

1. Peirce's Sentimental Conservatism

1. Introduction: Peirce's Lectures at the Cambridge Conference, 1898

During February of 1898, Peirce delivered a set of lectures at the Cambridge Conferences, a private adult education program that convened at 168 Brattle Street (a few blocks from Harvard), the estate of the widow of Ole Bull (the distinguished Norwegian violinist). The Conferences had been founded the previous year, and attracted a number of prominent temporary lecturers from around the world, as well as Harvard philosophers Josiah Royce and William James, who had been the catalyst, the arranger, for Peirce's eight lectures.

Only a small handful of Peirce specialists have known of these lectures; even fewer have read through the surviving manuscript texts for them in the order in which they were delivered. The situation was complicated even further when the editors of the so-called *Collected Papers* of Peirce presented some parts of these manuscripts, but scattered them over different volumes and under erroneous titles, for instance supposedly as a set of lectures entitled 'Detached Ideas on Vitally Important Topics.' No such lectures were delivered by Peirce, although this was a name for part of an earlier draft he had proposed.

The tangled history of Peirce's Cambridge Conferences Lectures, eventually delivered under the title of 'Reasoning and the Logic of Things,' is given in detail in a new study edition of them which I have

prepared. In working with these materials, I came face to face with a doctrine that has been unpopular with students of Peirce's writings, a matter he labeled 'Sentimental Conservatism.' Peirce scholars have tended to think of this theme as a momentary aberration in his work (although an exception to this trend is Maryann Ayim's fine study¹), an interpretative hypothesis which perhaps was encouraged by the unusual set of circumstances surrounding the development of the Cambridge Conferences Lectures. One such aspect was Peirce's desire to speak about topics in mathematical logic, a disposition that James urged Peirce to restrain because he thought only one person in the audience (probably Royce) would be able to follow the discussion.

Contrary to received opinion, my long study of Peirce's work has led me to conclude that Sentimental Conservatism was a long-standing, but latent, portion of his system which rose to full consciousness in these lectures and continued to remain present in later work. And I believe that Sentimental Conservatism incorporates doctrines that are directly relevant to the proposal that it might be feasible and appropriate to apply principles and results from logical theory into politics, or indeed into any part of life.

2. Summary of the Lectures

I begin with a summary of the doctrine as it emerged in the 1898 lectures. The summary is based primarily upon an early draft, MS 435, but supplemented by MSS 437, 442, and 940; see also similar comments in one of Peirce's reviews for *The Nation* in 1899.²

¹ Maryann Ayim, *Peirce's View of the Roles of Reason and Instinct in Scientific Inquiry*, Shivaji Road, Meerut 250001 India: Anu Prakashan, 1982.

² K.L. Ketner and J.E. Cook (eds.), *Charles Sanders Peirce: Contributions to The Nation: Part Two, 1894-1900*, Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1978, pp. 220-21.

To save time and space I will not provide elaborate supporting quotations, but simply state condensed paraphrases of each element. (The wording here is quite close to that Peirce actually used.) Then I will entertain the idea that these principles of Sentimental Conservatism are defensible.³

- An issue of 'vital importance' is one concerning the great crises or decisions in a person's life.

- The lower animals never reason about vitally important topics; they allow themselves to be guided by their instincts in almost every detail of life, and as a result, they very rarely fall into an error of any kind, and never into a vital error. The mental qualities we most admire in human kind, such as the maiden's delicacy, the mother's devotion, manly courage, are merely instincts and inheritances from the biped who did not yet speak. In contrast, the characters that are most contemptible in humans, such as back biting, treachery, hypocrisy, and thieving, if the students of criminal psychology are right, are effects of reasoning. MS 435:02

- The very theory of reasoning furnishes us with conclusive reasons that on vitally important topics reasoning is out of place, and that reasoning should be limited to unimportant matters.

- Reasoning itself pronounces that it is a fallacy to submit vitally important issues

³ For an introductory overview of Peirce's life and work, see Kenneth Laine Ketner (1987), 'Charles Sanders Peirce,' in: John J. Stuhr (ed.), *Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 13-92. These materials add further evidence for my contention that Sentimental Conservatism was a permanent and fundamental aspect of Peirce's system.

to reason. Mathematics being 'taboo' in these lectures, Peirce 'hinted' at the evidence for this result. MS 435:04

- In regard to the greatest affairs of life, the wise man follows his heart (his sentiments, instincts) and does not trust his head (his reasoning). This should be the method of every man no matter how great his intellect. Even the mightiest of mental giants is foolish to try to regulate his life advantageously by a purely reasoned out theory. MS 435:04

- Common Sense, which is the resultant of the traditional experience of mankind, witnesses unequivocally that the heart is more than the head, and is in fact *everything* in our vitally important concerns. Thus Common Sense agrees with the logical theorem Peirce hesitated to prove because he could not use mathematics in these lectures. MS 435:04-5

