

The Cosmopolitan Peirce: The Impact of his European Experience

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Guest Editor

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Introduction

The common image of Charles Sanders Peirce as an isolated thinker writing in Arisbe without any contact with the world is not only historically inaccurate, but also it makes difficult to understand some key elements of his philosophy. Charles S. Peirce traveled to Europe on five different occasions. The five trips occurred between the years 1870 and 1883, all of them in the service of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, at that time the chief scientific agency of the United States. Those trips—which covered a total of thirty-eight months—were a rich mixture of scientific research and tourism, of communication with other scientists and also of enjoying the artistic treasures of Europe. The impact of this extensive travelling was so relevant in Peirce's life and thought that it makes perfect sense to identify this period of time as his “cosmopolitan period”—to use Max Fisch’s expression (Fisch 1986, 227).

Peirce's experiences of his European trips are lively reflected in his broad correspondence (professional and family letters), which until now has been unduly neglected by the scholarship, due in part to the difficulties accompanying access to it and in part to the general lack of interest from the analytic tradition in the biographical aspects of philosophy. We are convinced that the feelings that Peirce experienced in Europe were seeds which bore fruit in later years. A close study of Peirce's letters and other documents of those years will help in avoiding a number of misunderstandings about his thought and its evolution, highlighting his active participation in the first line of several fields of cooperative scientific research (astronomy, geodesy, etc.).

In this issue we collect the works presented at the 2014 Charles S. Peirce International Centennial Congress. There are three papers, authored by Nathan Houser, Sara Barrera and myself. The first paper, written by Nathan Houser, describes how Peirce's European experiences influenced the development of his thought and helped shape his philosophy. It appears likely that his thought was decidedly influenced by his intellectual and personal contact with European scientists and philosophers. So to understand Peirce as an American

philosopher it is necessary to grasp that he was profoundly influenced by European thought and culture and to inquire how his American and European experiences worked together to form his ideas and shape him into the world-renowned philosopher he became.

Sara Barrena's paper is focused on Peirce's aesthetics. While Peirce claims to not be well acquainted with aesthetics, he always was interested in that field. In spite of the fact that Peirce did not develop the issue in depth, aesthetics is at the foundation of the other normative sciences. Barrena suggests that the trips through Europe and the contemplation of so many works of art and of historic places left in his memory the impressions that are at the basis of the importance that Peirce would assign in his later years to art and aesthetics.

The final paper by Jaime Nubiola describes—with some documental support from Peirce's correspondence from his first and second European trips— Peirce's conception of science as a collective and co-operative activity, involving all those whose lives are animated by the desire to find out the truth, whose lives are animated by "an impulse to penetrate into the reason of things" (*CP* 1.44, c.1896). The paper deals with Peirce as an inventor and builder of research instruments around which scientific communities are built, and with Peirce's experience of cooperation in science.

In sum, a close study of Peirce's letters and other documents of his "cosmopolitan period" will help to avoid certain misunderstandings about his thought and its evolution, highlighting his active participation in the first line of several fields of cooperative scientific research (astronomy, geodesy, etc.). A better understanding of Peirce's activity in those years will provide a richer and more sympathetic approach to him, and will correct that common but inaccurate image of Peirce as an isolated thinker.

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