

The Legitimacy of Metaphysics: Kant's Legacy to Peirce, and Peirce's to Philosophy Today*

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Abstract. Part of Kant's legacy to Peirce was a lasting conviction that metaphysics is not irredeemable, but can and should be set "on the secure path of a science". However, Peirce's "scientific metaphysics", unlike Kant's, uses the method of science, i.e., of experience and reasoning; but requires close attention to experience of the most familiar kind rather than the *recherché* experience needed by the special sciences. This distinctively plausible reconception of what a genuinely scientific metaphysics would be is part of Peirce's legacy to philosophy today, enabling us to steer clear both of apriorism and of scientism—the Scylla and Charybdis of recent metaphysics.

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In the early sixties I was a passionate devotee of Kant [...]. I believed more implicitly in the two tables of the Functions of Judgment and the Categories than if they had been brought down from Sinai. Now Kant points out certain relations between the categories. I detected others; but these others, if they had any orderly relation to a system of conceptions, belonged to a larger system [...]. Here there was a problem to which I devoted three hours a day for two years, rising from it, at length, with the demonstrative certitude that there was something wrong with Kant's logic (C.S. Peirce, *CP*, 4.2, 1898).

[I] was a pure Kantist until [I] was forced by successive steps into Pragmatism (*CP*, 5.451, 1905).

Kant (whom I *more* than admire) is nothing but a somewhat confused pragmatist [...]. (*CP*, 5.525, 1905).

Unlike his fellow-pragmatist William James—who once wrote that in his opinion philosophy would do well to go round Kant, rather than through him—Peirce was strongly influenced by his early, intense study of, as he calls it, the "*Critic of Pure Reason*". But as my first quotation reveals, Peirce soon reached the conclusion that Kant's logic was defective, and that correcting the mistaken logic that undergirds his metaphysical system would require significant revisions; and as my other quotations reveal, eventually he concluded that, stripped of these indefensible elements, the Kantian philosophy would be a kind of proto-pragmatism.

* My thanks to Mark Migotti for very helpful comments on draft versions of this paper.

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Nevertheless, early and late, the influence of Kant is unmistakable; in particular, Peirce's life-long effort to make metaphysics a "scientific" enterprise seems strongly reminiscent of Kant's commitment, famously affirmed numerous times in the Preface to the B edition of *KrV*, to setting metaphysics on "the secure path of a science". So my attempt to articulate "Kant's legacy to Peirce, and Peirce's to philosophy today" will begin with my account of how Peirce's response to the anti-metaphysical positivism of his day draws on Kant's response to Hume, and how it moves beyond it; and end with my reasons for believing that Peirce's post-Kantian reconception of what a reformed, scientific metaphysics would be and do is a valuable resource, especially in our own post-Logical-Positivist era.

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The first part of my story is familiar, and soon told.

According to Hume, "abstruse" philosophy "or what is commonly called *metaphysics*", is painful, fatiguing, and "the inevitable source of uncertainty and error". "Here indeed", Hume continues, "lies the justest and most plausible objection" to "a considerable part of metaphysics, that they are not properly a science, but arise either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity [...] or from the craft of popular superstitions". The obscurity and uncertainty of abstruse metaphysics, Hume argues, is the inevitable result of our trying to penetrate beyond what is really accessible to us. And "[t]he only method of freeing learning [...] from these abstruse questions, is to inquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such [...] subjects". Only such analysis can "subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, [...] gives it an air of science and wisdom"; only such analysis can liberate us from "such airy sciences" (*Enquiry*, I "On the Different Species of Philosophy").

For this analysis will show that there can be no idea without a previous impression; which suffices "to banish all that jargon which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings and drawn disgrace upon them" (*Enquiry*, II.17). It will reveal, moreover, that there are only two kinds of knowledge: (probable) knowledge of matters of fact and (demonstrative) knowledge of relations of ideas; which suffices to show that most purported metaphysical knowledge—ostensibly both necessary and yet going beyond our ideas—is nothing but "sophistry and illusion", to be condemned to the flames.