- Those persons who think that sentiment has no part in Common Sense forget that the dicta of Common Sense are objective facts, not the way some dyspeptic may feel, but what the healthy, natural, normal democracy thinks. Hence, anyone who proposes a fully intellectualized doctrine as a guide for daily life is a self-deceived person. MS 435:05

- Logic and reasoning are only of secondary importance. An associated common difficulty is that persons become 'puffed-up' with their logical acquirements. It is far from rare to find a young man who ridiculously overrates logic and who is consumed by conceit about superior reasoning powers so that he is completely ruined by that. But comparatively few persons are possessed of any significant amount of talent in reasoning. That is a plain sign that it is not of the first importance to success in life, for were it so, the individual would postpone marriage, and natural selection would act

to breed the organism for vigorous reasoning powers, and they would become common. MS 435:06-8

- Here are two of Peirce's key examples in support of these arguments (from MS 435:05).

1. If, walking in a garden one night, you were suddenly to hear the voice of your sister crying to you to rescue her from a villain, you would not stop to reason out the question of whether it were possible for one mind to cause material waves of sound and for another mind to perceive them. If you did, the problem might probably occupy the remainder of your days.

2. It would be an analogous case if a man underwent a religious experience and heard the call of his Saviour. For him to halt until he has adjusted a philosophical difficulty would be equally imprudent. If on the other hand, a man has had no religious experience, then any religion not an affectation is as yet impossible for him, and the only worthy course is to wait quietly until such experience comes. No amount of speculation can take the place of experience.

- On the other hand, a person who wishes to pursue some special branch of experience, for example 'practical politics,' should not count on logical theory, but should develop a *logica utens*, not a theory, but habits of reasoning developed by actually dealing every day of his life with certain facts, just as a billiard player learns the ways of his game without resort to theories of trigonometry or mechanics. Thus in your own personal pursuits, you have no more use for the theory of logic and reasoning than an expert billiard player has for analytical mechanics. MS 435:12

- True conservatism, which is sentimental conservatism, means not trusting to one's reasonings about questions of vital importance but rather to hereditary instincts and traditional sentiments. Place

before such a conservative arguments to which he can find no adequate reply, and which imply (for instance) that wisdom and virtue call upon him to marry his sister, and though he is unable to answer the arguments logically, he will not act upon their conclusions [THE RATIONALITY SYLLOGISM — K.L.K.], because he believes that tradition and the feelings that tradition and custom have developed in him are safer guides than his own feeble ratiocination. He regards his deepest sentiments as practically infallible. Thus true conservatism is sentimentalism. MS 435:29-30

- An extended example of the principles of Sentimental Conservatism at work: Peirce's review of the Science of Ethics (from MS 435:32-34).

The Science of Ethics is chiefly occupied with reasoning out the basis of morality and questions secondary to that.

There is no *use* in such a project, for we all know what morality is: it is behaving as you were brought up to behave; and to believe in thinking as you have been brought up to think defines *conservatism*. No reasoning is needed to perceive that morality is conservatism.

And conservatism again means that we agree not to trust to our reasoning powers in making moral decisions. To be a moral man is to obey the traditional maxims of your community without hesitation or discussion.

Hence, ethics — which is reasoning out an explanation of morality — is, Peirce would not say, immoral, which would be going too far; but it is composed of the very substance of immorality.

The example of the thief. Two things characterize him: an even more immense conceit in his own reasoning powers than is common, and second a disposition to reason about the basis of morals.

Ethics, then, even if not a positively dangerous study, as it sometimes proves, is as useless a science as can be conceived. But it must be said in favor of ethical writers that they are commonly free from

the nauseating custom of boasting of the utility of their science.

A useless inquiry, provided it is systematic, is pretty much the same as a scientific inquiry. And if a scientific inquiry becomes by any mischance useful, that aspect of it has to be kept carefully out of sight during the investigation, otherwise its hopes of success are fatally cursed.

But as long as ethics is recognized as not being a matter of vital importance or in any way touching the student's conscience, it is to a normal and healthy mind a civilizing and valuable study.

But as soon as a proposition becomes vitally important, first it is sunk to the condition of a mere utensil, and second it ceases altogether to be scientific because concerning matters of vital importance reasoning is at once an impertinence toward its subject matter and a treason against itself.

Peirce might be willing to make a single exception to the principle of Sentimental Conservatism, and perhaps to admit that logic could be at once both scientific *and* vitally important. The reason is that if we fall into the error of believing that vitally important questions are to be decided by logic (the theory of reasoning), the only hope for salvation lies in Formal Logic which demonstrates in the clearest manner that reasoning itself testifies to its own ultimate subordination to sentiment or instinct.

