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Conversation and The Infinite Long Run

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Conversation is a significant notion in the work of Charles S. Peirce: from his view of the history of philosophy as the conversations of the philosophers to his account of the sign as necessarily addressed, from his understanding of hypothesis as question to his construal of science as taking place in a community of inquiry, there are always (minimally) two voices—two sources of ideas—engaged attentively with each other and committed to discovering the consequences of their exchange. There is much disagreement, and much doubt, in such a process, and—as for Peirce’s emblematic two tramps who leave messages for each other along the road of inquiry—much building on the work of predecessors. In his own exchanges with colleagues and friends, Peirce was a fine reviewer of the work of other people, and the evidence shows that his discussions of their work—often in richly reflective letters—mattered deeply to his correspondents. Alongside these facts, we might set this other: much of his writing takes the form of series of lecture series or papers; though he wished to produce a system in the form of a philosophical treatise, it is clear that these more local modes with their invitation to immediate uptake suited him better. Through them, he had the greatest impact during his life, and, while it is standard practice now to consult the mass of manuscript writings for buried treasures, it is
they that show how Peirce was in constant dialogue with himself. As Manley Thompson demonstrated many years ago, Peirce’s habit was to explore in one series of papers or lectures a problem thrown up in the previous one. Even in silent solitary meditation, he writes, one’s thoughts are addressed to one’s self of the next instant. It is the pervasive theme of conversation along with this habit of dialogue that make not only the title, but the conception, of this book so felicitous.

It consists of twelve chapters, each the upshot of conversations between the two principal authors or between one of them with other colleagues. Divided into three parts—Conversations I on the metaphysics, Conversations II on the epistemology, and Conversations III on Peirce and religion—the book is remarkable for overcoming its multiple occasions in a cable of interwoven threads: closure vs. openness, the infinitely long run, the relations of “chance, love, and logic,” and continuity are the Peircean themes par excellence whose bearing on standard philosophical topics is continually demonstrated.

The most satisfying chapters are those examining conversations between Peirce and other philosophers—from the past (Berkeley), with his contemporaries (Josiah Royce, John Dewey, William James, and Karl Pearson), and discussions of his work by ours (Joseph Margolis and Richard Rorty). The compare-and-contrast method enables the authors to draw on their shared formidable knowledge of Peirce’s writings, illuminating the issues with an admirable combination of textual precision and transversal understanding. Two painstaking chapters by Housman, on the “dynamic object” and the beginning of interpretation, take us to the heart of the difficulties in assessing the relation between Peirce’s metaphysics and his semiotic: no reader of Peirce can avoid this matter and, while these topics have been discussed frequently, their juxtaposition with the debates regarding the history of Pragmatism is particularly revealing. The end of the book consists of an eloquent case, made by Anderson, for not bracketing out Peirce’s theism, leading to a final chapter staging a response from Peirce to fundamentalism. This is a pragmatic use of Peirce, making a pair with Anderson’s account of Peirce’s objections to Pearson’s social utilitarian views of science. Both chapters have a strongly polemical undercurrent; they are addressed firmly to the public forum, and both rest on the philosophical work done in the other chapters to demonstrate how what I call the Peircean thematic (mentioned earlier) helps to cut through the impasses of contemporary social debate.
The conversations with other philosophers serve to set up the terms in which the discussions of the later chapters are pursued. Thus, Peirce’s review of Fraser’s edition of Berkeley identifies the crucial contrast between realism and nominalism, the latter being the view that reality consists exclusively of singulars, that it is independent of mind and external to it. This is the view presupposed in what has been called the so-called gap between representation and the real, a view against which Peirce argued throughout his work. Peirce sets out from here on a quest to define an account of representation in which the knowing of an object and the object of knowledge are continuous, though not assimilable, with one another. This will be a nonidealist realism that can include singular existents alongside the postulate of generality, hence authorizing science’s quest for laws of nature without abandoning the possibility of a world that can surprise inquiry. The second chapter sets out to study the ways in which the early pragmatists influenced one another (16), as against their “tendency” to polemical self-identity. Peirce, writes Anderson, marked out a “middle-ground” between Royce and Dewey in respect of two key issues: the issue of method and the consequent assessment of his realism. Thus, Royce considers that reality is “a fixed, unified whole and the story to be told about it—the truth—[is] equally fixed and whole” (22). As against this, Dewey takes an experimentalist position in which reality is the product of a transactional account of experience, arguing that “the empiricist’s epistemological concern about whether an experiencer can reach some external world is unnecessary because it is in experience that we do find nature” (62–63). Thus, the human history of inquiry is in a relation of reciprocal constraint with the natural history of the world. But Dewey, who inclined more towards a historicist understanding of the outcomes of science than did Peirce, was also inclined to proclaim the “disinterest” of pragmatism in ontology and metaphysics (36). It is this aspect of Dewey’s thought that provides the central plank of Richard Rorty’s repudiation of Peirce. But where, for Rorty, the “social conversation is the only source of constraint on . . . further conversation” (69), Dewey “argued minimally for something more” (64), since not to do so would involve a return to nominalism. Hence, Dewey “never relinquished his belief that inquirers were constrained by the real” (60), and his two central affinities with Peircean realism were “his belief in the reality of habits and in the reality of possibility” (34).

