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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/818>

DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.818

ISSN: 2036-4091

Publisher

Associazione Pragma

Electronic reference

Eugene Halton, « Pragmatic E-Pistols », *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], III-2 | 2011, Online since 29 December 2011, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/818> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejpap.818

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Pragmatic E-Pistols

Eugene Halton

Pistolets are the best Artillerie.
And they who write to Lords, rewards to get, Are
they not like singers at doores for meat?

John Donne

To William James

- 1 Dear William,
- 2 I am a student of pragmatism, and I must begin with an apology. For some time I did not take your writing as seriously as I should have, probably because of your conception of pragmatism. I am still of the opinion that you misunderstood Peirce, that what you took to be obscurity on his part was, in fact, his carefulness in his choice of words and delimitation of ideas. Peirce, as you know, considered himself a “laboratory philosopher,” and he forged a far-reaching conception of science at odds, in many ways, with the very fabric of modern thought. It is interesting to me how each of you developed philosophies of purport, not only in pragmatism, but in your conceptions of science and of its place in society as well.
- 3 A Nobel Prize winner, Jacque Monod, exemplified the extreme opposite position concerning science, perhaps, when he claimed that, “The cornerstone of the scientific method is...the systematic denial that ‘true’ knowledge can be reached by interpreting phenomena in terms of final causes – that is to say, of ‘purpose’ [...] The ancient covenant is in pieces: man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he emerged by chance” (1974: 30, 167). And Bertrand Russell, in his 1946 book *History of Western Philosophy*, says, “In the welter of conflicting fanaticisms, one of the few unifying forces is scientific truthfulness, by which I mean the habit of basing our beliefs upon observations and inferences as impersonal, and as much divested of local and temperamental bias, as is possible for human beings [...] The habit of careful veracity acquired in the practice of this philosophical method can be extended to the whole

sphere of human activity, producing, wherever it exists, a lessening of fanaticism with an increasing capacity of sympathy and mutual understanding. In abandoning a part of its dogmatic pretensions, philosophy does not cease to suggest and inspire a way of life” (1946: 744).

- 4 Ah, the age of enlightened modernism, when intellect thought that its “impersonal” scientific rationale would inspire a way of life with increased “sympathy and mutual understanding” to “the whole sphere of human activity,” instead of dehumanization. It thought that by removing the personal, the local, the temperamental, you could remove the fanatical. It did not understand that it was simply removing some of the human anchors of sanity, so as to make it easier for fanaticism to re-emerge, disguised in the clothing of cold, truth seeking hyper-rationality: truth seeking in means, indifferent as to ends: call me Ahab, as Melville put it, “all my means are sane, my motive and my object mad.”
- 5 Russell published his words the year after World War 2 ended, the year after science developed the first atomic bombs that were used by the United States to kill hundreds of thousands of Japanese, dropped on them from heavenly heights. His book was published by George Allen and Unwin in London, a city that had been rained on by German V-2 rockets, compliments of rocket science.
- 6 How vastly different Russell’s words were from yours, when you said, “The only form of thing that we directly encounter, the only experience that we concretely have, is our own personal life [...] And this systematic denial on science’s part of personality as a condition of events, this rigorous belief that in its own essential and innermost nature our world is a strictly impersonal world, may, conceivably, as the whirligig of time goes round, prove to be the very defect that our descendants will be most surprised at in our own boasted science, the omission that to their eyes will most tend to make it look perspectiveless and short” (1986: 166).
- 7 Times’ whirligig has gone around, William, to prove your words and disprove Russell’s. Now admittedly, you don’t give as much critical thought in your work to the place of institutions in the operating of society as might be called for. But your words here offer a profound critique of modern science and technology. The extension “to the whole sphere of human activity” of an impersonal intelligence, as Russell would have it, has not proved to be the mark of science proper, but of science in the thrall of the depersonalizing machine. That is why I find your allowance for the person and for the qualities of life in your account of science and society to be of such value, and why I seek to reconcile them with Peirce’s philosophy of science. Peirce did see that science is not sufficient for the practice of life because it does not go deeply enough to the whole passionate being required for the practice of life. It is why he reserved science for theoretical life, and why, in his “Vitaly Important Questions” lectures of 1898, he disdained science in the service of practical questions. This is also why he noted the difference in the meanings of “pragmatic” and “practical,” and why his pragmatism is not, as he put it, a “practicalism,” whereas yours is.
- 8 As you put it in *Pragmatism*: “The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one” (James, 1977: 379). Though it is true that practical decisions often need to be based on beliefs and “gut” feelings which produce the “definite difference” you mention, Peirce’s claim is that theoretical life can only be based on fallible *opinions*, always subject to correction within the unlimited

community of inquiry. So pragmatic meaning is found, as he put it elsewhere, “not in a particular experiment, but in *experimental phenomena*,” (Peirce 1938: Vol. 5 Para. 425).¹ In my opinion Peirce got that one right, and your version of pragmatism does not. But I do think that you are addressing the relation of ideas to practical life, which has been a source of great misunderstanding in the modern era. George Bernard Shaw put it this way in his 1930 toast to Albert Einstein: “Science is always wrong. It never solves a problem without creating 10 more.” Now he may have been hyperbolizing, because science clearly gets so many things right. But he points to something that can be taken positively as how scientific findings generate new inquiries, or negatively, of how a precise answer to a particular problem may be wrongly generalized in practical life to produce a hydra-head of unanticipated consequences worse than the original problem.

