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# Habit and Meaning in Peirce's Pragmatism

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## Habit and Meaning in Peirce's Pragmatism

The pragmatic movement has often been misunderstood; the most frequent misconceptions, which assimilated the philosophies of Peirce and James in particular to forms of positivism, reductionism, or crude voluntarism seem to be on the wane. Peirce's scholastic realism, his doctrine of signs, and his conception of truth as the unique and destined goal of inquiry now tend to receive the attention that was formerly reserved for his empiricism and pragmatism. A similar change in the estimation of James seems to be taking place insofar as his theory of truth is seen as much less simplistic than was formerly supposed; and both his conception of truth and his pragmatism are coming to appear as more powerful philosophical suggestions when seen in their connection with his radical empiricism.

It would, however, be too easy for those sympathetic to the early pragmatists to attribute the misunderstandings to unsympathetic critics (or, in Peirce's case, to the additional factor of the late appearances of the *Collected Papers*). Much of the misunderstanding appears to have been generated by the pragmatists themselves; on a superficial level, they seem to be responsible for sometimes misrepresenting their own ideas. This is not a clear case of philosophical bad faith, for there is sometimes an incoherence in their thought which is quite capable of generating several interpretations. The most general discrepancy has always seemed to be between the metaphysics espoused by the pragmatists and their theory of meaning. When the theory of meaning (in its more reductionist versions) was taken to be the primary philosophical contribution of the pragmatists, their metaphysical speculations were regarded as aberrations, to be explained perhaps in terms of the heady climate created by the competing forms of idealism in their philosophical milieu. However, the more we see of the speculative vigor and coherence of their metaphysics, the more we may be tempted to reverse this interpretation.

Peirce's treatment of a crucial issue in his own pragmatism illustrates, I believe, some of these problems of interpretation, which are in turn complicated by self-interpretations. The general problem is whether we can make sense of either the motives or the formulation of the pragmatic theory of meaning when this theory is regarded in the light of Peirce's more metaphysical analyses. Now Peirce himself wants to exclude the possibility of our raising such questions. In a late exposition of pragmatism (a term he adopted in order to distinguish his own version from others) he says that pragmatism "is no doctrine of metaphysics, no attempt to determine any truth of things. It is merely a method of ascertaining the meaning of hard words or abstract concepts" (5.464).<sup>1</sup> What is misleading about this claim is that while a principle of meaning may not explicitly propose a metaphysical account of anything, it may very well (and perhaps generally does) *presuppose* one. In the same paper, Peirce formulates the pragmatic principle as the thesis that meaning is to be analyzed in terms of habits:

Intellectual concepts . . . essentially carry some implication concerning the general behaviour either of some conscious being or of some inanimate object, and so convey more, not merely than any feeling, but more, too, than any existential facts, namely the "would-act's," "would-do's" of habitual behaviour. (5.467)

The way that Peirce establishes this principle raises some questions; he attempts to give a proof of the claim that *the* meaning of an intellectual concept (or, in his terminology, the ultimate logical interpretant) must be a habit or a habit-change, for this is "the only mental effect . . . that is not a sign but is of a general application" (5.476).

These formulations would suggest that Peirce is committed to the existence or reality of habits, if nothing else. Moreover, the concept of habit has a significant role to play in other areas of his philosophy. At the very least, then, the anti-metaphysical presentations of Peirce's pragmatism must be qualified so as to allow for this. Now the question arises, however, whether the omission detected is an oversight or perhaps masks a serious problem. For once we have filled out Peirce's statement of the pragmatic principle by reference to his analysis of habit, the possibility arises that the principle will have to be modified or abandoned. I suggest that we are forced to just this result when we raise the question of the compatibility of the two analyses. We may begin by

elucidating Peirce's concept of habit and proceed to examine how it fares in his "proof" of pragmatism; finally, it will be important to see how we can account for the discrepancy and what general import it has for Peirce's philosophy.

