

PROLEGOMENA TO A PREHISTORY OF PRAGMATISM

Karolína Šedivcová

Faculty of Humanities of Charles University
karol.sedivcova@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Pragmatism is said to be born in the early 1870s within the sessions of Cambridge Metaphysical Club, having as its foundation Peirce's 1877/78 papers "The Fixation of belief" and "How to make our ideas clear". However, as shown in this paper, pragmatist ideas published in these works had already been presented in Peirce's earlier texts. This paper is focused on Peirce's pre-pragmatist thinking presented in the "Treatise on Metaphysics" (1861, W 1: 57-84). This work, moreover, shows that the pre-pragmatist ideas are closely connected to metaphysics and stay therefore as basis of all scientific thinking. It will be shown that the later pragmatist texts use the exact same notions and ideas as the "Treatise" does, marked only by the difference in terminology.

Keywords: C. S. Peirce; metaphysics; pragmatism; belief

This paper aims to give account of Peirce's thinking before the birth of so-called pragmatism. In writing, the word 'pragmatism' was first used by William James in his "Philosophical Conception and practical results" in 1898 with the remark about Peircean origins of this word used during the Cambridge Metaphysical Club sessions of the early 1870s (De Waal 2001: 24). The Cambridge Metaphysical Club had among its members also Alexander Bain and Nicolas St. John Green, whose ideas are said to influence Peirce's conception of pragmatism, so that he later called Nicolas St. John Green the grandfather of pragmatism (Fisch 2005: 7; c. 1907, CP 5.12).¹ Nevertheless, by reading Peirce's earlier texts from the early 1860s, it becomes obvious that the main line of thinking of pragmatism was expressed even before the Metaphysical Club began to meet.

The origins of pragmatism are said to spring up from late 1870s' papers "The Fixation of Belief" (1877, EP 1:

109-123) and mainly "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878, EP 1: 124-141; Goodman 2005: 2). There, Peirce links 'meaning' and 'practice' together: "there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice" (1878, EP 1: 131). In the latter paper Peirce also formulates his "pragmatic maxim" by stating that meaning of a conception is depended on practical bearings the object of the conception has.²

These are the so-called origins of pragmatism. But by studying Peirce's early texts, we can find that pragmatist ideas linking meaning with practice presumably originating in the late 1870s, are presented even in the 1860s. This is most particularly the case of Peirce's "Treatise on Metaphysics" (1861, W 1: 57-84), to which we may now turn our attention.

I.

In the "Treatise on Metaphysics", Peirce defines metaphysics as the analysis of conceptions (1861, W 1: 63). Metaphysics so conceived is that which precedes all science, does not come from experience and is focused on knowledge of primal truths, which are fundamental conditions of all the science (1861, W 1: 59).

The value of metaphysics lies in its practical usage, which Peirce calls the knowledge of the Perfect³ (1861, W 1: 62). Such knowledge cannot be gained by any other science but metaphysics since metaphysics does not derive its conceptions from any system but "from the thoughts as they presented in their logical form". Metaphysics therefore is the study of logical relations of conceptions, therefore it is the analysis of conceptions (1861, W 1: 63).

Because metaphysics is the analysis of conceptions and its value lies in its practical usage, we can accept

¹ According to Fisch (2005: 23) Peirce was acquainted by Alexander Bain even before he finally started with his pragmatist way of thinking. In "Cognition series" papers from 1868 some links may be detected, but they were not developed. Historically, Peirce's thinking in late 1870s could really be influenced by Bain's publications or thinking but considering the period of early 1860s, which this paper would be primarily focused on below, it is at least doubtful since both worked simultaneously. Nicholas St. John Green started to publish his work in 1870.

² "Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." (1878, EP 1: 132)

³ The knowledge of the Perfect is a knowledge which, writes Peirce, we do not have *à priori* nor we had obtained it *à posteriori*, therefore, we could not have a representation of it – it is in our immediate consciousness accessible for uncovering only by metaphysics (1861, W 1: 62).