- 9 It was through a scholar named Lewis Mumford that I first came across your term “vicious intellectualism,” a term that has been close to my heart for many years. In my experience many academic intellectuals (that subspecies of intellectuals with the “three magic letters,” Ph.D., as you put it in your essay “The Ph.D. Octopus”) do not take the “life” part of intellectual life seriously, and their intellectual prowess was gained at the cost of infantilized emotions. It probably was their way of surviving childhood. The effect is to put powerful brains at the service of infantilized emotions, and institutionally this is how bureaucracy is spelled. It is the infant enwrapped in modern rationalization: cognitive facilities hyper-developed, emotional and empathic abilities diminished or even disabled as a virtual system requirement. To me intellect is that discriminating (meaning “to choose between”) aspect of intelligence, capable of determining purport, which is only one kind of intelligence. There is also the more Russian term “intelligentsia,” which has a broader connotation, inclusive of the arts as well as the critical capacities. But that sense almost seems to be a target for vicious intellectuals, who want their world pigeonholed.
- 10 A more primary, yet sorely neglected, intelligence is what I’d call “bodying forth” intelligence, creatively conceiving, or perhaps what William Blake meant by Poetic Imagination. These facets of spontaneous, live to the moment intelligence don’t seem to figure into the social sciences that much these days, even in, if you could imagine it, the study of art. But you put it so well when you said, “Our intelligence cannot wall itself up alive, like a pupa in its chrysalis. It must at any cost keep on speaking terms with the universe that engendered it” (James 1977a: 556). Here, it seems to me, you are of a piece with Peirce’s semiotic realism. Being on speaking terms with the engendering universe may very well entail an engendering consciousness alive in awareness to the moment, creatively attuning to what you called, as I first heard from philosopher Bruce Wilshire, the “much-at-once,” rather than habitually calculating.
- 11 You know, William, I’ve always felt that you and your brother Henry were somehow crossed in your cradles; that you were really the artist-writer on the inside, while Henry was the psychologist. I realize I may just be talking to myself, but in my inner life I admire your palpable presence in your writing, just as I admire Peirce’s perspicacity, and hope to catch a little of each in what I write.
- 12 Yours sincerely,
- 13 Gene Halton

To George Herbert Mead

- 14 Dear George,
- 15 In your 1925 essay on “The Genesis of the Self and Social Control” you say: “But it is not necessary that we should talk to another to have these ideas. We can talk to ourselves, and this we do in the inner forum of what we call thought. We are in possession of selves just insofar as we can and do take the attitudes of others toward ourselves and respond to those attitudes [...] Our thinking is an inner conversation in which we may be taking the roles of specific acquaintances over against ourselves, but usually it is with what I have termed the ‘generalized other’ that we converse” (1925: 272). I wish to put those words to work in this letter to you.
- 16 First, I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that you have been accepted into the sociological canon; your work has become part of the sociological liturgy, so to speak, with obligatory genuflections. Ironically, your work as a pragmatist philosopher has been largely ignored by philosophers, who seldom include you in discussions of pragmatists, despite a revival of interest in pragmatism since the 1960s. Dewey has come back big, but you, despite the affinity of many of your ideas with Dewey’s, remain curiously peripheral to professional academic philosophers. Go figure!
- 17 One of the ways your work on mind, self and society remains relevant to social science today is that it is able to include the subjective elements of experience, without resorting to dualism of individual versus social, and to frame this in the context of a democratic philosophy. I find this both in yours and Dewey’s social psychologies and theories of democracy.
- 18 Democracy does not begin in subjectivity; it begins in a common life. It, like chickens and eggs, does not start with isolate individuals who discover the common, but in the common life through which individuals arise, as you showed particularly well in your essay. There you state: “[...] we realize that each individual has a world that differs in some degree from that of any other member of the same community, that he slices the events of the community life that are common to all from a different angle from that of any other individual [...] It is this recognition that takes psychology out of its isolation, as a science that deals with what is found in the mind of an individual, and makes of it the standpoint from which to approach reality as it is going on” (1925: 260).
- 19 Subjectivity is an element of a common life, from a democratic perspective. Human subjectivity is primordially an internalization of community, arising in early biocultural socialization developmentally, as you showed in your discussions of the play stage leading to the “game,” but already primed for development in the human genome and individual temperament, as more recent research has confirmed.
- 20 Or consider this: the subject arises in relation to the rise of objects, developmentally. The child’s discovery of a world of objects, of others, is a developmental process in which the subject is discovered as well; in effect, is extricated from the process. “It is and I am” is no given, but a developmental achievement. It is a biosocial construction involving the internalization of a community of animate objects, some of which are human. Not only is the subject social, but the objective object is also social. It may have its individual existence as well, but its reality is intrinsically social, as an element of the interpretive act, of communicative conduct, of semiosis.