## I

Habit is used by Peirce to designate an initially bewildering variety of things, including beliefs, logical principles, dispositions, instincts and personality. It is a broad concept which covers under one umbrella what other philosophers might want to separate as the bodily and the mental, or the rational and the irrational. Peirce's typical way of describing it is to say that readiness "to act in a certain way under certain circumstances and when actuated by a given motive is a habit" (5.480). Or, alternatively, "a habit is the *general* way in which one *would act if* such and such a *general* kind of occasion were to occur."<sup>2</sup> As Peirce's emphases in the last formulation suggest, he is at great pains to stress both the generality and the conditional aspect of habit. The significance of this emphasis is that it gives Peirce a way of bridging the gap between thought and action. We can contrast with Peirce's methodological formulation of pragmatism his claim that "quite the most striking feature of the new theory was its recognition of an inseparable connection between rational cognition and rational purpose" (5.412). Here pragmatism is characterized in terms of a certain result (why not call it metaphysical?); and, for our purposes, it is to be noted that this result is precisely the one which Peirce needs in order to make his "proof" of the pragmatic criterion of meaning plausible.

In a preliminary way, we can see why habit can play the role of providing a generic concept with which to analyze thought and action. Thought employs rules or concepts and by subsuming thought under habit, Peirce stresses that these are active rules; to think of something I must be prepared to do a variety of things with it. Action, if it is significant action and not an isolated event, is characterized by a general purpose and a use of a variety of means to obtain this purpose. The teleological nature of action, then, requires some conceptual or rule-like elements and it is these which Peirce stresses as marks of habit (although they need not be consciously or articulately present to the agent).

To understand the import of this analogical use of the concept of habit, it may help to see its roots in Peirce's initial philosophical concerns.

In an early and important paper, Peirce announces the principle that "we must as far as we can do so, without additional hypotheses, reduce all kinds of mental action to one general type" (5.266). The strategic importance of beginning here is that, once having seen the analysis of "the one general type of mental action" we will be in a better position to see what Peirce had in mind in establishing a more generic connection between thought and action.

Peirce begins, in this series of articles, by rejecting intuitionism in all forms. He then proposes to follow a non-intuitive or scientific method in determining the form of mental action. The scientific method suggests that we adopt one relatively simple hypothesis in such matters and then attempt to confirm or disconfirm it by reference to the evidence. The hypothesis here is that all mental action is of the general form of inference. The significance of the claim may appear by considering what Peirce takes the alternative to be. An intuitionist is one, according to Peirce, who believes that some of the contents of our mind are premises which are not themselves conclusions (5.213). Thus he is ordinarily led to suppose at least two forms of mental action, intuition and constructions or inferences from intuition. But intuition is to be rejected as a *recondite* faculty which is neither intelligible nor necessary to explain what we know about cognition or mental activity generally. The associationist school, represented by J. S. Mill, while denying the possibility of an intuitive knowledge of first principles, seems to appeal to something very much like an intuitive knowledge of the data of sense which are connected by association. Both the intuitionist and the associationist, then, recognize at least two types of mental activity: intuitions or primary data and the constructions or associations which derive from them.<sup>3</sup>

If Peirce's thesis is to be accepted, he must show that none of the phenomena adduced by these rival theories are irreducible to forms of inference. Alleged intuitions, he suggests, are the results of unconscious inference; we may not be aware of the inference which produces a certain conclusion, but this does not render the conclusion any less inferential. The associationist doctrine, on the other hand, is construed as an approximation to Peirce's own theory:

The association of ideas is supposed to proceed according to three principles — those of resemblance, of contiguity, and of causality. But it would be equally true to say that signs denote what they

do on the three principles of resemblance, contiguity, and causality . . . the association of ideas consists in this, that a judgment occasions another judgment, of which it is the sign. Now this is nothing less nor more than inference. (5.307)

So far we have been concerned only with "thought"; but Peirce's analogizing has been observed in this area. It is only a few steps to the construction of the master analogy which is to provide us with the key to the "inseparable connection" of thought and action. One way of approaching the extension of the analogy is through Peirce's analysis of inference in terms of leading principles:

Every inference involves the judgment that, if *such* propositions as the premises are true, then a proposition related to them, as the conclusion is, must be, or is likely to be true. The principle implied in this judgment, respecting a genus of argument, is termed the *leading principle* of the argument. (2.462)