Kant acknowledges that metaphysics has long been the "battlefield of endless controversies"; and comments that the one-time "Queen of

all the sciences” has become “a matron outcast and forsaken”. But he believes that the Empiricists’ efforts “to cast doubt on the pretensions of the supposed Queen” by appeal to what he calls their “physiology” of human understanding were unsuccessful, leaving metaphysics to “lapse [...] back into the ancient time-worn dogmatisms”. Looking, like Hume, to an analysis of human faculties, but in a more constructive spirit, Kant urges that the way forward, “the only one which has remained unexplored”, is to undertake an examination of the faculty of reason in general, a critique of pure reason, to determine what knowledge reason can achieve independently of all experience (*KrV*, A ix-x).

Kant replaces Hume’s simple dichotomy of knowledge of matters of fact and knowledge of relations of ideas by his twin distinctions of analytic and synthetic, *a priori* and *a posteriori* judgments. Metaphysics claims necessary knowledge of objects, which would have to be synthetic knowledge *a priori*; hence, “[a]ll metaphysicians are [...] solemnly and legally suspended from their occupations until they shall have adequately answered the question, ‘How are synthetic a priori cognitions possible?’”, for “metaphysics stands or falls with the solution of this problem”. Until then, they “can expect nothing else of reasonable people, who have been deceived so often, than to be dismissed without further inquiry” (*PM*, p. 33).

Kant believes he has the answer to this question, an answer that will at long last establish the legitimacy of metaphysics. But his answer requires an intellectual revolution: for “if intuition must conform to the constitution of the objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter *a priori*; but if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility” (*KrV*, B xvii). The old assumption that all our knowledge must conform to objects has to be abandoned: to the contrary, objects must conform to our knowledge. Metaphysical knowledge is *a priori* knowledge not of the noumenal realm of Things in Themselves, but of the phenomenal, of things as they must appear to us. The old Queen will be restored to her throne; but not, after all, to her traditional domains.

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Like Hume and Kant, Peirce acknowledges that historically metaphysics has been the arena of “ceaseless and trivial disputation” (*CP*, 6.5, 1898); and complains that in his own day it is still “in a deplorably backward condition” (*CP*, 6.2, 1898), “a puny, rickety, and scrofulous science” (*CP*, 6.6, c. 1903). And—surprisingly perhaps, given that the Pragmatic Maxim ties meaning to experiential consequences, and that pragmatism is, as Peirce acknowledges, broadly akin to Comte’s

positivism—far from giving up on metaphysics, Peirce aims, as Kant had and Hume had not, to rehabilitate the discipline:

[The Pragmatic Maxim] will serve to show that almost every proposition of ontological metaphysics is either meaningless gibberish—one word being defined by other words, and they by still others, without any real conception ever being reached—or else is downright absurd [...]

he writes; but he continues:

[...] all such rubbish being swept away, what will remain of philosophy will be a series of problems capable of investigation by the observational methods of the true sciences. [...] So, instead of merely jeering at metaphysics, [...] the pragmaticist extracts from it a precious essence, which will serve to give life and light to cosmology and physics (*CP*, 5.423, 1905).

Kant had dismissed Thomas Reid and his Commonsense school as offering in response to Hume “nothing but an appeal to the judgement of the crowd” (*PM*, p. 9). Once Peirce ceased to be a “pure Kantist”, however, he came to describe himself as a “Critical Common-sensist”. His coinage has a double historical resonance, alluding both to the Scottish School of Common Sense philosophy, and to the Critical Philosophy of Kant: Peirce’s Critical Common-sensist is “distinguished from the old Scotch philosopher by the great value he attaches to doubt, provided only that it be the weighty and noble metal itself, and no counterfeit nor paper substitute”; and from unmodified Kantianism by his critique of Kant’s distinction of the analytic and the synthetic and of the concept of the noumenal, and ultimately by his reconception of the metaphysical enterprise.

