

JAMES, PEIRCE, AND PRAGMATISM:
INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE

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In view of Peirce's eventual rejection of 'pragmatism' as a label for his philosophy, and his preference for the deliberately less attractive 'pragmaticism,' it is often maintained that he and William James represent divergent pragmatist traditions.¹ Indeed, Richard Rorty came to believe that Peirce falls outside the pragmatist tradition, providing it with little else than its name. For Rorty, Peirce remains too wedded to quasi-philosophical concerns inherited from the European tradition, and it is only with James and Dewey that the radical humanistic potential of American pragmatist philosophy is appreciated. Hence Peirce and James are often presented as differing in their respectively 'scientific' and 'humanistic' priorities. Whereas Peirce introduces his pragmatism as a methodological principle for facilitating the solution (or dissolution) of metaphysical problems, James's pragmatism is of far greater scope and is intended to address such concerns as the value and desirability of human existence. While Peirce's sympathisers object to a lack of logical rigor in James's writings and to an epistemic frivolity which has tarnished the reputation of pragmatist philosophy, those sympathetic to James complain of the narrow technical preoccupations that prevent Peirce from adequately addressing moral and existential concerns.

To sharply distinguish, however, between a 'scientific-objectivist' Peircean pragmaticism and a 'humanistic-subjectivist' Jamesian pragmatism is to risk overlooking the numerous commonalities between Peirce and James. Contrary to his reputation as a narrowly technical logician, Peirce did engage seriously and in depth with ethical matters and his later architectonic system makes logic systematically subordinate to ethics and aesthetics. James's scientific interests and his strong empiricist leanings should also cast doubt on the long-held suspicion that his philosophy gives license to undisciplined wishful thinking. What is more, Peirce and James are both explicitly dedicated to reconciling a commitment to modern scientific method with a profound religiosity. In addition, little is known of the important personal and intellectual conversations they sustained over many years, conversations that, according to the

testimony of each of them, affected and stimulated their thought, even in dramatic ways.

The editors of this special issue of *William James Studies* are therefore grateful for the opportunity to present a collection of recent essays covering a number of topics within the general field of the relations between Peirce's and James's respective philosophies. It is hoped that the various contributions shall highlight the opportunities for dialogue across the pragmatist tradition, without failing to respect the breadth and diversity of the movement. The contributions address topics in metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophies of science and religion, and the nature of truth—frequently identified as a crucial point of disagreement between Peirce's pragmatism and James's.

It is a particular objective of the special issue to highlight work on Peirce, James, and pragmatism from scholars based in Latin America. Both guest editors were present at the founding conference of the Sociedad Latinoamericana Peirce at the Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla in 2019 and co-edited the proceedings of that event in a collection entitled *The Reception of Peirce and Pragmatism in Latin America: A Trilingual Collection*.² That event and the continuing activities of the Sociedad are testament to the lively influence of Peircean and pragmatist ideas amongst scholars and writers throughout Latin America, and the guest editors are proud to be able to showcase in this special issue some new work from pragmatism scholars based at institutions in Brazil and Mexico. In recognition of the thriving community of pragmatism scholarship in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking worlds, this issue of *William James Studies* includes, for the first time in the journal's history, a Spanish language contribution.

Peirce and James may justly be regarded as co-originators of the pragmatist tradition. Although James popularized philosophical pragmatism, he always credited Peirce as the founder of the 'pragmatist' movement. Indeed, James remained a loyal supporter of Peirce and a constant advocate of his work, endeavoring wherever possible to secure employment for his old friend, and when Peirce's difficult personality made this impossible, going to lengthy efforts

to provide what financial support he was able to offer. For Peirce was, unlike his good friend James, a most awkward and irritable character who, in spite of his deep philosophical commitment to the value of collaborative effort and intellectual cooperation, was an often unreliable colleague, given to impatience in his dealings with others and little disposed to adjust his often challenging writing style to accommodate the preferences of a wider audience.³ At times, indeed, Peirce's writings—which are littered with mathematical equations, references to the history of philosophy and science, bizarre neologisms, and specialist terminology from a wide array of scientific disciplines—can seem almost willfully obscure. Those few works which he was successful in publishing during his lifetime are often intimidatingly dense in places, and contain lengthy digressions, and his voluminous unpublished writings are, quite predictably, even less accessible.