The point of this analysis is that any inference depends upon our appealing to a rule which tells us that such transitions from one group of premises to some other premise are legitimate. It is impossible to eliminate such a use of rules so that an inference could be reduced to a case of "just seeing" that the conclusion follows from the premises. For even if (the premises being P, the conclusion C, and the leading principle of an argument L) we try to put the leading principle into the argument itself (the premises now being P and L), we will need a further leading principle which will allow us to infer the conclusion from the new set of premises. (2.466)

All inferences, then, involve the operation of rules; if we attempt to displace them by making them mere elements or steps in the inference we find ourselves appealing to others in the manipulation of these new steps. The point here is that inference essentially involves active rules or rules in use. Now Peirce defines a habit as "a rule active within us" (2.643), so that inference turns out to be an affair of habits. We can complete our reconstruction of Peirce's key analogy by investigating the implications of his claim that habit is not exclusively mental (5.492). The "inseparable connection" then becomes one which holds between habits of thought and habits of action. But this point should perhaps be rephrased; for since both thought and action (or, at least, "rational"

action) are analyzable in terms of habit, it may be better to say that habit involves both thought-like and action-like properties.

But does Peirce have an analysis of the concept of habit which will support the demands which he makes of it? Basically, Peirce conceives of habits as general ways of acting. If we stress the "general way," we see that habit involves the purposiveness and generality imputed to thought. If we stress the "acting," it appears that a habit must be a kind of doing, or at least a potential for doing. Now if the concept is also to play the central role that has been suggested for it, these two aspects must both be present.

To have a habit is to "behave, or always tend to behave, in a way describable in general terms upon every occasion (or upon a considerable proportion of the occasions) that may present itself of a generally describable character" (5.538). By stressing the fact that the occasions on which a habit operates are of a "generally describable" sort, Peirce emphasizes that the mode of activity involved is of a purposive, rather than a mechanical type. Or, to adopt his own use of classical terminology, it is a matter of final rather than efficient causation. If I have a habit of speaking the English language, for example, I produce results of a generally describable sort (acceptable English sentences) whenever an occasion of a certain sort presents itself (one which is appropriate for speaking). There is an indefinite number of possible occasions on which my speaking might be appropriate and there is an indefinite number of possible ways in which I might utter the same sentence, although it is clear that not *all* occasions are appropriate nor do all sequences of sounds count as the utterance of the sentence in question. To say that my action is governed by the habit is to say that I would bring about a certain kind of result if the proper occasion presented itself, but it does not require that the occasion or result be of a completely determinate sort. Now this is precisely to describe what activity is like when it is under the guidance of purpose and concepts — or thought (1.212).

We could restate this analysis by saying that while habits require or involve actions, they are not reducible to actions (2.664). It is possible to see another side of this analysis, however. For just as habitual actions must be determined by purposes, so without action there is no habit. This suggestion breaks down into two. Initially, we may say that there is no thought which does not involve activity in the minimal sense of making connections and syntheses. Peirce wants to say something more

than this, however; he claims that there can be no thought that does not have a *tendency* (at the very least) to definite embodiment. The metaphor of the court and the sheriff, frequently employed by Peirce, is illuminating in this respect.

The court cannot be imagined without a sheriff. Final causality cannot be imagined without efficient causality; but no whit the less on that account are their modes of action polar contraries. The sheriff would still have his fist, even if there were no court; but an efficient cause, detached from a final cause in the form of a law, would not even possess efficiency; it might exert itself, and something might follow *post hoc*, but not *propter hoc*; for *propter* implies potential regularity; and without the influence of ideas there is no potentiality. (1.213)

The point of the metaphor concerns the interdependence of the "merely" physical and the rule-governed and also suggests the kind of analysis to be given of their basic differences. A court is not a real one unless it has or might have some method of enforcing its rulings, and one cannot speak of a *ruling* being enforced where there is no process of making a ruling but only an enforcer. (The frontier justice of a sheriff who makes and enforces his own rulings is either a peculiar *kind* of court — one perhaps sanctioned by public acceptance but not by higher courts — or else should not be described as involving the making of rulings.) The court and the sheriff, then, are correlative notions. They do not designate so much different sources of action (for they might be vested in the same person) but distinct aspects of the process of "embodying laws." One might draw an analogy here with Aristotle's conception of the practical syllogism: we must apply the major premise to a particular case (make a ruling) and then act upon our judgment (enforce the ruling). Our habitual action encompasses both phases: without the final causation of the rule, its "tendency to make itself true," there is no *habitual* action — without efficient causation directed by the rule there is no habitual *action*.