In his “Minute Logic” of 1902 Peirce had observed that “the position of the two greatest of all metaphysicians, Aristotle and Kant, will herein be supported by satisfactory proof, that that science can only rest directly upon the theory of logic. [...] [T]here has hardly been a metaphysician of first rank who has not made logic his stepping-stone [...]” (*CP*, 2.122). But he objects to Kant’s uncritical reliance on traditional subject-predicate forms of judgment: which by the mid-nineteenth century were known to be inadequate to represent even such inferences as “All horses are animals; therefore, everything that is the head of a horse is the head of an animal”, or to handle even elementary mathematical reasoning. Kant’s conception of necessary reasoning as simply explicating the meaning of its premisses “is clearly shown by the logic of relations to be utterly mistaken”; and as a result, “his distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, [...] which is based on that conception, is so utterly confused that it is difficult or impossible to do anything with it” (*CP*, 5.177, 5.176, 1903).

Kant himself had raised the question whether the concept of the Thing-in-itself really has content (*KrV*, A 129). Peirce argues that it is as pragmatically meaningless as the concept of a “sky-blue demonstration”, and “all reference to it must be thrown out as meaningless surplusage” (*CP*, 5.525, c. 1905). Only a couple of years before, he had written that “we have *direct experience of things in themselves*”; but the context makes clear that, distancing himself from the technical Kantian meaning of the phrase, he was saying that what we perceive is, precisely, *things*, the objects and events around us—and not, for example, impressions. Though knowledge is in a sense relative to our representations, he writes, “all knowledge is knowledge of that which is, independent of its being represented”. The real is independent of what you, or I, or anybody, believes about it; though (this is Peirce’s pragmatist twist on Scotus’ definition of reality) it is *not* independent of what the community of inquirers would believe about it at the hypothetical end of inquiry (*CP*, 6.95, 1903). Hence: “The Kantist has only to abjure from the bottom of his heart the proposition that a thing-in-itself can [...] be conceived, and then correct the details of Kant’s doctrine accordingly, and he will find himself to have become a Critical Common-sensist” (*CP*, 5.452, 1905).

And the way Peirce hopes to make metaphysics scientific diverges notably from the way Kant hoped to set the discipline “on the secure path of a science”. Kant assumes that metaphysics is distinguished from physics precisely by virtue of “lying beyond experience” (*PM*, p. 15).¹ Metaphysics will be an *a priori* investigation of the conditions of the possibility of human knowledge; and thus will stand “wholly isolated” (*PM*, p. 11). But Peirce’s scientific metaphysics will be an *a posteriori* discipline, and anything but isolated. It will be continuous with the special sciences; but it is charged with investigating those aspects of reality too general to fall within their scope, and so will rely on close attention to the most familiar and “unscientific” observations.

Since scientific metaphysics is a kind of investigation, it must be genuine inquiry, undertaken with the “scientific attitude”, i.e., from a desire to discover the truth, not “sham reasoning” undertaken to make a case for already-unbudgeable beliefs—the characteristic failing, in Peirce’s view, of “seminary philosophy”. And since scientific metaphysics is an empirical kind of investigation, it must use not the traditional metaphysical method of What Is Agreeable to Reason, but the “scientific method”, i.e., the method of experience and reasoning.

¹ For the record: according to Webster’s dictionary, metaphysics got its name from the title of the volume of Aristotle’s works that came *after* the *Physics*—i.e., for bibliographical reasons, not reasons of content; so “beyond physics” is false etymology.

In scientific metaphysics as in the special sciences, the reasoning needed will be abduction (to arrive at an explanatory hypothesis), deduction (to derive its consequences), and induction (to check how well those consequences stand up to evidence). But since metaphysics investigates reality in its most general aspects, it will require not specialized instruments of observation, but close attentiveness to the most familiar and ordinary observable facts.

The idea that metaphysics “is inscrutable because its objects are not open to observation”, Peirce avers, “is a complete mistake” (*CP*, 6.2, 1898). Metaphysics does, and must, rest on observable phenomena. We fail to realize this, he argues, because the observations on which metaphysics depends are so ubiquitous that we ordinarily pay no attention to them. But in fact they are far more readily available than the observations needed by the special sciences; philosophy “does not undertake to make any special observations or to obtain any perceptions of a novel description. Microscopes and telescopes, voyages and exhumations [...] are substantially superfluous [...]. It contents itself with a more attentive scrutiny and comparison of the facts of everyday life [...]” (*EP*, 2.146, 1903).