- 21 Your developmental view of the self remains interesting to consider in the light of theories of social constructionism, which claim selves and societies are solely conventional constructions. Kenneth Gergen is a psychologist who has argued for a postmodern view of the self as “relational,” as simply constructed by the conventions of the culture. His view illustrates the anaemic understanding of signs prevalent today as limited to conventional signification, incapable of allowing more modalities of signification, for example, your discussion of what Wundt originally termed, “the conversation of gestures,” as prelinguistic, preconventional signification.
- 22 These ideas of social constructionism derive from older traditions. Earlier Georg Simmel, for example, was working out of the Kantian tradition, making the distinction of form and content, and with an idea that sociology is the study of forms of interaction. His sociology is formal, studying forms, not contents, of interaction. Kant’s outlook was that the human faculty of knowing gives form to the otherwise formless content of the manifold of experience. One can read this as the mind gives form to experience, or constructs the world. Kant’s nominalist outlook entails a divide between form and content, nature and culture, world and mind. You and the other pragmatists rejected that way of dividing things.
- 23 Even earlier, Hobbes took philosophical nominalism into political and social thought, reversing Aristotle by claiming an individualistic “state of nature,” “[...] a condition of Warre of every one against every one,” which required a social contract for there to be society. This view of the social as conventional and as divorced from nature entails a view that society is a non-natural construction. You and the other pragmatists rejected this way of dividing things as well, seeking a philosophical continuity of nature and culture. Peirce’s semiotic maps out a range of signs beyond simply conventional, as does your discussion of the development of the self.
- 24 Once you admit natural signification as more encompassing than conventional signification, though still admitting the wide range of conventional signification, you open up possibilities that yes, there are social constructions that can be arbitrary, but that there can also be social constructions that may be the result of natural constructions as well. The very earliest socialization of the infant with its mother/caretaker involves wired-in behaviors of attunement by the infant deriving from its subcortical brain, which are read as intelligible signs by the mother/caretaker, which furthers the socializing attunement and dance between them, which in turn furthers later cortical development and interaction by the infant. The result is a social construction of the self, but one in which natural constructing signification is a key element. This process is unavailable to the Hobbesian, Kantian, and contemporary arbitrary social constructionist outlooks, as well as to those of pure biological reductionisms, which deny the place of communicative socialization, but can be easily understood by Peirce’s and your perspectives.
- 25 That newborn infant’s facial attunement to its mother, deriving from the limbic system of its subcortical brain, is a good example of how “conversation of gestures” can occur in significant human transactions. Through the mother’s mimicking responses of attunement, the pair can “dance” the infant into cortical interaction, developing later, through gestural play, into the development of the significant symbol, where child learns to indicate to self and other simultaneously, through internal dialogue with the generalized other.

- 26 Mirror neurons, an area of brain cells discovered in the premotor cortex of macaque monkeys in 1996, suggest a physiological basis for a “looking-glass” self along the lines of Cooley and your and Peirce’s discussions. They fire not only when the monkey performs an action, but also when the monkey observes the same action performed by another: monkey see, monkey do. And more, they also reflect the sensations and emotions of the other. They form a neural basis of mind-reading, and evidence suggests a relation between deficits in mirror neurons and autism. I find it interesting that the technical discovery of the physiology has received so much attention, while your theory of how becoming a self through developing a generalized other as a basis for thought and conduct illustrated back then what is simply being confirmed today. In other words, mirror neurons provide a physiological confirmation of your theory, rather than being a wholly new idea.
- 27 Back in your time Freud thought that psychoanalysis would eventually give way to neurology. Today, many cognitive scientists similarly think psychological and sociological phenomena will give way to neuroscience. But it might come out happier than that dismal form of reductionism: social theories of mind and of empathic social relation such as yours, Cooley’s and Peirce’s can suggest ways for cognitive science to emerge from its “black box” model of isolate brain, while simultaneously being informed by its findings. The body-mind is a biosocial reality, not reducible to the machine model which has dominated modern neuroscience. The machine model can be useful, but it is partial, and cannot encompass spontaneous, generative minding.
- 28 The reality of a self is not its existence, but its intelligibility as a sign. Signs involve existence, but are not reducible to existence, for their being lies in their being interpreted in a future interpretation; in continuing semeiosis. So that a self or a sign has a reality at any given moment as a *potential existence*, in Peirce’s terms.
- 29 Modern materialism would consider all of this reducible to actual existence. Peirce claimed that such a nominalist way of thinking, shaving off generality in the name of Occam’s razor, actually cuts its own throat and ultimately renders science inexplicable. What if the modern era and its earnest scientists have been working for the myth of the machine, projecting the subjective clockwork culture of their time onto the objective universe, truly discovering with the precision of William Blake’s painting of Newton, the truth of the single-visioned part, while sacrificing the vision of the whole reality? Blake’s Newton, supple but hunched over his compass, blindered to his surrounds, is a visualization of the paradox of accurate viewing of the part and blindness to the whole. To put this in Peircean terms, modern science is corrupt in its nominalism, treating the reality of generals, which are the basis of its life, as unreal.
- 30 This brings me to another point. While your concept of the generalized other remains a fruitful way to understand the development of the self, it seems to me time to update it. You pictured a democratic model of the generalized other. Yet the modern world picture has been dominated by the machine, by the universe as a giant clock, and more recently the brain as a computer. These are not simply empty metaphors, but living symbols of the myth of our time, namely, that ultimately reality is a kind of machine, and we but parts of it. The mythic element in this is the idealization of the machine as defining nature, of the automatic, and the simultaneous denigration of the spontaneous. And George, the machine model is not democratic, quite the opposite. It is an alienation of human purport, of the automatic portions of purport expansively projected out (ironically, in the name of anti-teleological and even anti-mythical) as virtual deity substitute. Today that