The theory attributed to Peirce here may seem to conflict with some of his own accounts, which have a more reductionistic tone. What is interesting here, however, is that there are two kinds of reductionistic statements concerning thought and action to be considered. On the one hand, there is the well known claim that



The whole function of thought is to produce habits of action . . . we come down to what is tangible and conceivably practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought. (5.400)<sup>4</sup>

But Peirce is also quite capable of claiming that "the organism is only an instrument of thought," as he did in *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities* (5.315). More than thirty years later he reminded James that "pragmatism is correct doctrine only when it is recognized that material action is the mere husk of ideas" (8.272). One way of reconciling these various accounts is to recognize that Peirce did not intend to reduce thought to action, nor action to thought; his main theoretical endeavor in this respect is to formulate the more generic concept of habit which shows their "inseparable connection." In terms of philosophical method, Peirce is abandoning a literalistic distinction of thought and action in order to suggest a significant analogy between them. Thought is a kind of activity, involving active rules and dispositions, on this account, while conduct, in order to be significant must be governed by habits and general purposes. Peirce's analysis is a powerful one, although it raises many questions. The suggestion to be considered now is not that the analysis is inadequate but that Peirce failed to take note of all of its implications for his own pragmatism.

## II

Suppose we now try to understand Peirce's pragmatism in the light of this "inseparable connection" between thought and action. We have already suggested that Peirce's attempts to divorce the pragmatic principle from any "metaphysical" claims is somewhat misleading. In particular Peirce's sketch of a proof of the pragmatic principle finds meaning to consist in habit.

Our problem, then, is to see how Peirce's analysis of habit is related to his pragmatism. For this purpose it will be instructive to follow the argument of "A Survey of Pragmaticism," which is in many ways the most precise of the several expositions of his philosophy which Peirce prepared toward the end of his career. Peirce states the pragmatic principle in terms of habit, as he has done before, but adds the important qualification (perhaps implicit in the earlier versions) that it is a method of ascertaining the meaning of "intellectual concepts" alone and not of ideas or things in general.

Peirce begins by stating the principle of meaning which, as we have seen, identifies the meaning of an intellectual concept with the "would-be's" of habit. It is important to note that while this formulation echoes the one in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," it differs from it in its stress on the generality and real possibility of habit. That is, Peirce has taken into account in his pragmatism his own metaphysical analysis of thought and action.

Now Peirce's problem, as he says himself, is to demonstrate or prove the principle which he has announced. He claims that he cannot, because of the audience and the context, give a "real proof" of the pragmatic principle, but he does propose to come as close as possible to this goal. What emerges does have very much of the atmosphere of a proof or argument. The question is a question about meaning, so Peirce's "proof-sketch" (if we can call it that) proceeds by attempting to show that the final or genuine meaning of an intellectual concept is a habit. An intellectual concept may be regarded as a sign, and a sign, says Peirce, has three typical kinds of meanings or interpretants (to use his own technical term). A sign has, or tends to have, an emotional, an energetic, and a logical interpretant. Since we will be focusing on the last, we may briefly illustrate the first two varieties. "The east is red" is a proposition consisting of intellectual concepts (or perhaps it is a single concept; Peirce is not clear about this). A typical "significate effect" of the proposition for one who understood it would be the occurrence of a certain feeling; in this case it would perhaps be a patriotic feeling of pride or hatred, depending upon one's nationality, disposition, and other factors. Such a feeling would be an emotional interpretant of the sign. The sign also might lead us to perform some action, such as marching or picking up guns in defense; and these would be energetic (or dynamic) interpretants of the sign. But Peirce suggests that we are all acquainted with a third type of meaning, namely, the logical interpretant. If we translate our sentence into another sentence, hopefully achieving more precision, we will have replaced one "mental sign" by another (5.476).