The reasons for Peirce's relative neglect during his own lifetime and for much of the twentieth century are therefore not difficult to discern. With the growing audience of enthusiasts which his work has found over more recent decades, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that his isolation during his lifetime from what ought to have been his community of intellectual collaborators, and his posthumous failure to reach anything approaching the audience of such fellow pragmatists as James and Dewey, was not only a personal tragedy for one who so vocally championed the communitarian dimension of the scientific enterprise, but a regrettable loss to the history of twentieth-century philosophy. When it is so often remarked that Peirce anticipated many of the most important developments in twentieth-century analytic philosophy, from his groundbreaking work in formal logic, to the proto-falsificationist elements of his philosophy of science, his quasi-functionalist approach to mental phenomena, and his profoundly original research in semiotics, one can hardly help but wonder whether so much of the dismissive treatment which pragmatist philosophy has received from the analytic tradition might have been avoided had more of its principal figures been as well-acquainted with Peirce's work as were James and Dewey.⁴

Indeed, it was James who made perhaps the pithiest observation about Peirce's writing style—"flashes of brilliant light relieved against Cimmerian darkness."⁵ Peirce's writing is often difficult, but it contains passages of such profound insight and originality that hardly anyone who holds the philosophical imagination in any esteem can come away from these passages without the sense of encountering a thinker of outstanding creativity and perspicacity. One's philosophical outlook seldom remains unaffected, moreover, by encounters such as these, and it is then difficult not to find oneself peering into that 'Cimmerian darkness' so off-putting to James, in the hope of catching further glimpses of light, or, most tantalizingly of all, some hidden trace of their underlying connection.

Though unlike his lifelong friend in so many ways, James is a testament to the impressive potential of Peirce's thought to act as a catalyst to philosophical creativity. James is, of course, far too much of an original thinker in his own right ever to occupy the role of uncritical adherent or mere expositor of someone else's ideas and he was, in any case, temperamentally indisposed towards Peirce's speculative and system-building ambitions. It would be grossly unfair—as some of Peirce's champions have done—to accuse James of simply misunderstanding Peirce and offering a discreditable namesake in place of the original form of pragmatism.⁶ To one who so often stressed the importance of temperament in philosophy, it was entirely in keeping with his own philosophical commitments to interpret creatively what sources of philosophical inspiration he was able to find, in order to further an original project of his own, and, in any case, James is quite explicit about his differences with Peirce, the shortcomings he purports to identify in Peirce's brand of pragmatism, and how he intends to extend and improve its application.⁷

It is indeed an irony that James—ever the champion of the heroic individual against established conventions and institutions—was able to function far more effectively within an intellectual community than was his somewhat eccentric but community-idealizing friend. To relate James's 'individualism' and Peirce's 'communitarianism' to their respectively 'nominalist' and 'realist'

forms of pragmatism has become something of a commonplace in the literature comparing these two founding figures of the pragmatist movement.⁸ One might reasonably ask, however, whether it was not James's very reverence for the irreducibly particular and the specificity of actual circumstance which accounts for his greater sensitivity to the subtleties of interpersonal dealings and his more successful grasp of the actual dynamics of different forms of social interaction of varying layers of complexity. James's lack of interest in formal methods of reasoning, and his preference for topics less remote from the concerns of everyday experience was often criticized by Peirce, but it is also the key to James's appeal and the reason that pragmatism's value as a possible insight into those profound human concerns which draw so many to philosophy in the first place have not remained in the 'Cimmerian darkness' of Peirce's writings, into which recent groups of Peirce scholars have gradually begun to shed some flickers of light. Certainly, much work remains to be done in reconstructing the philosophical system which it was always Peirce's aim to construct. In seeking to better understand the details of Peirce's system, however, one ought not to expect incompatibility with James's views at every step of the way, and much recent scholarship suggests quite the reverse.⁹ It is hoped that the present special issue shall contribute to this ongoing effort to understand Peirce and James in light of, rather than in spite of, their respective forms of pragmatist philosophy.

The special issue opens with "Pragmatic Truth: A Task of Ours through an Unusual Comparison" by Cassiano Terra Rodrigues. Comparing Peirce and James in terms of their respective accounts of truth, Rodrigues discusses their relation to Newton da Costa's notion of quasi-truth. Rodrigues highlights, therefore, the contemporary relevance of Peirce and James as influences in ongoing philosophical research in Brazil. His essay addresses a number of longstanding issues in pragmatist accounts of truth, including objectivity, pluralism, relativism, and the human contribution to truth. While acknowledging well-recognized differences between Peirce and James with respect to a pragmatist conception of truth, Rodrigues identifies important points of

agreement as well, particularly concerning the human agent's active involvement in the relationship between truth and its object. Rodrigues's article demonstrates the vast breadth of the pragmatist tradition co-founded by Peirce and James, in assessing how a common pragmatic account of truth might be applied across such diverse subject matters as mathematical knowledge and the production of artistic phenomena. A key pragmatist theme which surfaces throughout Rodrigues's article, then, is the irreducible responsibility which agents must bear in the quest for truth—creatively pursuing an agenda of their own while remaining answerable to stubborn realities confronting them.