imago has come to dominance in the diffusion of technology and its colonization of the self through a plethora of devices.

- 31 And so I have termed this pervasive model that gets into the socialization process *the mechanical other*. It is meant to draw attention to how the modern world picture, far from being anti-teleological, has as its purpose the colonization and replacement of those supreme gifts of our organic, sensing and signifying nature by dictates of the automaton. As I argued in my book, *The Great Brain Suck*, it is not so much a process of brain-washing as soft brain-rinsing through pleasurable distractions. I also introduced a new term to add to Cooley's primary and secondary relations, which I call "tertiary relations." If primary is face-to-face, and secondary is person to role, tertiary is person-machine mediated relations. When tertiary relations predominate social relations, to the point of displacing primary and even secondary relations, the generalized other manifests as the mechanical other, role model for developing the automaton within, a compliant servant of the power system. Your idea of the generalized other as the internalized community rooted in democratic ideals provides an alternative.
- 32 In my view it may be precisely the deep-rooted organic abilities for what I term *self-originated experience* that can ultimately offset a culture of automatism. But this has led me to further modification of your idea of the generalized other, namely, a consideration of the possible genesis of the generalized other. Your view treats the human socializing agents: parents, playmates, both imaginary and actual, and broader human community. I think the original generalized other went further; that it was primarily wild, and significantly non-human.
- 33 Dramatic and ritual-like processes percolate deep from our bio-semiotic nature, including the subcortical brain. One might say that semiosis was the primary "tool" that begat humans, not the reverse, in the two million year trajectory toward the emergence of symbolic signification. We emerged through an environment alive with signs, ranging from mother and clan to the non-human others to whom we paid the closest attention. It was by attuning to the others without and within, including the non-human wild others, that we found ourselves. Your developmental theory, like most other developmental accounts, seems to me hampered by anthropocentrism in this regard, in limiting the evolution of the socializing process to human participants and excluding the profound significance of the revered community of life. They were the actual wild others as well as imagined others in play and ritual who coaxed us into the significant symbol. They were what were on our emergent minds as we painted them on the walls of the caves tens of thousands of years ago.
- 34 It was especially through the animal others, the original others of the mind's I, as Paul Shepard pointed out, that we emerged as the degenerate monkeys we are (if you will excuse my Peirce-onification of homo sapiens sapiens). Peirce coined the term "degenerate monkey" by way of alluding to human prolonged neoteny, new-born like characteristics. We are biologically determined to our peculiar human ways of signification, involving prolonged neoteny, the loosening up of instinctive determination coevolving with greater communicative and cooperative social signification.
- 35 Proto-human ritual "conversations of gestures" became self-aware ritualizing communications, and these were the most basic tools through which we bootstrapped ourselves into humankind, of far greater significance than stone tools. That is why drama must be compelling to be convincing, something more than simply "dramatic effect" or

social construction: it retains the full play of our organic, gesturing complexus of signs, natured and nurtured over hundreds of millennia.

