A Case for Peirce and Social Science?

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Among the classic pragmatist philosophers, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), is often regarded as a most difficult and tricky thinker. His writings are seen as catering more to ‘aficionados’, attracted to either speculative cosmology or else to logic and mathematics. However, on the basis of recent archive findings, Peirce’s philosophy is now being regarded as remarkably ‘modern’; indeed, more than a century ago, he struggled with what he at the time called ‘speculative grammar’ which modern Peirce-scholars now view as the forerunner of speech act theory in searching for ‘sequential ordering’ of speech (PEP; Gumperz, 1996; Kevelsen, 1988; Midtgarden, 2000, 2002). Any conversation, or for that matter text, contains an information content followed by a ‘blank’ spot to be filled in as a matter of sequence. In sociology, the ‘hearing/seeing rules’ developed by the legendary Harvey Sachs in the late 60’ies, and cultivated by the ethnomethodological tradition at the time when I was a student, well illustrate the ‘spirit’ of Peirce’s original project: ‘The baby cried – The mommy picked it up’. As was remarked by Sachs himself, the blank spot is the ‘seeing’ inference that it was the ‘mommy’ and not a kidnapper who picked the baby up. From Peirce’s perspective, we are dealing with a ‘first order clarification of meaning’, an abductive inference based on mere ‘familiarity’. (CP 4.389).

Peirce himself took pain to insist that pragmatism was ‘nothing else than the question of the logic of abduction’. (CP 5.196). Logic, in his view, was an exercise in self-control (CP 5.130), and hence, pragmatism was to foster such control. When we move on the level of restricted formal-logical thinking, it is not hard to accept a link between logic and self-control; either we are skilled in the art of drawing logical implications from given premises or we are not. The link between logic (knowledge) and self-control (ethics) is more problematic in the case of the non-formal (synthetic) inferences of induction and abduction. Especially problematic ‘from a logical point of view’ is that of abduction. The inference ‘the mommy picked it up’ appears self-evident at a first glance; the question is if ‘what we see’ here and now will stand up for scrutiny in the long run.

Abduction is not new in the history of philosophy: already Aristotle had contemplated a form of statement called apagoge (CP 1. 65; 68). As the smooth operation of both deduction and induction in fact hangs on the ‘substance’ nourished by abduction, abduction becomes a key inference. It informs us as to ‘why something is the way it is’. Often the ‘abductive judgment comes to us like a flash. It is an act of insight, although of extremely fallible insight.’ (CP 5.181). Peirce’s entire project aimed at infusing self-control in the cognitive process epitomised in the act of seeing: ‘To act intelligently and to see intelligently become at bottom one.’ (CP 7.562). His theory of inquiry is to be seen in this wider perspective of fostering a habit of seeing and acting so that a ‘community of interpretation without definite limits’ could arise among men. The German philosophers K O Apel and Jürgen Habermas ceased on the normative and universal spirit of Peirce’s interpretive project several decades ago and saw in it a surprisingly modern semiotic-pragmatic transformation of Kant’s transcendental philosophy (Apel, 1973; Habermas, 1970).

Also among sociologists, primarily those on the margin of the discipline like for instance Harvey
Sachs, abduction has been in focus although under different labels. We need to recall C. W. Mill’s vivid plea to the promise of the sociological discipline: to foster ‘the sociological imagination’ so as to link private troubles with public issues (1959). Abduction has (also by Peirce) often been used as equivalent to ‘hypothesis’. But when logical positivism was in its height, then hypothesis-making was regarded as something merely empirical, possibly of interest for psychology and sociology, but hardly for logic and philosophy (Popper, 1972). As abduction by contamination could be seen as a flirtation with irrational Verstehen-approaches, its cultivation as a ‘context of discovery’ was not deemed relevant. In a seminal article in \textit{AJS}, typical for its epoch, Theodor Abel ceased on the occasion to severely criticise his European émigré colleague, Florian Znaniecki, for daring to suggest the notion of a human coefficient as a ground of validation in the social sciences (Abel, 1948: 211-218).