Differing from the special sciences not in kind but in degree of generality, scientific metaphysics sometimes “welds itself” with them (*EP*, 2.375, 1906)—at some points, for example, it can scarcely be distinguished from the science of cosmology, at others from psychology. Nonetheless, it is neither reducible to the special sciences nor subordinate to them. Rather, the “special sciences are obliged to take for granted a number of most important propositions, because their ways of working afford no means of bringing these propositions to the test. In short, they always rest upon metaphysics” (*CP*, 1.129, c. 1905)—the discipline to which it falls to supply their key presuppositions.

Peirce hopes that “by proceeding modestly, recognizing in metaphysics an observational science, [...] without caring one straw what kind of conclusions we reach [...] but just honestly applying induction and hypothesis, the disputes and obscurities of the subject may at last disappear” (*CP*, 6.5, 1898); and that “really scientific work [in metaphysics] will bring in an extraordinary harvest of fundamental truth” (*CP*, 1.128, c. 1905). His “small specimen of the questions that press for industrious and solid investigation” runs in part as follows: “Whether or no there be any real indefiniteness, or real possibility, and impossibility? Whether there be any strictly individual existence? Whether there be any real distinction [...] between fact and fancy? Or between the external and internal worlds? [...] Is hylozoism an opinion, actual or

conceivable, rather than a senseless vocable? [...] what is consciousness or mind like?" (*CP*, 6.6, c. 1903).

Replying to F.C.S. Schiller's Humean complaint that professional philosophers have made their subject "abstruse, arid, abstract and abhorrent", Peirce had commented that "some sciences are not in a healthy state if they are *not* abstruse, arid and abstract" (*CP*, 5.537, c. 1905)—putting one in mind of Kant's wry observation that his work "could never be made suitable for popular consumption" (*KrV*, A xviii), and is inevitably "dry, [...] obscure, [...] contrary to popular ideas, and on top of that prolix" (*PM*, p. 10). Actually, Peirce's metaphysical writing tends more to the lush than the arid; but it certainly can be hard to penetrate. One reason is that, like the rest of his philosophy, it is frequently couched in terms of his universal categories; which he sees, with logic, as forming the conceptual backdrop to all positive science.

These universal categories—Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness—are few in number, and can be characterized in more than one way. But they are neither simple nor unanalyzable. In terms of the logic of relations, Firstness is monadic, Secondness dyadic, and Thirdness triadic; in phenomenological terms, Firstness is pure quality or feeling, Secondness reaction or interaction, and Thirdness mediation, connectedness, generality; in ontological terms, the mode of being of Firsts is potentiality, of Seconds actuality or existence, and of Thirds, reality. In semiotic, for example, Peirce's categorial analysis begins with a threefold division: the icon (1st), signifying by qualitative resemblance to its object, the index (2nd), signifying by causal relation to its object, and the symbol (3rd), signifying by convention; and culminates in his division of ninety-nine kinds of sign. In the theory of perception, his categorial analysis recognizes three aspects of the perceptual event or percept: its phenomenal quality (1st), its causal origin in interaction with its object (2nd), and the characteristics of its irreducibly particular phenomenal quality that generalize to other objects (3rd). And so on.

When Peirce is criticizing Hegel, he stresses Secondness, which he faults Hegel for ignoring; but a more frequent preoccupation is the reality of kinds and laws, which are Thirds, and their relation to particular things and events. This is why Peirce is preoccupied with the question of nominalism and realism: "whether *laws* and *general types* are figments of the mind or are real" (*CP*, 1.16, 1903). This question cannot be settled by just assuming that all putative generals are real, that for every general term of our language there is a corresponding real kind; but neither can it be settled by physics, by psychology, or by any of the special sciences. Peirce argues first abductively: that the realist answer that there are real kinds and laws can explain how explanation, induction, prediction, and hence science itself, are possible, whereas a

nominalist answer cannot; and then inductively: our everyday experience testifies that explanation, induction, and prediction *are* possible. This is at once an application of the scientific method in metaphysics, and an argument that the very possibility of scientific inquiry presupposes a kind of realism—as Peirce puts it in acknowledgement of his debt to Scotus, a “scholastic realism of a somewhat extreme stripe” (*CP*, 5.470, c. 1906).