The guest editors are honored by the opportunity to present in this special issue Susan Haack's "The Differences that Make a Difference: James and Peirce on the Importance of Individuals." Originally published in the *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, Haack's essay addresses a recurring theme of this special issue by examining the importance of temperament in James's philosophical outlook and the temperamental differences between James and Peirce which underlay their respective approaches to pragmatist philosophy. Focusing on a topic of lasting interest to James, Haack discusses his and Peirce's various approaches to the understanding of 'the great man in history.' Haack's article shows once again the extraordinary breadth of pragmatist philosophy, and how Peirce's work and James's work illustrate cross-disciplinary approaches to issues of general human concern, drawing upon research in biology, the social sciences, and the humanities to illustrate a common cluster of problems from a variety of angles. This essay is also noteworthy for the manner in which it locates James's interest in the topic of history making individuals within the context of a nineteenth century intellectual climate informed by such figures as Darwin, Spencer, and Carlyle, each of whom influenced profoundly a Jamesian approach to individuals and human history.

Daniel Herbert's contribution to the present special issue compares Peirce and James in respect to their commitments regarding the rationality or, more generally, the permissibility of

passionally-motivated beliefs for which no sufficient evidence can be offered. Whereas James's anti-evidentialism is well known from his much-cited essay, "The Will to Believe," Peirce has often been interpreted as an advocate of the very kind of Cliffordian evidentialism which James rejects. This contribution argues that while Peirce's important 1877 essay, "The Fixation of Belief" can easily—when taken in isolation—lend itself to such an evidentialist reading, an appreciation of his broader position as indicated in such other writings as "The Doctrine of Chances," "The First Rule of Logic," and "On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents, Especially from Testimonies," suggests that his views are in fact closer to James than has often been recognized. In particular, and just as James maintains in his 1896 paper, the very belief that there is a truth of the matter about some contested question, and that this might be discovered by scientific methods is, for Peirce, the expression of a desire or hope which cannot be supported by evidence but rests on what James would call one's 'passional nature.'

In "Hábitos y Conocimiento. Las condiciones pragmáticas de un Modelo Científico," the fourth essay of the special issue, Julio Horta discusses Peirce's 'objectivist' and James's 'subjectivist' conceptions of belief and habit. Horta examines the important role of counter-factual conditionals in distinguishing the Peircean and Jamesian approaches to belief and habit, and argues that Peirce's account is better equipped to provide a satisfactory treatment of scientific models. According to Horta then, Peirce's pragmatism differs from James's in respect to its handling of the kinds of laws which are of interest to scientific inquiry.

Finally, in "William James and Charles Sanders Peirce on Experience and Perception: A Radical Exploration of the Universes of Experience," Paniel Reyes Cárdenas aims to show the fundamental accord in Peirce's and James's views on perception and experience. According to Cárdenas, both classical pragmatists discover the richness of experience, and, from the renewed value they see in experience, they construct a theory of perception. There are important nuances and differences between the two, in

Cárdenas's view, but his claim is that their agreement is deeper than previously thought, and that such agreement can be understood, in a pragmatic fashion, in terms of how both of their accounts of perception converge in a richer theory of perception.

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NOTES

¹ Peirce declares his rejection of 'pragmatism' as a label for his own position and his preference for the term 'pragmaticism' in "What Pragmatism Is", published in *The Monist* (April, 1905). See also EP2.331–345.

² Cárdenas and Herbert.

³ It is characteristic of the relationship between the two co-originators of the pragmatist tradition, that when James arranged in 1898 for his struggling friend to give a series of paid lectures at Cambridge, MA., Peirce was nonetheless resentful at his encouragement to speak on topics of popular interest, rather than the more technical issues in formal logic that were occupying Peirce's attention.

⁴ F.P. Ramsey is a notable exception to this general trend, however. Cheryl Misak has done much to shed light on Ramsey's indebtedness to Peirce in such works as her *Frank Ramsey: A Sheer Excess of Powers*.

⁵ James, *Pragmatism*, 10.

⁶ See, for instance, Apel.

⁷ See especially his "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" (1898), in James, *Essays in Philosophy*, 123–139.

⁸ See, for instance, Atkins.

⁹ See, for instance, Woell.