If Peirce had stopped at this point, he would have been content with a pluralistic and somewhat phenomenological account of meaning. This would simply amount to the observation that there are a plurality of things which are quite properly referred to as meanings. However, we are looking for *the* meaning of an intellectual concept and not an indefinite plurality of meanings. If we are to find *the* meaning of a

concept we must eliminate some alternatives. Peirce does not, in this context, offer much of an explicit argument for the elimination of the emotional and energetic interpretants as candidates for the position of *the* meaning; but it is not difficult to reconstruct a plausible argument of this type. *The* meaning must be public and general, while feelings are subjective and particular and acts are particular (5.475).

Now we cannot conclude the argument by elimination with the thesis that *the* meaning of a concept is its logical interpretant. For just as there is an initial plurality of types of interpretant there is a plurality of logical interpretants of any given concept. If I clarify a concept by defining it, I may go on to give a translation or clarification of that definition; this interpretant of the first interpretant would also be an interpretant of the original concept. Since this process can go on indefinitely, Peirce claims that no one of the elements of this series can be *the* meaning; it cannot be what he calls the "ultimate logical interpretant" (5.476). Yet Peirce says that there can be such an ultimate logical interpretant; and it is interesting that he again talks about proving where he had begun by abstaining from proof.

It can be proved that the only mental effect that can be so produced [i.e., as an ultimate logical interpretant] and that is not a sign but is of a general application is a *habit-change*; meaning by a habit-change a modification of a person's tendencies toward action, resulting from previous experiences or from previous exertions of his will or acts, or from a complexus of both kinds of cause. (5.476)

The proof here proceeds once more by the method of elimination. The logical interpretant must be general, in order that it truly be the meaning of a concept. What Peirce requires, then, is a "mental fact of general reference" which is not itself capable of having an interpretant (for otherwise it could not be the ultimate interpretant). He asserts that there are only four such facts: conceptions, desires, expectations, and habits. The concept cannot be the ultimate interpretant, for concepts are precisely the kind of things that themselves take interpretants. Yet desires and expectations are not general "otherwise than through connection with a concept," so these candidates must also be rejected, leaving habit as the sole survivor from the original list. Peirce apparently means to suggest that we desire and expect things only of a general sort, that is in accordance with a concept; so they are no less conceptual than a concept itself.

What are we to make of the suggestion that habit is the ultimate logical interpretant? There is a problem here which cannot be evaded. In his analysis of thought and action, Peirce deliberately blurs distinctions by introducing the generic notion of habit; but in order for his proof (or proof-sketch) of the pragmatic principle to go through, he is led to stress the differences between habits and concepts. One might defend Peirce here by claiming that he simply employs habit in two different senses in the different contexts; but if this line of defense is pushed far enough it ends by robbing habit of those properties which qualify it to be considered as the logical interpretant. For once we eliminate the conceptual from habit all we have left, as Peirce's analysis of thought and action is intended to show, is mere acts, not conduct. Or in terms of Peirce's categories, we have reduced Thirdness to Secondness. Now a mere act, or a Second, can serve only as an energetic interpretant and not as a logical interpretant.

Suppose we ask why a habit (in the sense used in the proof) cannot be a concept or involve a concept. The answer that otherwise habit could not serve as the ultimate interpretant begs the question; for it may be that a habit involves a concept and that consequently there is no ultimate interpretant (or that some other thing must be found to fill this role). It does seem that habit, even in the context of Peirce's proof, involves a concept. When speaking of the formation of habits, Peirce says that mere muscular practice is insufficient for the formation of at least some habits, because "nothing like a concept can be acquired by muscular practice alone" (5.479). Now it could be claimed that since habits are the meanings of concepts it is not surprising that they should be "like" concepts. This will not do, however, for we want to know whether habits are sufficiently *unlike* concepts to make Peirce's eliminative argument plausible.

Peirce's definition of habit, in the context of the proof, is that "[readiness] to act in a certain way under given circumstances and when actuated by a given motive is a habit" (5.480). The generality which is stressed by the "certain way" and the "given" circumstances and motive is of the sort which Peirce analyzes as final causation or purposive behavior. Yet such activity seems to depend on concepts for the recognition of the appropriate ways and circumstances relevant to the general purpose.