Were we to set aside the question of the real, we would be left with an outright constructivism such as our authors find in Joseph
Margolis’s assessment of Peirce (chapter 3), as well as in the radical pragmatism of Rorty. As we discover in chapter 4, the importance of conversation can be overstated. For Rorty, “philosophy is conversation that constructs stories about the way things are” (68). But Peirce would view Rorty as a nominalist for whom no general is real. Now the problem for Peirce in nominalism is that it recognizes as reality only an inchoate bunch of singular facts. But if “there are no real laws or generals in the cosmos, then there can be no heading toward truth even as an ideal or regulative hope” (106); scientific practice would be self-contradictory, unable to give a coherent account of itself. Peirce cannot tolerate any practice of philosophy that takes no account of the practice of science; indeed, he considered the advances of nineteenth-century science to be central to a principled reworking of metaphysics and epistemology. The question we are asking when we ask what is real and how we know it changes as a result. Induction is promoted above deduction in the actual conduct of scientific investigation, with the result that truth is modalized—probabilistic rather than absolute. The theory of evolution demonstrates the need to take into account the ever-changing dynamism of nature and to abandon the static views characteristic of both nominalism and Platonism. Significant in this shift from a static and absolute view of reality is the operation of chance, evident in geology, in evolutionary biology, and in statistics—a field in which Peirce himself made a major contribution. Likewise, experimental science demonstrates the self-correcting nature of inquiry. We get things wrong, frequently and demonstrably, but we cannot conduct inquiry without believing that there is a right answer and, hence, without the means to detect error (and without a way of accounting for these means).

Peirce’s realism holds that there are real habits in nature; they are the way existents behave. Regularity is subject to the operations of chance and to the infinite variability of similars. As Dewey puts it in *Experience and Nature* (1925), “Unless nature had regular habits, persistent ways, so compacted that they time, measure, and give rhythm and recurrence to transitive flux, meanings, recognizable characters, could not be” (65). It also holds that the nature of reality is relational and continuous. In chapter 6, Anderson discusses the proposition that this dimension is not just posited theoretically, but that it enters into experience through perception. This is a position identified with William James and given the name “radical empiricism.” The chapter is devoted to investigating the points of agreement between Peirce and James in this matter. While Peirce insisted that mind is continuous,
not contained discretely in individual brains, it is also important for him to argue that individual experience is a driver of collective inquiry, for, without this, “mere” conversation would take over the process. However, this entails a modification of the tenets of empiricism. The modification turns on two principal points: First, perception for Peirce is not a series of discrete events; it is a process whereby the percept accedes to judgment and thus to inquiry, all stages of this process being fallible, subject to testing and correction. Second, that which we perceive cannot be confined to “particular or singular entities or qualia” (103); we must be able to perceive relations and continuity. Laws must be features of human experience as such: “[U]nder Peirce’s version of perception, the reality of generals and of laws makes an appearance not only at the end of inquiry but in the very perceptions from which inquiry springs” (108). Only on some such basis can Peirce make sense of “the possibility and the importance of a history of inquiry that is capable of development and self-correction” (108).