Both in the introduction and in the conclusion of “The Law of Mind” (1892), the first paper in which he uses the term, Peirce describes synechism as “the doctrine that everything is continuous”. Some years later, however, he writes that “[s]ynechism is not an ultimate and absolute metaphysical doctrine; *it is a regulative principle of logic, prescribing what sort of hypothesis is fit to be entertained and examined*”, i.e., “that tendency of philosophical thought which insists [...] upon the necessity of hypotheses involving true continuity” (*CP*, 6.173 and 6.169, 1902, my italics). The later formulation of synechism, as a regulative principle, is more plausible in itself; and it makes better sense of Peirce’s observations about the synechist’s attitude to dualisms: “[s]ynechism, even in its less stalwart forms, can never abide dualism, properly so called”; not even dualism “in its broadest legitimate meaning”, the style of philosophy that “performs its analyses with an axe, leaving, as the ultimate elements, unrelated chunks of being”. (Unfortunately, Peirce comments neither on Hume’s penchant for binary distinctions, nor on Kant’s attempt to knit two such distinctions together in the synthetic *a priori*).

Unlike certain “philosophic cranks”, however, the synechist “does not wish to exterminate the conception of twoness” (*EP*, 2.2, 1893); but to recommend that, looking for underlying continuities, we try to reconstrue supposedly sharp distinctions as lines of demarcation drawn at some point on a continuum. Synechism “amounts to the principle that inexplicabilities are not to be considered as possible explanations”. For continuity is a kind of perfect generality: “[t]rue generality is [...] nothing but a rudimentary form of true continuity. Continuity is nothing but perfect generality of a law of relationship”. And generality is “the form under which alone anything can be understood”. Since “[t]he only possible justification for so much as entertaining a hypothesis is that it affords an explanation of the phenomena”, hypotheses that break reality into unrelated components “set up a barrier across the road” of science (*CP*, 6.173, 6.172, and 6.171, 1902).

Introducing his objective idealism, Peirce observes that “[t]he old dualistic notion of mind and matter [...] as two radically distinct kinds of substance, will hardly find any defenders today”. This means that we are obliged to accept some form of “hylopathy, otherwise called

monism”, of which he distinguishes three: neutralism, materialism, and idealism. Neutralism, he argues, since it makes inward and outward aspects of substance both primordial, violates Ockham’s razor. Materialism, he continues, is “quite as repugnant to scientific logic as to common sense; since it requires [...] that a certain kind of mechanism will feel [...] [as] an ultimate, inexplicable regularity”. “The one intelligible theory of the universe”, he concludes, “is [...] objective idealism”, which acknowledges “the physical law as derived and special, the psychical alone as primordial”, and “matter [as] effete mind, inveterate habits becoming physical laws” (*CP*, 6.245, 1891).

One thinks, in this context, of Kant’s comment about the need to “secure our thinking self against the danger of materialism” (*KrV*, A 383). But Peirce would not go on to say, as Kant had, that “if I remove the thinking subject the whole corporeal world would at once vanish”; for it turns out that his objective idealism isn’t really opposed to materialism in every sense. He even writes that “[f]aith requires us to be materialists without flinching” (*CP*, 1.354, c. 1890); and he speculates very suggestively about how matter might feel, proposing that “feeling, or immediate consciousness, arises in an active state of nerve-cells” (*CP*, 1.386, c. 1885); and that “[t]here is no doubt that this slime-mould, or this amoeba, or at any rate some similar mass of protoplasm, feels [...] when it is in its excited condition” (*CP*, 6.133, 1892). But this, he argues, “can never be explained, unless we admit that physical events are but degraded or undeveloped forms of psychical events”. Once it is acknowledged that matter is just mind informed by inveterate habits, the only further explanation needed is why in protoplasm these habits are “to some slight extent broken up”. Mind is dependent on matter; but mental phenomena are not wholly controlled by sheer physical law (*CP*, 6.264, 1892).

