, 1909)

Now, how general must the general mind be in order to conceive all of this rich continuity?

Now, when you think that so starting you never would get to the number of the details of the simplest occurrence, and that such Occurrence Actually do swarm throughout the Infinite Universe of our Experience, and that **to the eye of Logic it is equally evident that there is a Being to whom the thought of such a Universe in all its details [implies] no effort at all, one’s head swims at the contemplation of such a Being.** (*MS 648*, pp. 4-5, 1909)

Peirce’s late writings confirm and deepen the first insights on which pragmatism relies. His rejection of nominalism brings him to a view of reality as continuity in transition among logical

modalities, which is neither classic realism nor classic idealism. After all, Peirce was probably right in calling it as real-idealism. We find a confirmation of what we said also in another passage, from MS 636 where Peirce goes back to nominalism from another point of view.

There is a celebrated passage in the second edition of the *Critick der Reinen Vernunft* and a very notable one, in which Kant says that the “I think” – Das Ich Denke – must be able to accompany all his ideas, “since otherwise they would not thoroughly belong to me.” A man less given to discoursing might remark on reading this: “For my part, I don’t hold my ideas as my own; I had rather they were Nature’s and belonged to Nature’s author.” However, that would be to misinterpret Kant. **In his first edition, he does not call the act “the I think” but “the object=x.” That which that act has to effect is the consecution of ideas; now, the need of consecution of ideas is a logical need and is due not, as Kant thinks, to their taking the form of the Urtheil, the assertion, but to their making an argument; and this is not “I think” that that always virtually accompanies an argument, but it is: “Don’t you think so?” (MS 636, 1910, 24–6).**

In this passage Peirce does not become a defender of the “thing-in-itself” but of the transcendental unity of the object, which if recognized would have led Kant to a realist basis. This is the possibility that Peirce recognizes when he accepts that his doctrine implies objective idealism (CP 6.163), although he does not agree with the intellectualism of Hegelian dialectic; Hegel misses what Peirce calls Firstness and Secondness, that is to say the spontaneity of events and their brute occurrence (EP 2, 177). But at least Hegel understood that the relationship between reality and the human mind must be a profound continuity.

2. Don’t you think so?

In the same manuscript we find the second criticism: the “I think” does not guarantee the unity of the object because of the aforementioned lack of continuity between cognitive processes and reality. On the contrary, in presuming to unify a scattered reality, it paradoxically becomes presumptuously omnipotent. The “I think” pretends to reunite knowledge with its object and therefore it assumes an ability that is not its responsibility. Peirce, who considered the “I” as a semiotic effect more than a cause (De Tienne 2005, 98), cannot be but ironic about such a hypertrophic view. In another passage, some years before (1904), Peirce said:

All the special occurrences of the feeling of similarity are recognized as themselves similar, by the application of them of the same symbol of similarity. It is Kant’s ‘I think’, which he considers to be an act of thought, that is, to be of the nature of a symbol. But his introduction of the ego into it was due to his confusion of this with another element. (EP 2:320)

Here Peirce is explaining that symbols and their complicated relationships to icons and indexes can account for the complex architecture of transcendental deduction and can avoid Kant’s introduction of the Self, above all in its moral consequences that led to emphasize the role of the ego in any field of inquiry.

3. Last remarks on unity of knowledge and classic pragmatism

Summing up, there are two main attacks: nominalism in the specified meaning above, and the weakness of the “I think,” above all as assumption of this view of the Self that serves as a prelude to the solipsism of certain idealism or to a poor, minimal, transcendental realism. These two arguments against Kant’s philosophy bear the unmistakable label of pragmatism. A third one is often added even if there is no explicit reference to Kant. For Peirce and pragmatism there is a profound unity of knowledge between theoretical, ethical, and aesthetic knowledge. Aesthetics and

ethics are not separated from the theorizing of logic; on the contrary, in Peirce's classification of sciences they offer the principles on which logic moves forward (*EP* 2, 258-62). As it is well known, the entire classification of sciences shows this unity by claiming that logic relies upon ethical principles and the latter upon aesthetic principles. Again, scholars have tried to defend the idea that Kant was proposing a very similar move that emerges completely only in the third Critique. It maybe the case according to the philology of Kant's writings. However, at least, this is not what Peirce could think of it since he did not read the Third Critique. Therefore, his Kant has always been the author of the First Critique, which he knew by heart, and of whom he became increasingly critical as much as he developed his pragmatist metaphysics.

As a further confirmation of the role of anti-Kantism as essential part of pragmatism you can read also the rest of classic pragmatists. There is no one on both sides of the Ocean who forgot to blame Kant on different points of his thought. We have no room here to develop them here but we might sum them up with Vailati's epigram. The former Peano's collaborator concluded a letter to Papini by saying that "**Kant has devoted his genius to disprove theories that no one had ever supported and to defend theses that no one ever doubted, so that the free spirits admire him for the doubts that were his starting point, and non-free spirits admire him for the dogmatism to which he arrived**" (Vailati 1971, 398). Peirce had the most profound view of continuity as the key-stone of the pragmatist architecture and he was the one who really started by studying Kant. Therefore, it is not surprising that he was the more sophisticated in his attacks and that it is more difficult to understand the relevance of his progressive abandonment of the German thinker. However, I think it is time for all Peirce scholars to accept this characteristic for Peirce and classic pragmatists, remaining free to develop a new form of Kantian pragmatism on new bases but without attributing it to Peirce or to classic pragmatism anymore.