

A NOTE ON PEIRCE AND POSITIVES, AND 1910

In one of his two or three dozen private notebooks – this one with brief discussions of propositions and assertions, secundal arithmetic, and probability and the Petersburg Problem, as well as a draft of a personal letter – Charles S. Peirce wrote the following in the early part of 1910:

"I have been for a good while puzzling over the analysis of the predicate **Positive** applied to certain Predicates or Ideas.

"It occurred to me that it had a similarity with **Vividness**; then that it had more with **Luminousness**. Then that it had still more with **Chroma** or chromatic Intensity. This leads me finally to the conclusion that

"There are some **Respects**, which are such that when we are in doubt how an object will be determined in one of them, we **half**-expect the mind to receive a certain **Shock** or sense of Tension with a Feeling more **Distinctive** than what we feel while in Doubt and **half**-expect, on the contrary to experience of **Relaxation** of tension of mind accompanied by a less Distinctive state of feeling; and if when the Doubt is resolved, it be the former half-expectation that is realized that Predicate which the object is decided to have is **Positive**, while if it be the latter half-expectation that is realized that Predicate is Negative.

"Having reached this point in my reflexions, I ask myself whether I have not mixed up two distinct characters of Predicates.

"This will be the case if I can find any Predicates on learning one of which to be true we experience an **increase of tension** without any increased **Distinctiveness** or even perhaps with a loss of it, or any Predicates which through relaxing tension of Mind do not diminish.

"But what do I mean by **Distinctiveness**? I mean that **Moral wrong** for example has such varieties as Treachery Cruelty etc decidedly unlike one another, while Fidelity & Mildness are not so **unlike**. Falsity has exaggeration, confusion of subjects very unlike while Moderation & Distinctness are not so unlike.

"However that is not so much what I mean as that different kinds of falsity are **incompatible** while all kinds of Truth are compatible.

"But this hardly applies to Positiveness in general."
(MS 276, pp. 3-6)¹

1 Peirce's manuscripts, which are in the Houghton Library of Harvard University, are identified in Richard S. Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967) and "The Peirce Papers: A Supplementary Catalogue", *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 7 (1971), 37-57. Quotations from MS 276 is by permission of the Harvard Philosophy Department.

Peirce ends these brief reflexions with nearly four more pages of several lists of Positives (or positive-negative pairs) of Predicates or Ideas, including among others the following: present - absent, clothed - nude, well - ill, fresh - fatigued, loud - faint, light - dark, gentle - violent, friendly - hostile, easy - difficult, familiar - novel, certain - dubious, cautious - heedless, finite - innumerable, caused - fortuitous, and selected - random. But Peirce did more in 1910 than write scattered notes in a single private notebook.

Although his publishing career had ended the year before and he had come to subsist largely on the generosity of William James and several other friends, and although he was now 70 and in increasingly poor health, Peirce continued - with amazing perseverance and vigor - penning his intellectual legacy. He wrote at least fifty different manuscripts during 1910, and he inscribed well over one thousand manuscript pages. Well over half of these (MSS 645-668, 672, and 771) belong to one of the several larger philosophical works envisioned during his lifetime; begun in 1909, this one is variously titled "Essay on Meaning", "The Rationale of Reasoning", "Quest of Quest", "Studies of Logical Analysis", and "Essays toward the Full Comprehension of Reasonings". Several of these manuscripts contain relevant autobiographical remarks (because "the author of a new book ought to give an account of himself"), as well as critical comments on Euclid, Aristotle, Kepler, Descartes, Arnauld, Hume, Berkeley, Laplace, Mill, and Venn. Taken together, these manuscripts cover most of Peirce's most important semiotico-philosophical topics and concepts, including firstness, secondness, and thirdness; deduction, induction, and retroduction; feeling, volition, and thought; precession, dissociation, and discrimination; phaneroscopy, fallibilism, and the logic of relatives; probability, truth, and the pragmatic maxim; habit, conduct, and the three grades of clearness; and mathematical reasoning, existential graphs, and general semiotic.

There are more scattered and singular manuscripts on pragmatism (MSS 285-287), on various topics in mathematics and geometry (MSS 63, 217, 218, 242, 245, 267, 277, and S-17, as well as the above-cited MS 276), and on several other problems in logic (MSS 703, 704, 755, 828, 1121, and S-61). Moreover, Peirce translated and commented upon the *Cratylus* in MS 986; discussed agglutinative languages in MS 1246; tried to solve a Chinese puzzle MS 1522; and rejected his presumed triadomania in MS 902, which has the distinction of bearing the longest title of any of his manuscripts: "The Author's Response to the anticipated Suspicion that he attaches a superstitious or fanciful importance to the number three, and forces Divisions to a Procrustean Bed of Trichotomy". And finally, he tried to elucidate the art of reasoning in MSS 678 and 679, which were written "late in 1910".

The year 1910 probably cannot be said to be the most significant in Peirce's intellectual development and achievement (although it certainly was a product-

ive one). The same may be said of his above-cited reflexions on the *Positive*. But what is significant - if fortuitous, perhaps - is that these reflexions were written on 8 February 1910, one day after the birth of the man who would become one of Peirce's great students and critics. It is to the memory of this man, Professor Max Bense, that I dedicate my few remarks and Peirce's brief reflexions on the *Positive*.

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