- 36 Perhaps the first person, the first avatar of the symbol, was the wild other, impersonated. Impersonation goes far deeper than simply wearing a mask (persona). The self as persona/mask suggests spectator consciousness rather than participation consciousness, and a separation of the enactor from the enacted. That is indeed what occurred in civilization in the emergence of theater from ritual. But the human person originally emerged as participant in the social, transformative ritual drama of what Paul Shepard called “the sacred game,” with a play on game as play, and on prey and predator relation. The human person emerged from transformative transactions with the signifying beings in the evolutionary drama of life and death. Those transactions made for good eating, good inferencing, good ways for thinking the world and revering it (Shepard 1998).
- 37 As Peirce put it: “Something of the general nature of personality there is in all general ideas. These conceptions are in a certain sense creations of the human intelligence, but in another aspect the human mind is the creation of these conceptions working together. These general conceptions are no figments, they are real things – more than that, they are living beings with something like life and something like personality. Mind acts upon mind by virtue of its continuity; and this continuity involves generality” (MS 954). And in this sense the generality being internalized from habitat significations eventually became incorporated as the capability for the generalized other that constitutes the significant symbol in your sense. And this is why I think it was originally predominantly wild. In impersonating the wild other, ingesting its character and gestures as we ingested its body, we incorporated the intelligence of the ecological mind as the inner vocabulary of the human self: ways of hunting, tracking, ways of camouflage and moving, ways of being. Our minds were created in the creaturing of our minds by the wild others we encountered.
- 38 So far as we told ourselves what we learned from the instinctive genius of the animals and plants, revering them, we found the ways to mature our dematured, “degenerate monkey,” selves. But when, walled off in human-centered cities, we began to tell ourselves what we learned from ourselves, revering our projections of ourselves as gods, we began that well-known tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. The tall tale of the degenerate monkey: the mask of Civilization and its fruits of increased social inequality, work load, poorer nutrition, famine, mass killing warfare, and other niceties not usually included in describing what it means to be “civilized.” De-animalization of human consciousness by anthropocentrism coincided with the beginnings of dehumanization (Halton 2007).
- 39 Considered in the context of Peirce’s discussions of instinctive genius, those signs of life to which traditional foraging humans interpretively attune, attune us to the instinctive genius of ecological mind. That attunement is not only requisite for dematured primates with prolonged neoteny, namely, we degenerate monkeys, but is also the genius of panzooism (a term I’ve borrowed from John Stuart Stuart-Glennie, adding my own context), the emergent worldview of practical and reverential attunement to life, which bodied us forth into our human body-minds.
- 40 In that same essay of yours on “The Genesis of the Self and Social Control,” you also said something rather unfortunate: “I can only refer to the bearing of this childish play attitude upon so-called sympathetic magic. Primitive men call out in their own activity

some simulacrum of the response which they are seeking from the world about. They are children crying in the night” (269-70).

- 41 I’m sorry to say that your progressivism prevented you from fully considering the intelligence of ecological mind as that primarily addressed in “so-called sympathetic magic” by so-called “primitive men.” When one addresses, through mimesis, through ritualizing dance or song or story, the wild generalized other that is the ecological mind, there is real intelligence deriving from habitat in the dialogue, however fantastically the dialogue be clothed. Not that there is not also human projection that occurs as well, as a monologue functioning as a simulacrum of dialogue. But there is also valuable practical significance to ruminating over the conduct of creatures one may be hunting tomorrow, for example, or dancing them as a way into their movements, gestures and minds.
- 42 Such conversations of gestures, through ritual, engaged our ancestors into humankind over the course of evolution. Yet at a certain point, we distanced ourselves from the wild others through domestication, to our great loss in the long run. Dematured primates such as ourselves may require matured wild others as “role models,” something the full instinctive intelligence of wild others could provide, but the dematured intelligence of domesticates we surrounded ourselves with in agricultural civilization could not. We gave it up at our peril. As Ralph Waldo Emerson told it: “The end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilization.”
- 43 Speaking of wild, I heard that you and Sergei Prokoviev had to escape a police raid on a card game you both were involved in when he was in Chicago for the premiere of his opera, “Love of Three Oranges.” Is that true?
- 44 Yours truly,
- 45 Gene Halton

To John Dewey

- 46 Dear John,
- 47 I am writing as someone who has drawn from a number of your ideas, and who remains appreciative of them, yet harbors misgivings about your larger view of things. In my opinion you remain a vital source of ideas for social science today, and so I would like to review some reasons why I think so and then go on to criticize your larger perspective as insufficient to comprehend the devitalizing forces at large today.
- 48 One aspect of your philosophy that remains underappreciated is the aesthetic theory you developed in your 1934 book *Art as Experience*. There you finally fleshed out your idea of the consummatory phase of conduct, as well as the place of qualitative, felt experience you had elaborated earlier in *Experience and Nature*. You silenced some of the critics of your instrumentalism who argued that it was a mere utilitarian conception of conduct by describing aesthetic experience as the consummation of the act, in which the qualitative aspect of the act itself, rather than the act as a means to an end, is prominent. Any given act of interpretation may have both elements simultaneously.
- 49 You showed how aesthetic experience is neither simply subjective nor objective, but is the pervasive quality of the act, felt or “had” rather than known by the experiencer. Having an aesthetic experience is far more general than experiencing art: all experience potentially involves an aesthetic element or perspective. But this does not mean, as,

composer John Cage would say, that all experience is art. One can have an aesthetic experience of chance sounds without that being an aesthetic experience of music, contra Cage. In my own study of *The Meaning of Things* (1981), the objects respondents described most often as holding aesthetic meanings were houseplants, not art, because the qualities of the plants themselves most often evoked their meaning, rather than indirect social meanings, such as “it was a wedding present” or “we got it on vacation,” which many art objects signified.

