Objectivity in Peirce's Pragmaticism: Five Consequences for Relativism

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First, a bit of history. The objectivity of Peirce's pragmaticism derives from a variety of sources, many dealing with the histories of philosophy, science, and ideas in general, others contemporary with Peirce himself. His synthesis of these influences with his background and expertise in mathematics, logic, chemistry, other physical sciences, and philosophy provided, in 1872, for the announcement of his invention of pragmatism. Some thirty-three years later, in a repudiation of what he took to be a relativistic broadening of the pragmatic principle of meaning at the hands of William James, who is popularly thought of as Peirce's great benefactor, Peirce coined the term "pragmaticism" to then describe his invention.[1] Pragmaticism is, as we shall see, a prime example of just the sort of approach involving potentially universal principles of rationality, objective knowledge, reason, and method that relativism, in its post-modern guise, or any other guise, I suppose, deplores. We shall also see that the method of pragmaticism, especially when considered as an implementation of Peirce's categoriology, can provide for an effective antidote to present-day, dogmatic relativism. Now please consider, for a moment, a partial listing, by name and subject, of contemporary influences present in Peirce's intellectual and personal world around 1872 that contributed to his method. The figures of Louis Agassiz, the naturalist with whom he had privately studied classification a dozen years earlier, Darwin and Wallace, whose notations of evolutionary methods had been contributing to the incubation of pragmaticism itself for at least as long, mathematician J.J. Sylvester, whose powers of observation and employment of chemical graphs to mathematical ends Peirce praised some seven years later, and Peirce's own notable work on absolute and relative determinations of gravity and in photometric researches at, respectively, the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey and the Harvard College Observatory would need to be included in such a listing. From a further historical and perhaps more philosophical point

of view, influences on his objective categoriology ranging from the pre-Socratics through Kant, Hegel, the inductivist William Whewell, and John Stuart Mill would likewise be important. However, do not assume these influences to have been uncritically absorbed.

Such, then, were some of the influences on Peirce's thought and method at about the time he announced pragmatism, his experimental method of methods, to the Cambridge Metaphysical Club.[2] I hope we would agree that, drawn as these influences are from the natural or laboratory sciences at large, mathematics, and actual professional work as a scientist, these are indeed influences that would tend to produce a rational, reasoned outlook, an outlook marked by an experimental method of proceeding towards objective knowledge. Do not presume, however, that the nature of the destination, here, is a foregone conclusion. Realists, like Peirce, have dealt constantly with this problem, a problem described by the pianist Artur Schnabel, for example, as being rather like rowing constantly towards a distant shore, but a shore upon which we never quite entirely arrive.[3] For Peirce, the metaphysical schema that frames this method or boat-rowing of pragmatism and, indeed, produces it, criticizes it, and "re-produces" it again and again, is his framework of categories.[4]

My interest, then, is in the possibility that an application of Peirce's categories, as a component in his overall method, can provide some sort of counter-move or antidote to contemporary relativism. What this means, in effect, is that the objective, Realistic status of what Peirce called "Thirdness" stands in opposition to the subjective, nominalistic character of contemporary, dogmatic relativism. The issues to be addressed, then, are three: 1) relativism, as we see it in two current expressions, 2) Peirce's "Thirdness," as he and others, including James F. Harris, in a recent book, have described it, and 3) how "Thirdness," applied according to Peirce's pragmaticistic method, can draw out five important consequences for modern-day relativism.

What, then, is meant by the term "relativism," in its present-day applications? I take a fairly accurate understanding of this to be that there *are* no, and *cannot be any*, universal standards of or for rationality, objectivity, or, most importantly from a pragmaticistic point of view, method. I likewise take this understanding to mean that one should have no hope whatever for such standards, even when, with errors and

inevitable blank spots in the pursuit of knowledge, they are continuously sought or provisionally maintained. Such a meaning or understanding of relativism is consistent and comportable with the views expressed in Harris' book, *Against Relativism: A Philosophical Defense of Method*, published last year by Open Court. This work, in part, explains to common understanding the inevitably self-refutational nature of relativism.