If habits do involve concepts, it seems to follow that they would themselves have interpretants; like "pure" concepts, they would be

subject to interpretation. For Peirce's argument to be plausible he should be able to rule this possibility out. Yet it is not clear that he does so. He admits that a habit may be a sign in some way, but insists that it is not a sign in the way that the concept whose meaning it is, is a sign (5.491). Now there is a well-established usage in which we sometimes ask what the meaning of a habit is. A Freudian or a Marxist may think that he is able to find meaning in certain habits where others have difficulty in discerning it. Why should a habit not be subject to interpretation in either or both of these ordinary and extraordinary senses?

Here the question becomes whether we might regard both concepts and habits as types of signs; this would suggest that both are subject to interpretation for roughly the same reasons. Signs require interpretations because they are indeterminate (this is one factor among several). A sign may be indeterminate by being general or vague. It is general insofar as it "extends to the interpreter the privilege of carrying its determination further," while it is vague insofar as it "reserves further determination to be made in some other conceivable sign, or at least does not appoint the interpreter as its deputy in this office" (5.447). Now a habit could be regarded as indeterminate in both ways, and consequently as susceptible of interpretation. The habit whose verbal formulation is "fire burns" is general insofar as its application is left open. Simply having the habit does not require that every fire will arouse the manifestations of this belief-habit, any more than our understanding of the general proposition "man is mortal" requires us to meditate on the inevitable death of each man we see. But the habit does determine us to *some* actions which exemplify it. And to complete the parallel, it seems plausible to say that the habit itself becomes more determinate (although not completely determinate) through its specific manifestations.

Similarly, a habit could be said to be vague insofar as it cannot be determined by its own action but requires other habits for such determination. The habit of knowing that fire burns is vague insofar as we may not have a definite rule for identifying fires (a child might not suspect that white or blue flames were signs of fire, for example). Such an additional rule would be a further habit helping to determine the initial one.

Something of the force of Peirce's discrimination of generality and vagueness within habitual activity is found in the maxim that a rule cannot determine its own application. It may fail to do so either because

it does not mandate its application to particular cases or because the rule itself may be susceptible of more definite formulation. Peirce, I think, would agree with this statement of the case, with one important qualification. A habit is not merely the verbal formulation which is often associated with the concept of rule, but an actual power. It is interesting that Peirce himself sometimes seems to use the word determination either to define habit or as a synonym for it (1.592, 5.517).<sup>5</sup> The emphasis seems to be just as much on the act or power of determining as on that which is or has been determined. Habits, then, are powers of determining which are themselves to some extent indeterminate. On Peirce's analysis, all habits could be characterized as general and vague. In contrast to rationalistic psychology which sees the indeterminate as an error to be transcended as we apprehend things in their clarity, Peirce sees knowledge and human conduct generally as characterized by indeterminateness as well.

On this analysis, however, what becomes of the ultimate interpretant? Since a habit may require an interpretation just as a concept does, it can hardly be an *ultimate* interpretant. Peirce's dilemma, then, is that either habit is not a *logical* interpretant (in so far as we eliminate its conceptual aspect) or it cannot be an *ultimate* interpretant (in so far as we recognize its conceptual aspect).

The dilemma might be resolved if Peirce dropped his insistence on the necessity of finding an ultimate interpretant as *the* meaning of a concept (or of anything else, for that matter). This would be to restore the initial plurality of types of meaning and of meanings within the types but we would sacrifice the hope of extracting *the* meaning from this plurality. However, it would still be quite possible to talk about the process of finding or discovering meaning once we abandoned the notion of *the* meaning. The conceptual tools forged by Peirce could be adapted to this more open-ended situation without sacrificing much more than we already have. In this way we might also square Peirce's account of meaning with his analysis of thought and action. We would not need to distort the notion of habit in order to make the pragmatic principle plausible; and we could retain and intensify the idea that all human conduct is significant, which emerges in Peirce's account of thought and action in terms of habit. The main loss appears to be the pragmatic principle itself; but those who are concerned with meaning would still be able to recommend that some paths of clarification be pursued and others avoided.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, we might resolve Peirce's problem by reinstating the reductionist interpretation of the pragmatic principle. That is, we might attempt to stress the literal differences between habits of action and thought or concepts; and we might dismiss Peirce's analogical synthesis of the two as a metaphysical and unpragmatic excrescence. But it seems to me that Peirce's analysis of habit is a much stronger and more coherent aspect of his thought than is the reductionist version of the principle of meaning. Moreover, as I hope to have shown, we cannot make sense of that version because it denies all the features of habit that could give it the property of being even a possible logical interpretant of a concept, let alone the ultimate interpretant.