- 50 Your distinction brings out what to me seems one of the strengths of pragmatism: a full-bodied theory of meaning that not only accounts for conventional signification, but is able to encompass qualitative, experiential, and even symbolic modalities of signification that are extraconventional. Your qualitative element of signification and Peirce’s iconic sign allow the sign a presence, unlike the French semiological tradition of meaning as differential, where a sign’s meaning is determined by its difference from other signs in the system.
- 51 Contemporary social science has been flooded with social constructionist theories of meaning, which hold that meaning is an arbitrary or conventional system. In more extreme forms in postmodernism, meaning is regarded as purely conventional, and the place of experience and nature, of qualitative and indexical modalities of signs, of biosocial aspects of self and society, of signs capable of real purport, of reality itself, are all denied. A self proclaimed Deweyan pragmatist by the name of Richard Rorty held such views, leading me to proclaim him a *fragmatist* rather than a pragmatist (Halton 1995). One of the ironies in the radical postmodern ideologies is that in the name of a kind of “everything is permitted” perspective, signification and interpretation are tightly constricted to the realm of the conventional or contingent. For such reasons I view it as an embodiment of contemporary techno-consumptive capitalism, rather, as many of its adherents seem to believe, an alternative.
- 52 One of the key elements of your aesthetic theory that I have found insightful in understanding conduct is your distinction between *perception* and *recognition*. Recognition, in your sense, uses already internalized, habitualized schema to interpret, whereas perception goes further to bring those schema to meet the felt situation, so that the interpretation is influenced by the qualities of the situation – or work – being interpreted, and so that the schemas of interpretation one brings to a situation are potentially enlivened or modified by that act. One learns as one interprets in an aesthetic act, and this is one way, in the narrower zone of art, in which art is connected to life and provides vitalizing and transcendent experience. More generally, the idea of perceptive experience opens for me a view of human conduct and social life as primarily centered in awareness rather than knowledge.
- 53 Aesthetic experience is not to be confused with effete distance from everyday practice, but as the very basis, through awareness as primary modality of consciousness, to connect to the evolutionary roots of generalizing awareness through which we evolved into these human bodies. Human symboling created virtual worlds of internalized schemas of interpretation, but to live by them, through recognition, instead of *with* them, through perception, would be a dangerous denial of engagement with the living habitat. In my opinion, John, we evolved through perceptive awareness, what Ortega y Gasset termed “omnivorous attention.” Now, it seems to me, we have installed a growing technoculture that selects for living by recognition, in commodified unawareness. You

would surely be surprised at how America has become a nation of button pushers, how the world is pushing more and more buttons. This brings me to my next point.

- 54 Your work, especially in *The Public and Its Problems*, renewed the tradition of the public as a valid realm of conduct, not only necessary for maintaining vital, flourishing democracies, but also as a locus for everyday associative life. You brought into focus the problem of the privatization of the idea of the common good, something that modern thought seems to have lost because of its turning of subjectivity and emotions into what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre called “emotivism.”
- 55 Another aspect of the dilemma appeared in your contrast of Royce’s idea of a Great Community (his “translation” of Peirce’s idea of the unlimited community of inquirers into a practical conception) to Graham Wallas’s conception of “the Great Society,” and Walter Lippmann’s use of it. Lippmann took a technocratic approach that the public is not real per se, but is only what he called *The Phantom Public*, managed by elites and mediating media. Yet as you put it, “Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse. Communication can alone create a great community” (1927: 144). Again, democracy as a common life requires informed citizens capable of more than being managed by elites.
- 56 You also say, “Our concern at this time is to state how it is that the machine age in developing the Great Society has invaded and partially disintegrated the small communities of former times without generating a Great Community [...] The local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so vast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complexly indirect in operation, that they are, from the standpoint of the members of the social units, unknown [...] An inchoate public is capable of organization only when indirect consequences are perceived, and when it is possible to project agencies which order their occurrence” (1927: 126-7, 129). Your words of 1927 remain even truer today, when vast multinational corporations have invaded and colonized the face-to-face community at every level.
- 57 Marx’s concerns with class and alienation become prominent: what would a class-differentiated, yet unalienated Great Community look like? Can one even call America a democracy today when the great society indicators loom ever larger: when CEO to average worker salary ratios are 25 to 1, when average CEO pay (adjusted for inflation) between 1990 and 2005 skyrocketed almost 300 percent, when in the twenty five years from 1980 to 2005 more than 80 percent of total increase in Americans’ income went to the top 1 percent? And what about the Republic of Fat as the democratization of alienation: everyone dislodged from their bodies by being encased in them: The Great Big Society!
- 58 In America, public life itself has been transformed by the appearance of privatized shopping malls, which have gutted local commerce in many towns and cities, while diminishing or even eradicating the public space as a locus of community life. But the private sphere has been colonized as well, moving way beyond the infusion of television that had already just started in your lifetime.
- 59 So much of America today, in its techno-depressive state, wishes to be invulnerable, liberated from the troublesome encounter with life that involves being vulnerable, being live. Masking itself in technicalism, technical solutions and new technology, virtualized home life through overuse of electronic devices, consumed Status Stuff, and an obesity

epidemic, it has incarnated supersized perfections of anaesthesia: the mask of the living dead.