Among the several presentations of relativism that Harris examines, two in particular are conspicuous. They are, 1) the overall development of cultural relativism, and 2) what Harris describes as the general feminist criticism of science and scientific method. According to Harris' description of the development of social anthropology, for example, we may understand the position of cultural relativism as follows:

> . . . [A] particular culture [should] be understood not in relation to other cultures but solely in terms of itself. . . . Individual cultures are now regarded as simply different from one another. Each culture is autonomous, and cross-cultural judgments or comparisons are suspect if not meaningless. Hume's claims about a universal human nature and the uniformity in the principles and operations of human action seem to have been completely abandoned. (Harris 1992: 08)

I should interject, in passing, that to so mix up conceptions of cultural autonomy and cross-cultural comparisons is at least logically sloppy, if not outright contradictory: does the latter really preclude the former, as seems to be implied? At any rate, it seems that any application of the older, evolution-based form of cultural anthropology, with its implicit claim that cultural and human development might be described and understood according to some single, "grand, abstract universal theory" is seen as illegitimate. But this criticism, of course, rests on a misconstrual of evolution as somehow always being smoothly, incrementally, and linearly "progressive." Applying notions from any such single, science-based way of knowing or form of anthropological investigation is likewise seen as inappropriate, it seems, even if one hadn't misconstrued "evolution" or "science" to begin with.

Much the same situation, according to Harris, is found in the feminist critique of science. For example, Harris takes the central point of Helen Longino's 1987 piece "Can There Be a Feminist Science?" to be:

> . . .scientists should abandon their notion of a value-free science, make their political and social commitments clear, and commit themselves to the particular brand of science which is a result of their commitment to a more basic "interpretive model" composed of contextual values. Such an understanding of feminist science amounts to an explicit reversal of Francis Bacon's doctrine of the Idols, . . Longino seems to suggest that we simply abandon Bacon's attempt to free scientific thinking from bias and prejudice altogether and, instead, that we simply make our biases and prejudices explicit. (Harris 1992: 183)

So, it would seem that with science as with culture, the task is not to seek any possible or potential universal principles of rationality, objective knowledge, reason, understanding, or method, however remote they may be at the moment, but rather to simply acknowledge those "contextual values" we find appealing, attractive, or inevitable, and, thence, acquire and develop human knowledge accordingly. One question, in passing, about this approach to knowledge is the following: isn't this a recipe for schizophrenia? A second question, likewise: what warrant would one have, given these relativistic parameters, to express even the mildest displeasure towards a cultural and/or "scientific" practice (there is no difference, after all!) that was, in a clear and indisputable manner, physically or emotionally threatening to you and others?[5]

At any rate, these and other schools of relativistic thinking that Harris explores can, for present purposes, be singularly represented in the point of view exhibited by Paul Feyerabend in Harris' *Against Relativism*. Harris frames his work with remarks from Feyerabend's *Farewell to Reason* of 1987 and his *Against Method* of 1975. In his opening explanation of how those espousing relativistic approaches have succeeded in getting several highly negative connotations attached to classical approaches to the relevant issues, Harris gives some pertinent details of the situation, and includes an observation by Feyerabend:

> To defend Modernism or traditional Western understandings of science and epistemology is now viewed by many to be, at best, "Narrow" or "overly structured" and, at worst, "bigoted," "racist," "sexist," and "ethnocentric." Modernism has been represented in such a manner that to be a modernist is to be insensitive to and intolerant of other cultures with new and different ideas. For example, Paul Feyerabend describes the belief that there is some universal notion of human understanding which might be used to provide some theoretical approach to solving human conflicts as "conceited, ignorant, superficial, incomplete, and dishonest." (Harris 1992: 02)