Peirce's criticism of the anchoring of words to fixed meanings by definitions (which are said to be propositions signifying what the thing, or its meaning, is [1861, W 1: 58]). Peirce claims: "I believe in mooring our words by certain applications and letting them change their meaning as our conceptions of the things to which we have applied them progress" (ibid.).

This concept of, let us say, applied meaning, is closely related to the theory of faith. Peirce, in the context of his definition of metaphysics, expresses the importance of faith since, according to him, "the faith is inherent in the very idea of the attainment of truth" (1861, W 1: 78) - and metaphysics is the knowledge of primal truths. There is a relation of interdependence between knowledge and faith: "Wherever there is knowledge, there is Faith. Wherever there is Faith (properly speaking) there is knowledge." (ibid.). It seems that the faith is the guarantee of the truthfulness of meaning.

All knowledge is hence relative, we know things by their relation to us, to our faith. Therefore, in every act of knowledge, the inference is present. Inference is the means of thinking, knowing, containing premises, and for accepting any premise as true faith is required (ibid.). Peirce considers faith as "the recognition by consciousness of itself (ibid.), and

there can be no true without judgment, and no judgment without the conscious act of judging and assenting. By itself the mere procedure of reasoning cannot generate truth. Premises must be supplied to be reasoned upon, and in the very process of investigation commitment must be made to the working criteria of intelligibility." (Esposito 1980: 39)

This perspective, that the founding premises must be based on faith, is called metaphysical fideism (Esposito 1980: 38; De Tienne 1989: 393). The crucial point following from this perspective is, that since each act of knowledge is based solely on inference, our knowledge cannot be absolutely certain (Peirce finds this even in Kant's theory of judgment [1861, W 1: 75]). Why:

Relative cognition is the recognition of our relations to things. All cognition of objects is relative, that is we know things only in their relation to us. Every cognition must have an object (the subject of the proposition). The faculties whereby we become conscious of our relation to things are known as perceptions or senses. Therefore, every cognition contains a sensual element. Now, the information of mere sensation is a chaotic manifold, while every cognition must be brought into the unity of one thought. Therefore, every cognition involves an operation on the data. An operation upon data resulting in cognition is an inference. (ibid.)

The statement that our knowledge is not certain because it is based on inference is in fact not axiomatic nor demonstrable, because it is itself the result of a chain of inferences based on hypothetical grounds,⁴ therefore the contrary can be possibly established – this is what constitutes the validity of faith (1861, W 1: 76). In summary, we can assume that because faith is required by every premise, it is present in every premise. Therefore, faith is the assumption of knowledge, because knowledge is based on the inference drawn from premises. But because faith keeps the possibility for premise being otherwise, all our knowledge is only probable and potentially open to doubt.

Peirce defines faith as (1861, W 1: 78):

- (i) the recognition by consciousness of itself; [...] the strength of the faculty by which abstractions are conceived;
- (ii) the hearing of the testimony of consciousness, which develops into trust in every man till there is reason to distrust and a spirit of obedience to the Law of God;
- (iii) the vigour of that part of the mind which is in communication with the eternal verities.

He also claims that the "study of consciousness is the examination of abstractions by analysis of conceptions" (1861, W 1: 79). There is a close relation between ab-

⁴ According to Esposito, early Peirce considers faith as an act of hypothesizing, which is necessary for the attainment of so-called "man's truth". (Esposito 1980: 40)

straction and conception since abstraction is accessible only by the analysis of conceptions. Conceptions are derived from thoughts considered in their logical forms (1861, W 1: 62), i.e. in abstractions. Because faith is the recognition by consciousness of itself, because it is the hearing of the testimony of consciousness, we need faith to be able to study abstractions in their manifestations, in thoughts, since “abstractions are revealed in consciousness” (1861, W 1: 72).

We can therefore say that if we need faith to study abstractions in their concrete manifestation, then, because the analysis of conceptions is the study of these concrete manifestation, faith is required for this analysis itself. Hence, since the analysis of conception is metaphysics, therefore, metaphysics requires faith.