### III

It is not easy to explain or excuse the deep ambiguity in Peirce's use of habit in the metaphysical and pragmatic contexts. His own ethics of terminology required that "the effort of all should be to keep the essence of every scientific term unchanged; although absolute exactitude is not so much as conceivable" (2.222). The latter qualification is essential because, for Peirce, "every symbol is a living thing" and "the life of thought and science is the life inherent in symbols" (2.220). Peirce's "proof" of the pragmatic principle makes the methodological error of allowing the meaning of habit to wander; but this methodological error *might* be simply the consequence of forgetting that habit itself had all the characteristics which give concepts and signs a life of their own. One might offer a kind of defense of Peirce here by suggesting that he was at least able to recognize the tension between the life of symbols in philosophy and the efforts of the philosopher to pin them down. Yet the ambiguity goes so deep that this defense is of somewhat dubious value.

An explanation (if not a defense) of the ambiguity appears when we glance at some other philosophical motifs which may have contributed to Peirce's quest for the ultimate interpretant. There is a strong ethical flavor in the commitment to this search, as is evident in a further formulation of the pragmatic principle: "the true meaning of any product of the intellect lies in whatever unitary determination it would impart to practical conduct under any and every conceivable circumstance, supposing such conduct to be guided by reflexion carried to an ultimate limit" (6.490). What this "ultimate limit" means to Peirce

becomes clearer when we examine his theory of self-control. Peirce suggests that it is a central fact about human beings that they not only have habits of conducts but that one habit may play the role of regulating or modifying another, just as a single habit will govern particular acts (cf. 5.533). Now this process of revision and self-criticism is oriented toward a goal or ideal which is simply an ideal state of habit. Peirce may find an incentive to search for *the* meaning of a concept because he sees the discernment of meaning as one of the many processes subject to critical self-control. Since all activities should be transformed into their ideal and stable form, it follows that meanings, too, should be stabilized. The appeal to self-control, however, seems subject to the same kind of ambiguity as is found in Peirce's conception of meaning more narrowly considered. For Peirce sometimes speaks as if the end is a fixed state which can actually be obtained, while in other places he treats it more as a regulative ideal; and, perhaps most appealingly, he sometimes speaks of it as a continuous activity with no terminus. Now only the first two possibilities are congenial to the search for *the* meaning. In any case, one might suggest in a Whiteheadian spirit that the ideal of conduct is not order alone, but "order entering upon novelty." Peirce also seems not to have considered the possibility that there is an irreducible plurality of ends. I suggest, then, that Peirce's theory of the ends of conduct is not a sufficient basis for his theory of meaning.

The most paradoxical feature of Peirce's ambiguity about habit is his apparent failure to adhere to his own ethics of terminology and "scientific" procedure. But it may be that the cause is not negligence or perversity; there seems to be an ambiguity in Peirce's conception of philosophy which parallels, in a deeper way, his ambiguities of usage and which may be responsible for them. Philosophy, on Peirce's official view, is a science; it is distinguished from other sciences by its resting upon "those universal experiences which confront every man in every waking hour of his life" rather than upon specialized observation (1.246). On this scientific conception of philosophy, we may adopt and employ our central categories in a spirit of fallibilism, as the scientist adopts and employs a hypothesis; we are never absolutely certain that we have arrived at the correct categories but we may have reason to believe that our version is tolerably adequate. Peirce's requirement of a relatively fixed philosophical terminology seems compatible with this enterprise. Yet what this approach seems to omit is the possibility of a more radical reconsideration of the basic categories of a philosophical system; we may not only trace out