One might easily draw the conclusion, based on these rather forceful and uncompromising remarks by Feyerabend, that any approach to solving human conflicts marked by humility, knowledge, profundity, exhaustiveness, and honesty would amount to an intellectual, cultural, and scientific "call to arms," as Harris puts it. This exposes one of my major misgivings concerning cultural and scientific relativism, as follows. If there are no conceivable practical results or standards to which we might now or eventually appeal in such circumstances, then it would seem we are committed, by default if nothing else, to, as Harris writes, " . . .a chaos of principles and an anarchy of the intellect." In short, such a development would strand us, it would seem, with no better tool for decision-making than an infinitely self-replicating series of fallacies. In other words, pick your fallacy *du jour*: any one will do, and to insist to the contrary would expose you as "conceited, ignorant, superficial," and so forth. The final extract in *Against Relativism* by Feyerabend is even more comprehensive in its theoretical coverage:

> [T]he idea of a fixed method, or of a fixed theory of rationality, rests on too naive a view of man and his social surroundings. To those who look at the rich material provided by history, and who are not intent on impoverishing it in order to please their lower instincts, their craving for intellectual security in the form of clarity, precision, 'objectivity,' 'truth,' it will become clear that there is only *one* principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in *all* stages of human development. It is the principle: *anything goes*. (Feyerabend 1975: 19)

You may draw your own conclusions as to what might be meant here by a fixed method,[6] labeling the search for truth as a lower instinct, and by asserting that the *one* principle is that there *isn't* any one principle. In passing I should remark that, perhaps, Feyerabend has dismissed the common-sense notion that at least some human instincts are universal among us, and that he seems here to have adopted the notion that any principle is better that no principle at all, even when that principle is self-contradictory.

Now, how might pragmaticism and Peirce's categoriology collide with these notions of relativism? Harris devotes considerable space to this subject, and while I agree rather whole-heartedly with his application of Peirce's notions to the problems of relativism, I would like to proceed, now, according to a rather different, but complementary, line.

Peirce's categories, familiar to many, are three in number, namely, "Firstness," "Secondness," and "Thirdness." In 1892 in, suitably, an article in the journal *The Open Court* entitled "The critic of Arguments. II. The Reader is Introduced to Relatives," Peirce gave a description of the meanings of these three categories.

> It follows that if we find three distinct and irreducible forms of rhemata, the ideas of these should be the three elementary conceptions of metaphysics. That there are three elementary forms of categories is the conclusion of Kant, to which Hegel subscribes; and Kant seeks to establish this from the analysis of formal logic. Unfortunately, his study of that subject was so excessively superficial that his argument is destitute of the slightest value. Nevertheless, his conclusion is correct; for the three elements permeate ** not only the truths of logic, but even to a great extent the very errors of the profounder logicians. . . I will only mention here that the ideas which belong to the three forms of rhemata are firstness, secondness, thirdness; firstness, or spontaneity; secondness, or dependence; thirdness, or mediation. (CP 3.422/1892)[8]

"A rhema," he explains, "is somewhat closely analogous to a chemical atom or radicle with unsaturated bonds" (CP 3.421). This explanation refers to his idea that his categories could be illustrated according to a general chemical analogue, "valency," where the number of unbonded ends in a given diagram determine, on the one hand, the chemical

valency of an element and, on the other, the valency of a metaphysical conception: its category. Thus, actual physical, objective facts, open to all for inspection, provide a universal grounding for these metaphysical conceptions. He explains:

> . . .my researches into the logic of relatives have shown beyond all sane doubt that in one respect combinations of concepts exhibit a remarkable analogy with chemical combinations; every concept having a strict valency. . . . Thus, the predicate "is blue" is univalent, the predicate "kills" is bivalent . . ; the predicate "gives" is trivalent, since A gives B to C, etc. Just as the valency of chemistry is an atomic character, so indecomposable concepts may be bivalent or trivalent. Indeed, definitions being scrupulously observed, it will be seen to be a truism to assert that no compound of univalent and bivalent concepts alone can be trivalent, . . . Less obvious, yet demonstrable, is the fact that no indecomposable concept has a higher valency. Thus, [again using the chemical analogue] the relation between the four bonds of an unsymmetrical carbon atom consists of twenty-four triadic relations. (CP 5.469/1906?)