Peirce writes that “[t]hought is not necessarily connected with a brain. It appears in the work of bees, of crystals, and throughout the purely physical world” (*CP*, 4.551, 1906); it is “in the organic world”, he continues, and develops there. This suggests that we should take “thought” and “mind” to refer both to the particular mental capacities of particular organisms, and to the intelligible patterns, the Platonic Ideas, found in the formation of crystals or the hexagonal cells of a honeycomb. So Mind, with a capital “M”, is the capacity of the universe for forming patterns; while minds, with a small “m”, are very special, plastic, adaptable arrangements of matter—plastic, adaptable arrangements of matter capable of apprehending the pattern of Mind with a big “M”.

This, in turn, suggests how objective idealism is tied to agapism, the “doctrine of evolutionary love”, which hypothesizes an evolution from an initial chaos into order. Peirce summarizes the idea like this:

[...] in the beginning—infinity remote—there was a chaos of unpersonalized feeling, which being without connection or regularity would properly be without existence. This feeling, sporting here and there 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 would be evolved (*CP*, 6.33, 1891).

Elsewhere Peirce observes that he is speaking not just of an evolution of the existing universe, but “a process by which the very Platonic forms themselves [...] are becoming developed” out of initial vague potentialities by mutual affinity—hence his word “agapism” (*CP*, 6.194, 1898); perhaps anticipating recent efforts at computer simulation of how patterns might emerge from an initially chaotic, random set-up.

“At any time, however”, Peirce’s summary of agapism continues, “an element of pure chance [...] will remain”. This is tychism, the doctrine that absolute chance is a factor in the universe, that not everything is determined by law. Today, because it is thought to have anticipated the indeterminism of quantum mechanics, tychism is probably the best-known of his metaphysical ideas. For Peirce himself, however, it was not preeminent. For he saw the element of chance as a remnant of the original disorder, which would remain only “until the world becomes an absolutely perfect, rational and symmetrical system in which mind is at last crystallized in the infinitely distant future” (*CP*, 6.33, 1891), at which point it will finally be *aufgehoben*. This is why Peirce resists the suggestion that his metaphysical system as a whole might be called “tychism”: “although tychism does enter into it, it only enters as subsidiary to that which is really [...] the characteristic of my doctrine, namely, that I chiefly insist upon continuity, or Thirdness” (*CP*, 6.202, 1898); but he would have no objection, he says, to his system’s being known as “synechism”.

In view of the dense and subtle interconnections among the various elements of his metaphysics, it is hardly necessary to add that, like Kant, Peirce aspires to a systematic, “architectonic” philosophy. The Pragmatic Maxim requires that meaningful conjectures, whether in the special sciences or in metaphysics, have experiential content; the regulative principle of synechism gives them potential explanatory power; scholastic realism acknowledges the real generality that explanatoriness requires; the categories suggest the relation of laws and kinds to the particular things that instantiate them, and of our experiential inter-

actions with those particular things to our generalized representations of them—in short, of experience to reasoning; etc.

Unlike Kant, Peirce was always more preoccupied with the cosmological and psychical branches of metaphysics than with the questions of God, freedom, and immortality. Nevertheless, he speaks to these questions too—architectonically: offering a nested series of abductions and meta-abductions in “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God”; suggesting that free will results from the plasticity of mind-with-a-small-“m” implied by objective idealism; and, in an unpublished paper of 1893 entitled “Immortality in the Light of Synechism”, suggesting that there might be disembodied, spiritual consciousness as well as the embodied, carnal kind. A few years earlier he had written: “I cannot admit the proposition of Kant—that there are certain impassable bounds to human knowledge; and, even if there are such bounds in regard to the infinite and absolute, the question of a future life, as distinct from the question of immortality, does not transcend them” (*CP*, 6.556, 1887).

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As Peirce would be the first to acknowledge, even when metaphysics is conducted in the right way—from the right motive, and using the appropriate methods—there is no guarantee of the hoped-for “extraordinary harvest of fundamental truths”. Peirce’s own metaphysical harvest is quite remarkable; and I believe it contains many grains of truth. The present goal, however, is not to separate the wheat from the chaff, but to suggest what we can learn from his distinctive understanding of what metaphysics should be and do.