- 60 The ancient Greek polis, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, inherently involved the unique perspectives each citizen brought to it, in contrast to “society,” a medieval mistranslation of polis by Thomas Aquinas in Arendt’s view, which involves an aggregate. You saw this earlier, in *The Public and Its Problems*, when you said, “Associated or joint activity is a condition of the creation of a community. But association itself is physical and organic, while communal life is moral, that is, emotionally, intellectually, and consciously sustained [...] no amount of aggregated collective action by itself constitutes a community” (1927: 151). Aggregated collective action by itself is the hallmark of consumptive Isolatoism today, armored against community.
- 61 Contemporary capitalist democracy, so-called, emerged triumphant over communist democracy, so-called, at the end of the twentieth-century. As the joke had it, the difference between communism and capitalism is that in capitalism it is man’s inhumanity against man, but in communism it is completely the other way around. In the garrison state that was totalitarianism the rats were punished by negative conditioning. In “capitalist democracy” the rats are rewarded by positive conditioning. The latter has apparently proven a more successful method of conditioning rats to become docile to their conditioning, numb to their loss of freedom and autonomy, to their own mechanization and dehumanization. But a benumbed population of conditioned rats tends eventually to gnaw its way to the garrison state.
- 62 Democracy in your sense requires autonomous individuals capable of living for the common good, and a sense of the common good as capable of producing such individuals. Varieties of authoritarian societies – including capitalist oligarchies – require individuals and institutions subject to authoritarian good, yet not capable of determining it. They tend to select for automata instead of autonomy.
- 63 And yet democracy ends in a common good: the good life, as you strove to show. It is the valuing of the common life over the special interests of an individual or institution. To the extent that valuing is rooted in the practices of a common life it is a democratic life.
- 64 You sought to put a human face on science and technology, so that they could serve as instruments for the reconstruction of society. I am sympathetic to recovering these powers, which seem to have run amok like the brooms released in *The Sorcerers’ Apprentice*. But you seem to neglect, on the one side, Peirce’s valid claims that 1) science is primarily a theoretical affair concerned with the long run toward truth which the scientist serves, not the short term welfare of the scientist or society; and that 2) science does not go deep enough, limited as it is to opinion and not belief, to serve the interests of practical life, which require the availability of all the sentiments as well as practical judgment. On the other side, your championing of a broadened conception of scientific inquiry as the basis for democratic life still seems too narrow to encompass the necessary resources, even though your model remains broader and more humane than the “communicative rationality” machine constructed by Jürgen Habermas. You seem to leave so much out, or rather, to think that it can be squeezed into your inquiry model, as though other modalities are not good enough. Where does that “felt-sense” that leads to the problematic situation in which inquiry begins, as you showed so well, fit in to this? Or is there more?

- 65 So how about throwing some tender-hearted words into the tender-minded mix as well? Words like imaginative realism, or “the ART of political life,” or that reality of human being which is far more developed than our vaunted rational intellect, though explicitly targeted for destruction by the culture of narcissism that is perfecting itself globally these days: empathy.
- 66 I find it odd that you showed so clearly the place of qualitative immediacy and aesthetic experience in everyday life, yet give so little attention to how the sentiments, creative vitalities, and capabilities for passionate self-transcendence bodying forth from vital living rather than a perspective of critical inquiry, may reanimate the wider commonwealth that is our relation to ourselves, our families, neighbors, fellow citizens and fellow human beings. You allow art a place, but it seems to me a very tepid place. What is the place of simple face-to-face decency today, for example, or of trust and love?
- 67 A contemporary politician and thinker named Vaclav Havel, the former president of the Czech Republic who I like to think of as a “Prague-matist,” spoke of this elegantly at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, on July 4, 1994, where the American Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution were originally debated on and adopted, when he said: “Yes, the only real hope of people today is probably a renewal of our certainty that we are rooted in the earth and, at the same time, the cosmos. This awareness endows us with the capacity for self-transcendence. Politicians at international forums may reiterate a thousand times that the basis of the new world order must be universal respect for human rights, but it will mean nothing as long as this imperative does not derive from the respect of the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence. Only someone who submits to the authority of the universal order and of creation, who values the right to be a part of it and a participant in it, can genuinely value himself and his neighbors, and - thus honor their rights as well.”
- 68 Why is it, John, that Herman Melville, in his great novel *Moby Dick*, saw clearly in 1851 into the consequences of “Isolatoism,” of the global disaster the modern Ahabian mindset would produce, the sinking of the world-ship in the mad quest for oil and “the phantom of life” itself? How is it that he also foresaw an alternative, found in the renewal of humble reconnection to the community of humankind and the earth, through Ishmael’s connection to his shipmate Queequeg?
- 69 My point is that real art bodies itself forth, whether understood in its time or not, through means other than inquiry. Critical thought is secondary to art. So perhaps thinkers fill in more critically what artists have felt expressively. Peirce’s theory of reality as intrinsically social and involving a community of interpretation has always seemed to me to develop logically what Melville expressed in *Moby Dick*: that Isolatoism is unviable in the long run, that the modern “islander” consciousness must reconnect to “the common continent” of humankind. So far so good. Only Melville, in my opinion, saw more clearly and even earlier than Peirce why Isolato islander nominalism is not simply a logical fallacy, but full suicide. And you seemed not to see this at all.
- 70 Let me turn this to another context. You wanted a social philosophy that could understand and reconstruct its times. But your understanding of the twentieth-century more broadly, despite astute observations on a number of issues, seems kind of anemic to me, tepid, and your writing is not lucid. I admire your transactional model of conduct, how meaning should be understood in the “context of the situation,” but one of its great