One can take Firstness, the univalent, monadic category, then, to be an unobjectified "quality of feeling." Secondness, the bivalent, dyadic category, can be understood as "a single happening or fact, . . an experience." No combination of Firsts and Seconds alone can produce Thirds; all other categories are decomposable to the level of Thirds, which are themselves indecomposable.[8] And Thirdness, the trivalent, triadic category, "is the idea of a sign or communication conveyed by one person to another" (CP 5.7/1905?). Such a sign must be *capable* of being interpreted, understood, and known *objectively*. This is semiosis in action. Whether or not one is successful at it is, of course, another matter.

Crucial here is the notion that Thirdness embodies just those universals, those laws and habits, which the nominalism of relativistic thinking so dogmatically denies.

> Generality is either of that negative sort which belongs to the merely potential, as such, and this is peculiar to the category of quality; or it is of that positive kind which belongs to conditional necessity, and this is peculiar to the category of law. . . . [H]enceforward it will be a grave error of scientific philosophy to overlook the universal presence in the phenomenon of this third category (CP 1.427/1896?; CP 5.64/1903).

What of the inevitable charge, in response to this hope and claim for universal, objective law, that these laws, these "Reals," are enforced ethnocentric or sexist stipulations, mere hegemonic shams? Peirce responds, and we may acknowledge a rather detailed definition of pragmaticism itself:

> And what do we mean by the real? It is a conception which we must first have had when we discovered that there was an unreal, an illusion; that is, when we first corrected ourselves. Now the distinction for which alone this fact logically called, was between an *ens* relative to private inward determinations, to the negations belonging to idiosyncrasy, and an *ens* such as would stand in the long run. The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus, the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of a definite increase of knowledge. (CP 5.311/1868)

The sort of self-correction noted here is, of course, the method of pragmatism itself, in which no assumption, proposition, premiss, presumed law, or even relativistic certainty of lack of laws or principles of reasoning or method, has an indubitable or infallible status. Descartes and Hilbert would make for superb illustrations of the problems arising from such alleged certainties. In his Cambridge Conference Lectures of 1898, Peirce explained this from the standpoint of science and scientific method:

> Nothing is *vital* for science; nothing can be. Its accepted propositions, therefore, are but opinions at most; and the whole list is provisional. The scientific man is not the least wedded to his conclusions. He risks nothing upon them. He stands ready to abandon one or all as soon as experience opposes them. . . . [T]he scientific man will be glad to have got rid of an error. (CSP 1898/MS 437: 16)

The logical distinction here, the "Real" is, of course, Thirdness.[9] Thirdness, as law, mediation, or habit, is sought by a community of investigators whose membership is limited only by competence with the relevant questions and self-control of ego. When the activities of this community are framed by the categories and conducted according to pragmaticistic, self-correcting, error-eliminating procedures, a *definite* increase in knowledge, *objective* knowledge, knowledge of Thirds, can be expected. This indeed can be, from the standpoint of philosophy of knowledge, or ways of knowing, a clear definition of pragmaticism. In one of his articles for *The Monist* of 1891, Peirce showed how the scientific Realism of this metaphysical scheme arises by way of pragmaticism writ large:

> . . .in the beginning--infinitely remote--there was a chaos of unpersonalized feeling [Firstness], which being without connection or regularity would properly be without existence. This feeling, sporting here and there [Secondness] in pure arbitrariness, would have started the germ of a generalizing tendency. Its other sportings would be evanescent, but this would have a growing virtue. Thus, the tendency to habit would be started; and from this, with the other principles of evolution, all the regularities of the universe [Thirdness] would be evolved. (CP 6.33/1891)

Nevertheless, Thirdness, as Harris reminds us, "is a primitive category which cannot be explained in terms of or reduced to Firstness and Secondness, and the principles, laws, and rules which 'guide' thought are *given* and exist independently of thought. Thirdness is [then] actually *perceived* (Harris 1992: 170)." That is, the *reality* of Thirdness is not capable of a reductionistic, relativistic treatment, but this reality, exemplified according to valency analyses and accessible to any person or group open to reality at large, can be actually *experienced.*

In summary and conclusion, then, five consequences follow for relativism:

1) Relativism attempts an illicit reduction of Thirds. In turning a nominalistic eye towards Realism, relativism is left with but, at best, a perpetual struggle of Seconds amongst various "interpretive models." No self-correction or "definite increase of knowledge" can be hoped for.

