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## PEIRCE AND THE SEMIOSIS OF THE HOLY

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Charles Sanders Peirce advanced a conceptual framework that used something analogous to the ontological difference to ground his conceptions of God, phenomenology, and the three primal ontological categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Whereas Heidegger spoke of the difference between Being and a being, Peirce struggled toward an acknowledgment of the abyss separating the sheer difference of origin, both cosmic and phenomenal, from the qualities, traits, and powers manifest within nature and its innumerable orders. His conception of God, as we will see, oscillates between a classical view that would equate God with the highest good that is manifest here and now and a process view that would see God as an ejection from the primal state of ontological possibility. On the process reading, God is stretched between the powers of the hidden origin and the emergent rationality that is promised at the end of the evolutionary process. God is unique among the complexes of nature in participating in both sides of the ontological difference.

Pragmatism invokes its own version of the ontological difference when it speaks of the difference between nature nutured and nature naturing (cf. Corrington 1988 & 1990). In a sense, this distinction remains the unsaid within Peirce's writings and thus operates in an ambiguous way to illuminate the gulf separating off the orders of the world from the primal unmediated origin (firstness) that is nature naturing. The tensions between these two fundamental dimensions of nature become acute in Peirce's philosophical theology, with its implied semiosis of the holy, where this unsaid presupposition of thought, precisely because it is unsaid, generates problems in his conceptual portrayal of God. His seeming inability to choose between a classical and a process theism stems from his lack of clarity concerning the ontological difference and the role it must play in shaping all other categories. In what follows we will focus on these tensions and their possible amelioration.

Peirce's conception of God, while incomplete and fragmentary, represents a serious attempt to integrate the general traits of the divine nature into a conception of an evolving and goal directed universe. In his detailed analyses of continuity and evolutionary love, Peirce developed an account of God that stressed the triumphal

manifestation of Reason within the emergent generals of the world. The convergence of evolution toward the Reasonable per se, while not denying the perennial irruptions of novelty and the creation of new and more plastic habits, marks the path of the divine within the innumerable complexes of the world. The God of nature emerges into its plenitude through the evolutionary processes that take place alongside of the divine nature and it is meaningful to say that the divine is one of nature's products. From this it follows that Peirce had to reject the traditional notion of *creatio ex nihilo* with its assumption that the divine is in all senses prior to the innumerable orders of the world.

Of course, Peirce used the traditional language of "nothingness" or "nothing-in-particular-ness" [Cf. 6.217 & 6.200] in pointing to the original condition prior to cosmogenesis but he invested this nothingness with tendencies and possibilities that are themselves evocative of diversity and secondness. Sometimes he equated nothingness with chaos while at other times he gave nothingness a separate ontological status. Consider his 1893 "Rejoinder to Dr. Carus", where he argued that his concept of "absolute chance" or "chaos" is prior to existence [6.612]:

Even this nothingness, though it antecedes the infinitely distant absolute beginning of time, is traced back to a nothingness more rudimentary still, in which there is no variety, but only an indefinite specificability, which is nothing but a tendency to the diversification of the nothing, while leaving it as nothing as it was before.

Existence emerges out of nothingness as the protean chaos gives birth to orders of resistance which in turn generate habits of increasing scope and efficacy. Peirce's nothingness is intrinsically self-othering and is constituted by innumerable potencies that must manifest themselves in the orders of secondness and thirdness. The ejective power of primal chaos is self-contained and does not require an external agent or first cause. Consequently, is it incorrect to assume that Peirce's language concerning nothingness is fully commensurate with more traditional conceptions. His nothingness has the key tendency of diversification and can be understood outside of any consideration of external divine agency. Nature naturing is thus indirectly illuminated by the concept of a self-othering nothingness.

God is thus the primal eject of the nothingness even though the contour of God remains elusive and incomplete in the early stages of cosmogenesis. In 1906, Peirce made it clear that the creative power of the divine is embedded in all phases of creation even though God does not antedate the universe in which its own traits are manifest [6.506]:

I am inclined to think (though I admit that there is no necessity of taking that view) that the process of creation has been going on for an infinite time in the past, and further, during *all* past time, and, further, that past time had no definite beginning, yet came about by a process which in a generalized sense, of which we cannot *easily* get much idea, was development. I believe Time to be a reality, and not the figment which Kant's nominalism proposes to explain it as being. As reality, it is due to creative power. . . . I think we must regard Creative Activity as an inseparable attribute of God.