It is not only the findings of scientific research that affect the work of philosophy; importantly for Peirce, it is its technical methods. In experimental science, we do not deal with raw sense impressions, but with data manipulated for observation. This manipulation—by instruments, let us say rain gauges, weathercocks, or microscopes (these are common examples adduced by Peirce)—mediates the rawness of the world, making it available for chemical and physical investigation, and for the sophisticated techniques of measuring and counting in which Peirce himself was a specialist. What we see when we measure the curvature of the earth’s surface by using the specialized instruments developed by Peirce the “pendulum swinger” is quite different from what we see with the naked eye. The issue of perception changes as a result of taking such things into account in our reading of Peirce, but how he himself would have articulated discussions of natural perception with his understanding of mediated observation remains a matter of conjecture. I believe he took it for granted pervasively, because he takes instruments to be signs on the grounds that (a) they mediate perception and (b) they make material available to interpretation in a form in which it can be processed. Anderson does not engage in such conjecture, preferring to remain within the terms Peirce sets. By 1903 when he delivered the Harvard Lectures that are the subject of chapter 6, Peirce had given up his scientific work and was addressing himself exclusively to his philosophical colleagues. He used these lectures to set out a systematic first philosophy that could
integrate into Pragmatism both the formal logic he had urged on Royce and the metaphysics he had urged on Dewey. In them, too, he urged the importance of a “truly scientific philosophy” and developed an account of perception that speaks directly to that of James, on the one hand inflecting his speculative phenomenology through an appeal to empiricism and, on the other, revising empiricism in line with his realism.

I believe that the restatement of the issue of perception as scientific observation suggests a solution to the problem discussed by Housman in chapter 7: “[A]t what stage does the pre-interpreted begin to be interpreted, and how does the pre-interpreted function” to constrain interpretation (120)? In this chapter, the question is the articulation of the “immediate object” with the “dynamic object,” where the immediate object is the object as interpreted, and the dynamic object is that which initiates, exceeds, and at the same time constrains our interpretations. It is the condition on interpretation, which “does not vanish” with the sequence of immediate objects; “otherwise revision would not occur” (119). Housman restates his question in several forms: the version just quoted counts as (i). I construe (ii) on the following premises: if, as Peirce insists, an encounter with “something” is “forced upon” us, then this encounter falls under the category of secondness, “which is dyadic, precognitive and therefore pre-interpreted” (121). (ii) How then does “secondness” become “thirdness”; how does it enter into semeiosis? The question is summed up in (iii): How do percepts initiate interpretation (125)? He suggests an answer in Peirce’s distinction between “antecipuum” and “ponecipuum,” which are ways of naming stages of a process rather than distinct classes. This process is Housman’s answer: it “nudge[s] interpretation from the external side” of semeiosis (128, my emphasis); and again “the Peircean ideas of dynamic objects, percepts, immediate objects, and perceptual judgments provide a way to understand the crucial place of both sides of the interpretation—the objective and the intersubjective” (131, my emphasis). The formulation seems to me somewhat unfortunate: while infinitesimally reduced, there is still a purported gap between the real and its representation. Hence nominalism persists.

Housman’s discussion of the issues raised in chapters 5 and 7 is fastidious, but not entirely satisfying for this reason. However, the issue is unresolved by Peirce himself. As Christopher Hookway writes, Peirce was “wrestling with issues of genuine difficulty” and was never entirely happy with his solutions. He suggests that Peirce introduces the term “percipuum,” which “fus[es] the percept and the
perceptual judgment into a single whole,” as an attempt to prevent the consequences of “an oversimple dichotomy” between the “pouring in” of sense data and the conceptual processing of those data. The *given* of perceptual experience is a “phenomenologically rich complex of the sensory and the conceptual.” The term *experience* is important here. As we see in Dewey, experience is neither inside nor outside, and in Sandra Rosenthal’s formulation “the perceptual field, as it arises in the context of human activity, is an ontologically thick, resisting field of objects which are *essentially related to the interactional horizon of our world* and which allow for the very structure of the sensing which gives access to them.” Note “human” and “our.” Experience is species-specific because perception is species-specific: my dogs do not experience the ring on the telephone, but they do experience the ring at the front door and respond as to a sign, with habitual behavior. Or to contrary effect, we might adduce the example of a bird that attempts to fly into the reflection of a tree in a pane of glass—an outward clash indeed, with no aspect that can be processed semeiotically by the bird, and hence nothing from which it can learn. As Hookway writes, “[A]ny length of experience, no matter how short, will contain elements of memory and anticipation”; the bird’s clash with the pane of glass (even supposing that it survives) is not an experience in the useful sense, whereas the dogs’ hearing of the doorbell is.6 Housman’s discussion of the temporality of perception has much in common with Hookway’s, despite the contrast discerned between them by Rosenthal.7 Hookway’s, however, avoids the trap of hunting down the “pre-interpreted,” as indeed does Rosenthal’s: “[W]hat is ‘given’ at the most fundamental level of perceptual awareness is in fact a ‘taken’, and it incorporates both the nature of the taking and the nature of what is taken.”