the applications of the categories, but re-evaluate their proper relation to one another or to some super-ordinate category which we have previously failed to discern. If this is the case, then we might expect that an attempt to fix the meaning of philosophical terms will be self-defeating; for the pressures for change, if not allowed expression in the proper way will be displaced, resulting in unaccountable shifts of meaning in some other area of the structure of concepts. This may be the sort of meta-philosophical problem which is responsible for Peirce's shifts in regard to the concept of habit. Peirce did recognize the alternative philosophical mode, at least to some extent, as can be seen both from his various analogical extensions of concepts (such as that traced in section I of this paper) and his casual defense of the method in various places — especially in a rather qualified endorsement of Hegel's dialectic (2.32ff.). But Peirce's official view is that the philosophical community is like the scientific one, in that it aims at the fixation of belief; and it may be that when this norm is applied to philosophy it is inconsistent with Peirce's other well-known maxim: "Don't block the path of inquiry."

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NOTES

1. All references of this type are to volumes and paragraph numbers of Peirce's *Collected Papers*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (8 vols., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-58). References prefixed by MS are to the Harvard collection of unpublished Peirce manuscripts and follow the numbering system of Richard Robin's *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967).

2. MS 939.

3. Peirce emphasizes the methodological weakness of both associationism and intuitionism in two reviews which he wrote for the *Nation* immediately after the paper of 1868. Concerning Porter's *The Human Intellect*, a Hamiltonian production, Peirce remarks that "It is easy to see upon what side such a theory may expect attack. Its essence is that the process by which we attain our first knowledge of the fundamental ideas [intuitions of first principles] is essentially different from the other processes of the mind. Now, if it were shown that all the other mental processes, whether of cognition, emotion, or action, were essentially one, it would be hard to prevent men from believing that this process alone did not conform to their common formula" (*The Nation*, 1869, p. 213).

Peirce's treatment of James Mill again emphasizes the *methodological* weakness of the approach considered. Speaking of the associationist school which he represents, Peirce charges it with an overzealous application of Ockham's razor and ignorance of the analogous results of other schools of philosophy and psychology. But most damning is the charge that "Desultory experience is what they all build on, and on that basis no true science can be reached" (*The Nation*, 1869, p. 461). From Peirce's point of view both rival schools are striving to find a single model or form of mental activity, but compromise their inquiries at the beginning by simply appealing to the oracle of immediate consciousness or hastily generalizing from a few experiences which are themselves imperfectly understood. Peirce considered his own procedure scientific.

4. Peirce sometimes speaks as if he intends to give a reductive account of habit in biological terms, but it seems to me that this is an aberration from his main theme. In a paper *On the Algebra of Logic*, Peirce does say that "Thinking, as cerebration, is no doubt subject to the general laws of nervous action" (3.155). Some of Peirce's commentators have supposed that this passage and a few others constitute sufficient evidence for the reductionist interpretation. However, Peirce repeatedly claims that our metaphysical concepts must be derived, in a somewhat Kantian way, from the basic forms of thought, so that our notion of habit is in a way derivative from the logical activity of following rules. This is brought out in a later article where Peirce discusses what he calls the "analogy" of thinking and nervous behaviour, while stressing that the analogy rests not on the biological phenomena, for "psychologically, we still have, first, habit — which in its highest form is understanding, and which corresponds to the major premise of *Barbara*" (2.711).

5. There may be an echo of Hume here: "the necessity or power, which unites causes and effects, lies in the determination of the mind to pass from one to the other" (*Treatise*, p. 166).

6. Peirce believed that his differences with James had much to do with the latter's indifference to the search for *the* meaning (cf. 5.494). As a nominalist, James is committed to defining meaning in terms of particular consequences. Peirce claims that this simply will not provide us with the meaning of an intellectual concept; but even if James had admitted habits in all their generality as possible meanings, it is not clear that this addition would make his theory of meaning any less pluralistic. Peirce apparently believed that once we had found the *type* of meaning appropriate to intellectual concepts we would then be able to find *the* meaning of such concepts. This, however, will be possible only if the notion of *the* meaning is itself coherent. In this perspective it appears that there is more to be said for James' avowedly pluralistic theory of meaning; it may not be a misunderstanding of Peirce but a significant alternative.