God's creative activity is ubiquitous throughout the orders of the world and seems to be generative of the time process itself. Peirce's God thus occupies a curious ontological position. On the one hand, his God is an eject of primal chaos and emerges with the generals of the universe. On the other hand, his God has the trait of creative activity and seems to spawn time and the orders connected with time. On the latter point, Peirce stated, ". . . time may have been evolved by the action of habit." [8.318]. Put differently, God is both a product and a producer and lives somewhere between pure chaos and absolute reasonableness. God thus lives on both sides of the ontological difference, in this case, the difference between finite and created orders of the world (God's ejective quality) and the creative power that sustains the innumerable complexes of nature.

The creative power of world origination is tied to the category of firstness, that is to the category of possibility prior to exemplification. In 1894 Peirce details the unique features of pure firstness as they related to the condition of the universe prior to the creation of existents [1.303]:

The pure idea of a *monad* is not that of an object. For an object is over against me. But it is much nearer an object than it is to a conception of self, which is still more complex. There must be some determination, or suchness, otherwise we shall think nothing at all. But it must not be an abstract suchness, for that has reference to a special suchness. It must be a special suchness with some degree of determination, not, however, thought as more or less. There is to be no comparison. So that it is a suchness *sui generis*.

This special suchness is not a given suchness, that is, it cannot be a first or a quality but must be the sheer availability of possible qualities. We cannot arrive at a conception of pure suchness through analogy or through incremental degrees of conceptual scope. Suchness remains on the other side of the existents that constitute the world. In other contexts Peirce describes this suchness as pure feeling, pure freshness, and pure life [cf. 1.302].

The original state of pure feeling sports variation and gives birth to habits which in turn form into generals. [cf. 6.33]. Is God responsible for the transition from feeling to secondness to generality or is God itself emergent from the growth of the universe? Donna Orange argues that Peirce's God is both the creative Alpha that launches generality in the world and the consummatory Omega that lives out of the power of reasonableness, "Whether, for the purpose of a specific discussion, he considered God as beginning or as end, Peirce's thought led toward a conception of God (or Reason) becoming God (or reasonableness)" (1984: 68). God thus gives birth to itself as it approximates the Omega point of the Reasonable per se. It is less clear how we are to understand the Alpha point in divine evolution. The Omega point stands as a goad or lure for divine growth and secures Reason against premature foreclosure or the chaos of sportive feelings and their emergent seconds. But where does the Alpha point begin to manifest itself?

On one reading, Peirce embraced a process theism that allows God to be eternally self-surpassable in the face of an evolving universe of generals. The process reading would stress two features of the divine life. First, it would argue that the Omega point is itself somehow beyond God. That is, God would be a sign of

something beyond itself and thus point to the *summum bonum* in a symmetrical manner. The Omega point would point back to God even though such a form of semiosis would be beyond human apprehension. Second, it would argue that God is itself in process and thus moving toward a state of divine fulfillment. It is clear from Peirce's texts that the world can be a sign of God, iconically, indexically, and symbolically [cf. 5.119]. It is somewhat less clear whether God is a sign of something else. That is, how does God itself point to and illuminate the Omega point if God can be equated with Reason or with the growth of concrete reasonableness? For David Pfeifer, God does point beyond itself toward love, ". . . God is a sign of love actively energizing the universe. This love, as a law, is the active power causing the changes in the universe" (1979: 97).

In a different reading of Peirce's theism, Stanley Harrison, in an unpublished paper delivered before the Semiotic Society of America, argued against Orange and Pfeifer and their claim that God can be a sign of the law of love or of the *summum bonum*. For Harrison, God is a dynamical object that is fully infinite and beyond all growth. In rejecting the view that God is a sign, and thus evocative of an extra-divine referent, Harrison insists that Peirce's God cannot be in process. The non-process view would take seriously a passage like the following, ". . . the very meaning of the word 'God' implies, not surely *morality*, for He seems to me to be above all self-restraint of law, but to imply aesthetic spiritual perfection" [6.510]. Consequently, the non-process view affirms that God, as the *summum bonum*, is beyond all growth. It thus does not make a sharp distinction between God and the *summum bonum*. Such perfection cannot be embedded in a time process or involved in the recalcitrant and fitful movement of evolution. The process view can only make sense if God grows into something that is other than God. For Harrison, God is ultimately beyond all semiotic analysis and has an "inscrutable individuality" that is manifest to us indirectly through human forms of community and religious experience.

The decision as to whether or not to accept the process view is a vexing one. If God is infinite, in contradistinction to James, then God seems to have unlimited scope and is greater than the sum of all the world's orders. Yet if God is not itself fully developed at the beginning of cosmogenesis, as I argue, then there must be some sense in which God must approximate some state beyond itself. God would thus be infinite but self-surpassable in the face to that which is also infinite but in a different respect. In what sense, then, is the Reasonable per se, or the aesthetic ideal of the *summum bonum* different from the divine who struggles to embody or actualize it? In Peirce's unique understanding of anthropomorphism, God is in some respects like the human process and exhibits its own developmental teleology. That is, the concept of cosmic evolution entails the concept of a personal creator [Cf. 6.157]. From this it seems to follow that God is not yet complete in all respects even if infinite in scope, but not in power.