Brute reality is that up against which we bump in the surprises of experience for which the present state of our knowledge cannot prepare us. These bumping experiences are indeed, as Housman writes, instances of secondness. But Peirce does not ask how secondness becomes thirdness (question (ii)); he asks how thirdness provides the means for designating secondness. These means are indexical, and they are always already signs. This does not deny the existence of brute reality; it merely claims that only under experience does brute reality also partake of signhood. If it is an object, it is object-of-a-sign, whether this sign be a percept or something more—or indeed less—articulate. Hookway points out that objects are necessarily intentional objects, and that, in Peirce’s work, perception is centrally the issue of reference.9 Questions (i) and (iii),
I suggest, are answered by adducing the transformation of natural perception into scientific observation. A surprising event, an unexpected appearance—think of Alexander Fleming and the discovery of the unknown bacterium that was to become penicillin—incites examination with instruments and chemical techniques. No doubt this process displays parallels with the process of interpreting a spot on the horizon, the example adduced by Housman, but the scientific and technical examples are illuminating in two particular respects: (i) Fleming’s microscope and the further techniques he used for examining the properties of penicillium are signs devised for the purposes of inquiry; and (ii) if we take as paradigmatic the scientific examples, rather than the natural ones, then they bring to our attention the fact that natural, unaided perception is not for all that naïve or untutored. A “brief process of education” is all that is needed. We at least ask a question: What is this? We know that we do not know.

The spatial metaphor that underpins much of empiricism and beyond that tradition, the millennial debates in metaphysics, determines a form of the issue that Peirce tried tirelessly to dismantle, though the traditional language of philosophy sometimes betrays him: How do the things outside our cranium come to form the contents of our minds? The inside–outside dichotomy determines the ideal–real dilemma and hence the fantasy of perfect truth, knowledge that allegedly mirrors nature. I have discerned this metaphor in vestigial form in Housman’s chapter 7, and I also discern it in his chapter 5: Did Peirce, he asks, “have a vision of a reality that functions as an extra-mental condition not exhausted by the interpretants that render it intelligible?” (80, my emphasis). The inexhaustible condition of all thought in general is “external-ity” (98, my emphasis). I point this out not to rebuke Housman, but to note how persistent the standard language of philosophy is in the face of attempts to change it. Peirce’s attempt to change it lies in his reworking of the dilemmas of knowledge in terms of time. This is clear in Peirce’s choice of vocabulary in his account of the two objects of semiosis: they are immediate and dynamic, the former registered in one sign event whose interpretation is provisional, already inciting the next, the latter mobile, its ontology, we might say, that of cosmic time. Housman does a formidable job in teasing out this issue, arguing persuasively as he does so that Peirce’s is a “process philosophy”: “what is knowable as reality is temporally spread as or in sequences of events” (77).

We do not need to ask what is purportedly internal and external to the mind, or to thought, and indeed our authors avoid the trap
laid by the metaphor in their usage in chapter 3, asking instead what is outside the human and outside its constructs. If there are two dimensions to reality, as Peirce insists, they are governed by—or stretched between—human and cosmic time, our knowledge of the object being limited by and to the former (whether the micro time of perception or the macro time of history), but always set against the latter, which is, in Housman’s felicitous phrase, “the infinite escape from closure on the part of interpretation” (99). The consequence of not grasping this is the “degeneration of pragmatism,” those versions of pragmatism that confine themselves to human affairs.11 Any such confinement might well conclude that conversation is all there is.

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NOTES


4. Hookway, Peirce, 166.


7. Ibid., 194. Rosenthal is referring to an earlier discussion by Housman than the one contained in the book under review.