Faith, on the one hand, stands as a ground of all knowledge, while, on the other hand, it comes to be known by metaphysics itself. Faith is not immediate or ungrounded – there is always some reason to believe: In “Treatise on Metaphysics”, Peirce postulates two reasons for believing in a statement: “[i] because there is something in the fact itself which makes it credible; or [ii] because we know something of the character of the witness”⁵ (1861, W 1: 78).

II.

Now, what happens if we replace the word “faith” with the word “belief”? Clearly, we are getting to the conception of Peirce’s pragmatism as presented in his later texts usually considered to be the beginning of pragmatist thought.

According to Peirce, there are two main functions of pragmatism: (i) to give an expeditious riddance of all ideas essentially unclear; and (ii) to lend support, and help to render distinct, ideas essentially clear, but more or less difficult of apprehension (1907, CP 5.206). Since

⁵ For comparison, in “The Fixation of Belief” (1877, EP 1: 109-123) Peirce postulates four ways of fixation of belief, while the first two (method of tenacity and authority) could be subsumed under the (ii) knowing something of the witness, the last two (*a priori* and scientific method) under the (i) credibility of fact.

pragmatism is not a doctrine but a method for rendering ideas distinct (De Waal, 2001: 26), it fulfills the same function which Peirce in the “Treatise” ascribed to the metaphysical analysis of conceptions.

In “How to make our Ideas Clear” (1878, EP 1: 124-141) Peirce presented his pragmatic maxim:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (1878, EP 1: 132)

In fact, it tells us that any conception used in philosophy, science or whatever, “cannot mean anything other than the totality of the practical consequences we can conceive the object of that conception to have. ‘Practical consequences’ mean experiential effects that can influence future rational or deliberative conduct.” (De Waal 2001: 25). Therefore, it is a maxim of normative logic.

Pragmatic maxim is clearly focused on the meaning of a conception, which we are conceiving the object of the conception to have. It is solely a criterion of meaning. The meaning is not just “given”, it is “nothing but conceivable practical effects”, and these are conceived according to the belief we have.

Meaning is such as to involve some reference to a purpose. But meaning is attributed to representamens alone, and the only kind of representamen which has a definite professed purpose is an “argument”. The professed purpose of an argument is to determine an acceptance of its conclusion, and it quite accords with general usage to call the conclusion of an argument its meaning (1907, CP 5.175).

The conditions of all thinking – drawing conclusions from premises – and acting in accordance with it, are beliefs, which are fixed, and the impulse for their change is the irritation of doubt. Belief therefore makes the uncovering of conception’s meaning (by thinking) accessible for us. Therefore, it stands as a base for the analysis of conception.

A belief has three properties: (i) it is something we are aware of, (ii) it appeases the irritation of doubt, (iii) it involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of

action. "Belief is only a stadium of mental action, an effect upon our nature due to thought, which will influence future thinking." (1878, EP 1: 129)

Faith, says De Tienne, is a grounded belief: "all that consciousness has to do is to recognize itself and accept its own testimony" (De Tienne 1989: 394). Faith stands as a ground of all knowledge and comes to be known by metaphysics itself. Faith is a complex state of mental actions constituting one's own beliefs. We are able to change the belief after the irritation of doubt quite easily, but to change faith as a complex system that our knowledge is based on requires more than that – it requires to change the whole system of thinking, the whole metaphysics we employ, since it is the faith that is grounding our beliefs, including the metaphysical ones.

III.

Anyway, it seems that even though in Peirce's early texts, pragmatism is not explicitly named or defined, the ideas presented there are based on the same ground as in later so-called pragmatist texts, although they are not as sophisticated as that later, for example in terminological anchoring. But the importance of belief, that is not given but anchored by specific methods, is accented in both periods.

If we would have imagined the situation without having a belief, we would not be able to uncover the meaning of conceptions, which is being set according to the situation when the conception is used. Therefore, the semiotic thinking necessary for living, surviving and cooperating in human world would be impossible – we would not be able to understand not only each other, but even ourselves, since we would not be able to think at all. It is not possible to think without signs (1868, EP 1: 30), and for being able to think in signs, we have to be able to analyse conceptions of signs we use when thinking. Therefore, belief is the necessary condition for thinking.