The rise of post-positivism in the social sciences has done much to revive the interest in European hermeneutics, but largely without exploiting the link to the ‘logic of abduction’ in classic pragmatism. A rare exception is the Australian sociologist Norman Blaikie’s methodological writings on ‘social enquiry’ (2007). Among contemporary philosophers, on both sides of the Atlantic, abduction is becoming intensively discussed, but then primarily from the vantage point of an advanced formal analytical logic not easily accessible to many social scientists lacking training in mathematics and logic (Hintikka, 1997). But the real promising undertaking from the point of view of the social and the human sciences in the new archive readings on Peirce is to explore the relevance of ‘sequencing of thought/speech’ in the ‘speculative grammar’ now seen as prior to both logic and mathematics (Midtgarden, op.cit.).

The multiple approaches under the label of ‘critical realism’ have had considerable appeal in the last couple of decades among primarily European social theorists (Archer et al., 1998). One declared intention behind these approaches has been to restore the ‘scientific’ ground of contemporary social theory. The inference of abduction is now seen as a necessary and vital ingredient in ‘post-empiricist’ social science. Sociology, as a science of great complexity, is especially targeted as imbued with ‘abductive logic’ (Danermark et al., 2002: 88). When we see such events as ‘men and women communicating’, we quickly infer ‘gender structures in operation’; when we see ‘pupils and teachers interacting’, we easily infer (‘see’) the institution of schooling; a text with a content is by us quickly translated into ‘ideological content’; in a funeral or a greeting we ‘see’ rituals binding emotions.

What is at stake here, well illustrated by the sociological mind to see patterns/structures in individual events, is precisely a form of ‘imaginary inferences’. Depending upon our imaginary faculties, whether we are theorists or empiricists, such inferences occur on many levels; some of us claim to be closer to that which we ‘see’, while others develop a taste for theoretically induced inferences. Critical realists are for the most quite theoretical, and view it as their special aim to discover the necessary logical relations holding fuzzy events together. For that purpose, they distinguish between abduction and retroduction (Danermark et al., 2002: 80;110). Peirce himself employed both terms indiscriminately. (\textit{CP} 1, 65; 68). The preference for distinguishing between abduction and retroduction seems to relate to the need of critical realists to prove a third reality-level of laws, or of generative mechanisms to be theoretically deduced. As a lead in inquiry, abduction then appears as a first creative phase in the ‘imagining’ of such patterns, while retroduction is a logical and transfactual operation securing the ‘validation’ of that which we merely imagined earlier (Bhaskar, 1978: 227).
I have previously criticised the sharp division between the empirical and the logical/transcendental, a division that Peirce (and all pragmatists) tried so hard to refute (Bertilsson, 2007; 2009). Here, it suffices to call attention to one of the central texts in Peirce’s ‘pragmatist’ phase: *How To Make Our Ideas Clear* (CP 5.389 - 410) where he distinguishes between levels of meaning-clarification: familiarity (as in Sach’s inference), logical, and pragmatist levels of clearing up concepts.

The recurring fascination and interest in the logic of abduction resides in the fact that it deals with ‘primitive classification’: why we see events the way we do. Like Emile Durkheim, Peirce claimed that there were social factors operating in perceptual processes. Contrary to Durkheim (and to Kant), Peirce did not conceive of such social factors as operating blindly behind our backs, but as potentialities of a future state of ‘scientific citizens’ (Elam & Bertilsson, 2003). In his view, logic assumed ‘the social principle’. He nourished a hope that logic and science could teach us to see ‘particulars’ from the point of view of a universal community of observers/interpreters. To us moderns, such a majestic hope seems perhaps ridiculous, if not even downright dangerous (Latour, 1993). But we need be reminded of the *contra-factual*ity of Peirce’s philosophy. It is not about being as such, but about the (infinite) conditions under which a common view would be possible (if inquiry continued long enough). His semiotic pragmatism grounded in the triadic structure of signs (icon as vague experiences, index as observing relations, and symbol or interpretant as inference-making) was constructed for that great purpose to imbue in us a sense of humility when we ‘see’ that which we are most certain of; while remembering that what we see may be wholly different when seen from a community of speech and interpretation, without definite limits. To the very end, there will always be a blank spot/a question to be filled in – was it really the mommy who picked the baby up, perhaps it was a male kidnapper, dressed in woman’s cloth? They mystery and charm of world-interpretation can thus continue for ever.

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PEP – Peirce Edition Project. Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis (www.iupui.edu/peirce/)