It can hardly escape notice that this distinctive understanding is itself an abductive hypotheses of just the kind that synechism recommends. And it is not Peirce’s critique of Kant’s analytic/synthetic distinction, his pragmatist conception of meaning, his repudiation of the concept of the Thing-in-itself, or his reconception of the real, that will be central to the rest of the argument: it is his synechistic reconception of the metaphysical enterprise.

Not so long after Peirce’s death, the Logical Positivists—axe-wielding philosophers *par excellence!*—launched a renewed onslaught on the legitimacy of metaphysics: an onslaught so successful that even now you still occasionally hear echoes of Hume, when “metaphysical” is used pejoratively, meaning “meaningless, hopelessly airy-fairy”. Ironically enough, as the term “Logical Positivism” signals, admiration for the achievements of the new, modern logic—seen as a new, powerful tool for the demolition of metaphysics—was in part responsible for this new movement; when one might have expected that, for example, Frege’s

analysis of “exists” as not a predicate but a second-order concept would prompt renewed ontological effort.

Still, even so determined a positivist as Carnap did not eschew metaphysics entirely, but rather allowed ontological questions some legitimacy, *provided* they were recast as pragmatic questions about the choice of linguistic framework. Kant’s metaphor of the old Queen as “a matron outcast and forsaken” has lost neither its relevance nor its poignancy: if Carnap’s concessions to ontology bring to mind an Oliver Cromwell allowing himself the occasional glass of wine, *provided* it is strictly for medicinal purposes, Strawson’s and Quine’s unapologetic attention to such traditional ontological questions as the problem of the One and the Many evoke the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy.

Nevertheless, even though in the last half-century there has been much work in metaphysics, and even though some of this work has been impressively clever, Kant’s description of metaphysics as “a battlefield of endless controversies”, and even his references to those “time-worn dogmatisms”, have lost neither their relevance nor their poignancy either; nor does metaphysics presently seem to be bringing in any very “extraordinary harvest of fundamental truths”. Probably, in these more secular times, there is less of the theologically-motivated sham metaphysical reasoning of which Peirce complained; but probably, in this era of publish-or-perish preposterism, there is more career-enhancing fake metaphysical reasoning—efforts, that is, to make a case for propositions to the truth-value, but not the publicity-value, of which their proponents are indifferent.² Sometimes, indeed, one is put in mind of Hume’s eloquent complaint:

[t]here is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. [...] Disputes are multiplied, as if everything was uncertain; and these disputes are managed with the greatest warmth, as if everything was certain. Amidst all this bustle ’tis not reason which carries the prize, but eloquence; and no man needs ever despair of gaining proselytes to the most extravagant hypothesis, who has art enough to represent it in any favourable colours. The victory is not gained by the men at arms, who manage the pike and the sword; but by the trumpeters, drummers, and musicians of the army (*Treatise*, p. xviii).

And one still dare not think of taking a dogmatic nap; for once again some dismiss the whole business.

Most startling perhaps, is this, from Richard Rorty: “The pragmatist does not think of himself as any kind of metaphysician”.³ This comment is remarkable in part for its historical *chutzpah*, for by now I need

² Haack 1996.

³ Rorty 1982, p. xxviii.

hardly say that Peirce, the founder of pragmatism, was a metaphysician of unusual breadth and depth. More important, though, is that Peirce's reconception of metaphysics enables us to steer clear both of apriorism and of scientism, the Scylla and Charybdis of recent metaphysics.⁴ It suggests how to extend the domain of metaphysics from "our concepts and categories", as in Strawson's quasi-Kantian "descriptive metaphysics", to the world; to give metaphysics some experiential anchoring, instead of relying on "what is agreeable to reason", as in David Lewis's quasi-Leibnizian modal realism; and to do this without making metaphysics the handmaiden of current scientific theorizing, as Quine sometimes seems to do. But Peirce's is, if not quite "the only path that remains unexplored", a path sadly neglected since he pointed the way; so allow me to point out some signposts we might do well to heed.