One might as well try to explain the reality of the water in the Rio Grande by reducing it to its gaseous components.

2) Relativism attempts to use Firsts and Seconds to discredit Thirds. That is, relativism uses, in Peirce's language, the "sensual" and the "volitional" as exhaustive categories of experience, and uses them further to deny the "habitual" (CP 2.643/1878). This is inevitable, given the tenets and *perceivable* consequences of valency analyses: if you think Firsts and Seconds tell the whole story, so to speak, then Thirds can never arise. Thus, any true community of investigators is, in any search for "objective" knowledge, useless: "community of antagonists" would be a more appropriate phrase.

3) Relativism, in antecedently denying Thirds, likewise denies that pragmaticism, as a, but not THE FINAL, method of methods, could, in its trial and error, self-correcting nature, provide a continuously improving decision-tool to evaluate relativism itself as well as all the "-isms" which, rightly and wrongly, relativism has attached to modernistic ways of knowing. It thus mistakes pragmaticism for an absolute, "fixed method."

4) Relativism, in denying the method of pragmaticism, abandons testibility and falsifiability and, consequently, may actually make no claims about knowledge at all: this may be worse than the coarsest argument from ignorance. Without method, as Harris notes, "[s]cience and the nature of scientific enquiry would then simply become matters of social, political, and, perhaps, aesthetic *preferences* [my emphasis] (Harris 1992: 192)." Should relativism, itself, then, be ignored as conceited, ignorant, superficial, incomplete, and dishonest?

5) Relativism, in embracing "contextual values" for determinations in the social and physical sciences at the expense of pragmaticistic method, fails to acknowledge that this embrace fundamentally thwarts cultural and scientific interpretation and understanding. That is, relativism makes the comprehension of any other culture, any other version of "science," or any other way of knowing different from that which is already familiar to it extremely difficult, if not outright impossible. Thus, the capacity for signs to be interpreted, understood, and known objectively is crippled. Finally, then, semiosis is stalled.

NOTES

1. See Harris 1992: 31-33; 164-66 for an examination of James' role in the development of relativism.

2. See Fisch 1986: 137-71 for further details of the Metaphysical Club in its, original, 1871-1875, form.

3. See Schnabel 1942: 14 for the context of his description.

4. See Fisch 1986: 96 for an examination of the relation between Alexander Bain's definition of belief and Peirce's categories, and how the two combined produce a definition of pragmaticism.

5. See, for examples, Ono 1993, Waldman 1993, and Ono and Williams 1993, on the traditional *and* contemporary cultural functions of, respectively, 1) arranged marriages and the phenomenon of *Narita Rikon* in Japan, 2) the *fatwa*, or sanction for assassination given by Islamic leaders, and 3) monarchial bride-selection by the Crown Prince of Japan. And what of the alleged practices of genital mutilation and slavery- marriage visited on girls and young women in Africa and in the Near and Far East?

6. See Peirce, "Our Senses as Reasoning Machines," (CSP 1900/MS 831: 09-11) on the irrationality of "fixed method."

7. CP = Hartshorne, Charles, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks, eds., 1935, 1958. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Each item is referenced by volume and paragraph. I have included dates for the selections here used, so as to indicate something of the span over which Peirce ruminated on these subjects and to show how the CP edition is not an historical one.

8. See Ketner 1986: 381 for four summary points on valency analysis.

9. See Miller, ed., 1985, Part I: 4 - 5, for Popper's "Knowledge Subjective vs. Objective," and his "Evolutionary Epistemology" which, in their treatment of Popper's World 3 and his technique of conjecture and refutation, closely parallel Peirce's Thirds and his method of pragmaticism. See also Fisch 1986: 425 on the intersection between Popper and Peirce on the subject of falsification.

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