- There is one vitally important truth that is supreme above all others. It is that vitally important truths are the merest trifles, for they are an individual's concern or business. But each of us are only mere cells of the social organism. Psychological analysis also shows that there is nothing that distinguishes our personal identity except our faults and limitations. It is my highest endeavor to eliminate my blind selfish will by contemplating upon those universal things with which philosophy and theoretical science deals. That is, if one embraces a conservative sentiment-

alism, and rates one's reasoning powers for the very mediocre price they would bring, then your highest goal is to recognize a goal higher than strictly personal interests, a conception of duty which completes your personality by melting it into the neighboring parts of the cosmos. If this sounds unintelligible, just take for comparison the first good mother of a family that you encounter, and ask whether she is not a sentimentalist, whether you would wish her to be otherwise, and whether you can find a better formula with which to outline her portrait other than the one just given. MS 435:35-37

- Thus it is that while reasoning and the science of reasoning strenuously proclaim the subordination of reasoning to sentiment, the very supreme commandment of sentiment, which is also the supreme commandment of the Buddhisto-Christian religion, is that man should generalize, should become welded into the universal continuum, which is what true reasoning consists in. This does not reinstate reasoning, because this generalization should come about, not merely in one's cognition, which is but the superficial film of one's being, but objectively in the deepest emotional springs of one's life. In fulfilling this command man prepares himself for transmutation into a new form of life, the joyful Nirvana in which the discontinuities of his will shall have all but disappeared. MS 435:37

3. Discussion

What was the principle that Formal Logic demonstrates which testifies to the subordination of logic to instinct? It is found in Peirce's doctrine of the types of reasoning, the title of lecture two (MS 441) of the Cambridge Conferences series. He divided reasoning into three kinds. Deduction traces the consequences of hypotheses already given. Induction, which incorporates deduction, is the self-correcting

method of experimental study. The third kind of reasoning he designated Abduction, which is guessing or acquiring a hypothesis. Of these three types, abduction is the only one in which new information may enter. Neither deduction nor induction could function without abduction, and a healthy scientific logic requires all three: abduction to provide a hypothesis, deduction with which one gains a knowledge of the consequences of a hypothesis, and induction which tests those consequences. But scientific logic can do nothing lacking a hypothesis. Peirce's answer to the question of the origin of hypotheses is that we have an instinct for relatively accurate guessing. Concerning any single complex question, Peirce observed that there are an infinite number of answers relevant to it. He concluded that a human instinct, developed over eons of evolutionary experience, is the means whereby we can guess relatively closely to the ways of nature. And 'sentiment' is but a synonym for such an 'instinct'. Hence the theory of reasoning itself testifies that it is based upon sentiment.

Perhaps the most widely known Peircean doctrine is his definition of truth as what the community of scientific intelligences would be brought to converge upon in the long run. Almost equally well known is what he called logical fallibilism, the notion that one can never know that THIS is the end of that long run. This principle is sometimes expressed as: We can never know that we know. Such logical fallibilism is distinguished from practical infallibilism, which concerns that on which we are prepared to act. It seems to me that these ideas are quite prominent in Peirce's surprising claim that in matters of personal vital importance, we should not trust to theory (which contains only logical fallibility) but instead trust to instinct (the home of practical infallibility). A suppressed premise in such surprising examples is this: In these issues of Vital Importance our theoretical studies have not reached, even closely, the long run. From

such considerations one can draw the conclusion that applications of theory designed to supplant instinct should be undertaken with the utmost caution and slowness. Call this the SLOWNESS PRINCIPLE. It could be revised this way: In Vitally Important cases in which theory is not yet *practically* infallible, the most reasonable thing to do is to trust one's instinct. Theory can perhaps in the long run bring us to practical infallibility, but only through a slow evolutionary process.

Persons working with the application of logic into political situations often have occasion to bring up a particular syllogism, which can be stated like this (where X is an expert logician, R is the recipient of the proposed application, a is an act, and s is a situation):

- i. X (speaking to R): These arguments show that according to my theory of rationality, a is the correct thing to do in s;
- ii. In s you haven't done a (or you did not-a).
- iii. Therefore, you are irrational.

I have noted in the summary above that Peirce presented something similar to this: I call it the RATIONALITY SYLLOGISM. We see this Syllogism at work when, for example, students of political dialogue make comments like, 'the speech of the member of Parliament was loaded with fallacies, so it was irrational.' In effect Peirce suggested that this could be a wrong conclusion, for logic is out of place in such situations involving vitally important decisions. I suggest another possibility. Persons inclined to use the Syllogism of Rationality might wish to consider that one of the premisses may be false, namely some expert's hypothesis about the nature of rationality. Indeed the presence of such a syllogism might be seen as a strong disconfirmation of that particular expert hypothesis about the nature of reasoning. That is to say, the hypothesis is shown failing to capture the exact nature of what is happening in s.