In a 1902 discussion of mind, instinct, and consciousness, Peirce attacks Leibniz for equating infinity with perfection and completion [7.380]:

The Deity of the Theodicee of Leibniz is as high an Instinctive mind as can well be imagined; but it impresses a scientific reader as distinctly inferior to the human mind. It reminds one of the view of the Greeks that Infinitude is a defect; for although Leibniz imagines that he is making the Divine Mind infinite, by making its knowledge Perfect and

complete, he fails to see that in thus refusing it the powers of thought and the possibility of improvement he is in fact taking away something far higher than knowledge.

For Peirce, then, infinity and growth are not incompatible concepts. Insofar as God is a person, or is like a person, God improves itself over time, even though there is another sense in which God, as the chief exemplar of creative activity, creates time. Once again we are struck with a fundamental tension within Peirce's theism. God is an eject of nature, perhaps we may even say an eject of nature naturing, and yet the creative source of growth and the rise of generality. God emerges from pure chaos but is more than the 'sum' of generals at any given stage of cosmic evolution.

Michael Raposa is sensitive to both the process and nonprocess reading of Peirce although he ultimately sides with those who see Peirce affirming the traditional doctrine of radical creation out of nothing. For Raposa, God is both the absolute creator and the ultimate end of the universe. While the concept of the "Absolute" is less vague than the concept of "God", both concepts or symbols point to the reality of the Deity (1989: 68):

Rather, if God as *Creator* and God as *completely revealed* are conceived to be infinitely distant states of the universe, its origin as a Platonic world of possibility, its terminus as fully concrete reasonableness, then they are most properly regarded as being symbols of the Deity.

Raposa thus rejects the view that sees God as itself an ejected complex of the originary potencies of the world. God is actual at both the beginning and the end of the evolutionary process and cannot be an emergent reality in the same way that other complexes or their thirds are emergent. For Raposa, "In this sense, to say that the Deity determines itself and that God creates the world *ex nihilo*, is to say one and the same thing," (71). God's self-determination, as the introduction of new and possibly novel traits into the divine contour, is fully commensurate with the original creative act by which God brought the world of firstness into being. Like Harrison, Raposa reads Peirce along more traditional Scholastic lines and does not want to introduce radical finitude into the divine nature or divine evolution.

The tension between an emergent and an infinite God can be ameliorated by reshaping Peirce's conceptions in such a way as to do justice to both the ejective quality of God and to the evolving infinity of the divine life. This reconstruction takes the process view seriously by insisting that there is something beyond the divine that goads it to eternal self-overcoming. The difficult question is whether or not the *summum bonum* is itself in process. Related to this is the question as to whether God is identical to the *summum bonum* or underway toward it. I argue that Peirce is not clear on these points. Certain passages seem to say that there is a sense in which the *summum bonum* is itself embedded in evolution. Consider what Peirce said in 1905 [5.433]:

Accordingly, the pragmatist does not make the *summum bonum* to consist in action, but makes it to consist in the process of evolution whereby the existent comes more and more to embody those generals

which were just now said to be *destined*, which is what we strive to express in calling them *reasonable*.

On this reading, the *summum bonum* fully participates in the evolutionary process and is thus immanent in the world. Using spatial metaphors, we are thus compelled to analyze the ways in which God is a time-bound and located product of nature naturing while living out of the lure of a higher infinite than that embodied in its own life.

Like Tillich, Peirce rejected the view that God can be a being within the world. Existence or secondness would limit the infinitude of God as manifest in thirdness. The dyadic tensions in the orders of existence are not directly relevant to the divine growth toward the *summum bonum*. Consequently, for Peirce, the divine cannot be located within other orders of existence that might limit or fragment the divine scope. God can only be infinite insofar as secondness is transcended by thirdness. Yet, as we have noted, there are two grades of infinitude implied in Peirce's account of God. The lesser grade pertains to God itself as underway toward more and more reasonableness. The higher grade is manifest in the *summum bonum* which sometimes seems to be beyond growth. The lesser grade of infinity is correlated to the current 'sum' of generals in the world and exhibits the immanence of God within nature. The higher grade of infinity is beyond all generals and represents the ultimate not-yet for both God and the world. Insofar as God is indefinitely self-surpassable, it is because of the eternal tension between the two grades of infinity.