These ideas resulting from Peirce's pragmatist texts on the one hand, and from his early texts on the other, more importantly, must be taken as the basics of whole

Peircean philosophy, because they stand as a ground for his logic, semiotics, and metaphysics.

The aim of this paper was to show that Peirce's ideas of pragmatism presented above result from much older ideas belonging to the very beginning of Peirce's thought. And, most importantly, I would say that without these earlier works, Peirce would probably never be able to begin conceiving pragmatism as a method presented as so important for attaining knowledge, because he would not have the ground of his theory enabling him to do so. In the "Treatise" he presents the importance of faith as a ground of metaphysics. By considering all the theses emerging from metaphysics as faith-grounded, then, all his work, including sign-constitution theory, pragmatism, objective idealism etc. is based on his faith, which is, I would say, well-grounded by a precise faith-grounded methodology.

We considered Peirce as the "father of pragmatism", but for some reasons we hardly ever try to seek for beginnings of pragmatism in his earlier thinking.⁶ I claim that we should consider early 1860s as a real birth date of pragmatism, and not the late 1870s as we do now and as we are said to do by Peirce himself. Therefore, even though Peirce considers others as grandfathers of pragmatism, we should admit, that older Peirce could have easily, and maybe more deservedly, considered younger Peirce to be the grandfather of pragmatism.

References

- De Tienne, André. "Peirce's Early Method of Finding the Categories". *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 25(4), 385-406, 1989.
- De Waal, Cornelis. *On Peirce*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001.
- Esposito, Josef L. *Evolutionary Metaphysics. The Development of Peirce's Theory of Categories*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980.
- Fisch, Max. "Alexander Bain and the Genealogy of Pragmatism". In Goodman, Russell B.

⁶ There are some texts concerning establishing historical grounds of Peirce's metaphysical fideism (see p.ex. Esposito 1980: 38-40; De Tienne 1989: 393-396).

- (ed.) *Pragmatism: Critical Concepts in Philosophy*. Vol. 2. London etc: Routledge, 2005.
- Goodman, Russell B. "Introduction". In Goodman, Russell B. (ed.), *Pragmatism: Critical Concepts in Philosophy*. Vol. 1. London etc: Routledge, 2005.
- Peirce, Charles S. "Treatise of Metaphysics" [1861]. As published in Peirce Edition Project (eds.), *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, 57-84.
- Peirce, Charles S. "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" [1868], *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 2, 140-157. As published in Houser, N. – Kloesel, C. (eds.), *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, 28-55.
- Peirce, Charles S. "The Fixation of Belief" [1877]. First published in *Popular Science Monthly* 12, 1-15. As published in Houser, N., & Kloesel, C. J. (eds.) *The Essential Peirce*. vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, 109-123.
- Peirce, Charles S. "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" [1878]. First published in *Popular Science Monthly* 12, 286-302. As published in Houser, N., & Kloesel, C. J. (eds.) *The Essential Peirce*. vol. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, 124-141.
- Peirce, Charles S. "Lecture VI: Three Types of Reasoning" [1903]. Delivered on Lowell Lectures as "The Doctrine of Multitude, Infinity and Continuity," on Dec. 7, 1903. In Hartshorne, Charles, Weiss, Paul (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1-6, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935, CP 5.151-179.
- Peirce, Charles S. "Lecture VII: Pragmatism and Abduction" [1903]. Delivered on Lowell Lectures as "The Doctrine of Multitude, Infinity and Continuity," on Dec. 7, 1903. In Hartshorne, Charles, Weiss, Paul (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1-6, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935, CP 5.189-212.
- Peirce, Charles S. "Pragmatism (Editor [3])" [c. 1907]. Later published as "The Founding of Pragmatism". *The Hound and Horn* 2, 1929, 282-285. In: Hartshorne, Charles, Weiss, Paul (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1-6, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935. CP 5.12.