The proper upshot might in some cases be that X's theory should be revised, as opposed to a stance of dogmatism about X's present theory of rationality as exemplified in proceeding to call R and friends names such as 'irrational.' One could also say that this syllogism is related to the Principle of Slowness because it might assume a rush to utility — a desire to manipulate the world into being rational NOW in terms of THIS hypothesis about rationality. And any hypothesis about rationality that systematically excludes sentiment is likely to be in need of revision.

Another idea implicit in these remarks by Peirce is his doctrine that a good scientist, like a good Buddhist, has a duty to subordinate ego to the search for truth. This position is one defended by Peirce from his earliest works until his death. It is strongly implicit in one of his best-known essays, 'The Fixation of Belief.' You may recall that there he discussed four ways of resolving doubts. The first three, which could collectively be labelled as egocentric methods, incorporate only personal resources such as tenacity, or ego's respect for some person or idea or group; and all three make no distinction between correct and incorrect doubt resolutions. The fourth method, that of science, is in effect the unified application of Abduction, Deduction, and Induction mentioned above. But the particular feature of science that is emphasized in 'The Fixation of Belief' is subordination of ego's desires, hopes, wishes, aspirations. In place of those egocentric, or arbitrary elements, in the fourth method resolution of doubt takes place in terms of nonpersonal factors collectively known as Reality; and the longterm aim of users of this method is to purge all egotistical elements from thinking and replace them with Truth, that is accurate representations of Reality. In this process, Reality is not passive; indeed persons who have the will to learn, which for Peirce is the basis of scientific mentality, are considered to be in effect under the final causal control

of Reality. The contact with Reality in this process, of course, is through the instinct of Abduction, in the context of an intense desire to test all such guesses and to revise in light of those tests. Throughout, self-control in the sense of placing selfishness and arbitrary egotism under the control of something external to ego, is a vital part of the process, hence the strong parallel with Buddhism and its insistence that the ego is a poisonous source of deception and nonreality. In Peirce's eyes, scientific inquiry is understood as an accelerated form of evolution. The religious tone of this approach is no accident. Peirce offered a number of strong considerations in support of his claim that science presupposes religion. Perhaps the chief reason for this idea is that every scientist that seeks the truth presupposes that nature is intelligible. While I have not examined all aspects of Sentimental Conservatism, these few considerations support one of the theses I proposed above: that the doctrine of Sentimental Conservatism was implicit in Peirce's early works, hence in 1898 it was not a new addition to his system. Is this a topic of merely historical interest? I think not, for Peirce's approach seems relevant to a number of issues of contemporary *theoretical* interest, for instance: applications of logic into life situations (discussed above), the discussion of expert systems by Dreyfus and Dreyfus⁴ or Benner's results in the theory of nursing practice.⁵ These works provide evidence that accounts of rationality in terms of rule-governed behavior are inadequate, and show connections with Peirce's discussion of the role of sentiment in rationality. But

⁴ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Stuart E. Dreyfus, *Mind Over Machine: The Power of Human Intuition and Expertise in the Era of the Computer*, New York: Free Press, 1986. See also Ketner, K.L., 'Peirce and Turing: comparisons and conjectures,' *Semiotica* 68, 33-61.

⁵ Patricia Benner, *From Novice to Expert: Excellence and Power in Clinical Nursing*, Amsterdam: Addison-Wesley, 1984.

there is no space to consider it further here.

Can we accept Peirce's general conclusion that logical theory should only be 'applied' to the Vital Issues of life and to activities such as politics with the utmost caution and slowness, and that it is a gross error to rush the process? Of course this is a large issue, but for the sake of stimulating our discussions, I would be happy to serve in the role of defender of Peirce's claims. Toward that end perhaps I can offer a bit of evidence from our own era which will support Peirce's contention that we are now in the rather unhappy position of having applied the theory of reasoning much too far in advance of its natural evolution into a state of readiness for such utility. I suggest that today we have abundant evidence that we are in this condition on a rather wide scale.

Consider the widespread destruction of our planet's environmental resources, or the use of rationalized systems of life (such as are reflected in political bureaucracies, collapsing Stalinism being a ubiquitous instance) in place of traditional systems of life, in short the whole mess that constitutes our present overcrowded, polluted, and politically fanatical situation.⁶

Maybe the upshot of Peirce's principles here would be a campaign throughout the planet to allow life to return to more traditional modes, or at least to relax the impassioned pace of our drive to regulate our lives exclusively in terms of the THEORY of everything from agriculture to zeugma. That is to say, there is the theory of life, and there is life itself; the former is not a replacement for the latter.

⁶ A classic argument that our era is in fact precisely in the grip of violation of Peirce's principle of 'secular slowness' for application of theory to practice may be found in Walker Percy's remarks in 'The Delta Factor' and 'The Loss of the Creature,' in his essays collected as *The Message in the Bottle*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975.