In denying that the trait of existence or secondness is directly applicable to God, Peirce makes it difficult to articulate the ways in which the divine and the world become relevant to each other. The process metaphor of the "divine lure" is appropriate when delineating the ways in which generals feel the pull of larger possibilities that transcend attained cosmic habits. Yet it is less clear how the divine becomes relevant to the orders of existence themselves. Not only does this gap between emergent thirdness and brute secondness make it difficult for Peirce to develop a compelling account of evil, it makes it especially difficult for him to show just how the divine is relevant to the spheres of resistance that punctuate and threaten the human process. Put differently, in what sense can Peirce's God be ordinally located within nature so that the divine life has more than a bare teleological relevance for the self?

I propose the following transformations of Peirce's categorical scheme so that his doctrine of God can become more compelling outside of the context of his perspective. Instead of speaking of the three categories as they may or may not be exhibited in the Alpha and the Omega that govern the divine life, we should speak of different divine dimensions. In the first divine dimension, God is located within the orders of the world and fully participates in existence, space, and time. In this dimension, God is a product of nature naturing and thus belongs among the orders of nature natured. As one order among innumerable others, the divine is fragmented by the scope and power of other orders. In this sense, God is finite and correlated to secondness. In this dimension, God is experienced as a fragmented origin that competes with other origins for a share of the power within the world. As noted by James, such a God needs the energies of the human process to fulfill its role in giving shape to its own life. Put in different terms, the first divine dimension is manifest in epiphanies of power that stand on the fringes of our normal semiotic life. Such

sacramental orders transform the human process and move it beyond intra-worldly semiosis.

In the second divine dimension, God is still an order within the world but is manifest as a fragmented goal that moves the self and the community toward the future. Peirce's "would be" is transformed into an eschatological moment that radically alters the conditions of social interaction. In a sense, this second dimension is correlated to Peirce's concept of the community of inquirers with the important difference that the teleological theory of truth is replaced by the infinite suspension of the not-yet. Progress is not measured in terms of an approximation toward truth in the infinite long run but in terms of the restlessness of the not-yet that enables the community to overcome the temptations of origin and feel the lure of expectation. The first and second divine dimensions remain in dialectical tension as the claims of origin are challenged by the claims of expectation. In both of these dimensions, God is finite and embedded within the seconds of the world. More importantly, God experiences profound limits to its scope and integrity and longs for an internal transformation that will fulfill the divine life.

In the third divine dimension, God is infinite in the lesser grade noted above. That is, God is not only one order among others but lives as the sustaining ground for the innumerable orders of nature natured. Insofar as God is an eject of nature natured, God must be intra-worldly. Yet in its third dimension, God is coextensive with all of the orders of the world and secures them against the threat of non-being. Invoking the language of Tillich, this is the dimension of God that lives as the ground of being. As the ground of being God is infinite in scope and yet eternally self-surpassable. In saying that God is self-surpassable it is implied that there is something extra-divine in the face of which God is goaded toward its own growth (cf. Corrington 1991). In the process reading of Peirce, this is the *summum bonum* that lives before both the human process and the divine itself.

Secondly, the third divine dimension is manifest in the growth of concrete reasonableness within the world. In addition to securing all orders against the threat of non-being, God goads all generals into their own forms of self-surpassing so that the growth of Reason is guaranteed. Divine love for the orders of the world emerges out of the third divine dimension and this love enables all orders and all generals to attain their internal goals. At the same time, this divine love welcomes the irruption of novel traits into the world and enables them to become relevant to emergent thirds.

In the fourth divine dimension, God experiences the Omega point that lives as the lure for its own life. God stands before a higher infinite that gives it the 'space' within which to surpass itself. The Reasonable per se is in a sense beyond God in its four dimensions and lives as an encompassing measure for the divine life. The divine travail in the face of the Omega point empowers and quickens all of the divine dimensions, so that they can become permeable to the not-yet of the *summum bonum*. God's restlessness goads the worlds of firstness, secondness, and thirdness toward fulfillment and transparency.

My solution to the question of the nature of the *summum bonum* is that it is beyond evolution yet remains strongly relevant to the evolving generals in the world. In my reconstruction of Peirce, an effort has been made to be sensitive to these two aspects. The *summum bonum* is that which lures the divine beyond itself and is thus in one sense beyond the divine life. Yet its strong relevance to the innumerable seconds and emergent thirds of the world makes the Omega point operative in



intraworldly evolution. God, in its four dimensions, lives on both sides of the ontological difference and is thus strongly relevant to the evolution of concrete reasonableness. Yet, at the same time, God lives out of the not-yet of its own Omega point and experiences its own eternal travail in the face of that which is forever beyond its reach. While God is surely in process in all of its dimensions, the *summum bonum* both is and is not in process. In a striking sense, the Omega point remains a mystery both to the finite human process and to God who must struggle against the inertia in its own life. Insofar as God responds to the ultimate not-yet, it lives as a model for human evolution and thus infuses the human process with its own form of restlessness.

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