First: whatever else it is, philosophy is a kind of inquiry, an effort to discover the truth of the questions within its scope; if, as Rorty urges, it were to give up this aspiration and become "just a kind of writing", it's not clear it would be worth much. This isn't to deny that some works of philosophy, like some works of history, etc., qualify as "literary" in the aesthetically-honorific sense of the word—as Plato's dialogues surely do, and Francis Bacon's *Essays*, and many others; nor is it to deny that some works of imaginative literature convey philosophical truths—as George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* surely does, and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and many others. It is only to place philosophy on a continuum—the continuum of kinds of inquiry—to which the sciences, history, detective-work, etc., also belong.

This presupposes that there is a class of questions characteristic of philosophical inquiry, and capable of true or false answers; not, however, that the class of such questions is set in stone (not all or only the questions on the agenda of the philosophers of ancient Greece were still to be found on Descartes' agenda, nor are all or only Descartes' questions to be found on, say, Quine's or Derrida's). The evolution of new questions and the displacement of old ones is simply one of the ways in which any healthy discipline develops. It is a familiar fact that over time the questions tackled by the sciences have shifted and changed: e.g., the question about the structure of DNA which Watson and Crick are now famous for answering was not even conceivable when the stuff was first identified a century earlier; the concept of macromolecule, and the idea that stereochemical structure as well as chemical composition matters, came only later. And the fact that, in philosophy as in the sciences, new

⁴ Haack 1998.

theories and new concepts raise new questions and displace older ones doesn't mean there are no characteristically philosophical questions.

In the course of its long history, however, metaphysics especially has only too often been entangled in questions that eventually turned out to rest on false presuppositions. (The appropriate response to dubious metaphysical questions is obvious, if laborious: trace their roots until you find the falsehood, the wrong answer, among the assumptions on which they depend). In fact, this long history of misconceived questions based on wrong answers to earlier questions is probably an important source of the idea that there must be something just inherently wrong with the metaphysical enterprise as such—an idea which I, like Kant and Peirce, believe to be “a complete mistake”. But I would urge that at the next fork we take Peirce's path rather than Kant's.

The fundamental questions of metaphysics are about the world, the one real world; albeit questions characterized by a peculiar kind of abstraction and generality (a point Quine makes vivid when he writes that, while the question of how many and what kinds of beetle there are is characteristic of zoology, the question of how many and what kinds of thing or stuff there are is characteristic of metaphysics). To be sure, answering metaphysical questions often requires strenuous efforts at conceptual clarification; as, for example, Peirce's articulation of his realism led to his adoption, and pragmatist adaptation, of Scotus' conception of reality. Nevertheless, metaphysical theories are about the world, not just about conceptual schemes or linguistic frameworks or the-world-as-it-appears-to-us.

On this conception the former domain of the Queen of the Sciences is restored—but not her throne, exactly; for the old, autocratic apriorist regime is now restrained in a kind of constitutional monarchy. For, in my opinion as in Peirce's, precisely because it falls to metaphysics to investigate the most general aspects of reality, metaphysical inquiry must rely on experience as well as reasoning. Not that metaphysicians need to conduct experiments or set off on expeditions; for metaphysical abductions and meta-abductions can be expected to be of the highest generality, and the evidence by which they stand or fall won't be in the least *recherché*. If we are wondering whether there are uniformities in nature, for example, no fancy equipment or skillful experiment will help; nevertheless, the common experience that we can successfully predict how animals, or people, or stuff will behave is surely *apropos*. As Peirce suggested, the fact that the observations on which it rests are so familiar—so that, if you are so inclined, you really *can* do metaphysical work without having to leave your armchair—makes metaphysics seem more peculiarly *a priori* than it really is.

In briefest summary, then: (part of) Kant's legacy to Peirce was a lasting conviction that metaphysics doesn't have to be the hopelessly "airy science" Hume had pooh-poohed, but could and should become a legitimate and valuable area of investigation; and (part of) Peirce's legacy to philosophy today is a distinctively plausible post-Kantian reconception of how this might be achieved.

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