shortcomings manifested in your idea that America should remain isolated from the emerging conflict with totalitarian Nazi Germany. That is why I have to side with your opponent, Lewis Mumford.

- 71 The titles of the brief contributions in *Common Sense*, March 1939, on the theme of “If War Comes—Shall We Participate or Remain Neutral?,” and on the eve of the war, say it all. Bertrand Russell’s is, “The Case for U.S. Neutrality,” yours is, “No Matter What Happens—Stay Out,” and Mumford’s is “Fascism is Worse than War,” meaning war was the lesser of two evils and that America should forcibly resist fascism. You stated: “If we but made up our minds that it is not inevitable, and if we now set ourselves deliberately to seeing that no matter what happens we stay out, we shall save this country from the greatest social catastrophe that could overtake us, the destruction of all the foundations upon which to erect a socialized democracy.”
- 72 The next few years proved Mumford right, and you and Russell wrong. You thought the European conflict was not the American “context of situation,” neglecting the larger civilizational context of situation. “No Matter what Happens” proved to be, as Mumford said it would, that Hitler would do exactly what he said he would do in *Mein Kampf* and would not be appeased under any circumstances. As Napoleon said, “Oh well, no matter what happens, there’s always death.”
- 73 Mumford may not have possessed your technical philosophical knowledge, and he lacked a sense of how significant class relations can be, but even so, his understanding of the times was far deeper, and his writing far more elevated than yours. Like you Mumford admired Emerson. But he embodies Emerson’s spirit far more than you. The essence of that spirit to me is unfettered outpouring of ideas. But Mumford also drew from Melville, and the other literary transcendentalists, and drew from darker intimations than you were able to feel. You seem fossilized today in contrast to Mumford, as I read each of you, yet you loom large because you were a pragmatist, and so have now been canonized by the academic industry. Mumford fit no disciplinary boundaries neatly, and though widely read in his time, has gone into partial eclipse. Perhaps as Emerson did for a time after his death.
- 74 My question is: why were you so wrong – idiotically wrong in saying that war was not inevitable yet deciding to stay out of it had to be – and why was Mumford so right? Perhaps you were still feeling burned about your pro World War 1 stance and were on the rebound. Still, I claim that Mumford was so right about that issue, and so much more right about the dark forces released in the twentieth-century in general than your bright, ardent outlook, because he allowed the full weight of his passions and emotions to inform his thinking at a more full-bodied level. You may have built a philosophy that allowed for a live social creature capable of experience – one deeper than many out there today, but it didn’t amount to a row of beans when it came time for you to come to grips with the mid-century madness, and still wouldn’t with the larger potential calamities primed to release today.
- 75 I am sorry I have to express such misgivings about the sustainability of your general outlook, but, despite my continuing admiration for a number of the ideas you developed, I simply needed to move on to more inclusive perspectives than your pragmatism could provide. Nonetheless, you remain a part of my inner community of thought, which includes a variety of perspectives I am grateful for being able to think with and draw from.

76 Yours sincerely,

77 Gene Halton

To Charles Peirce

78 Dear Charles,

79 I am a great fan of your philosophy, and felt that I need to write to you. The way you were so neglected in your time, while your ideas winged forth and were bent by others to fit the times, continues to appall me today. In the roughly hundred years since you died there has been good news and bad news. The good news is that your works survived a posthumous trip to the Harvard philosophy department hallways, where they sat too long, and even though some papers were removed and others taken out of order, collected works projects ensued and are still underway today. You are accepted as the founder of pragmatism, as one of the founders of semiotic, and as a source of ideas still being uncovered. It still is not widely known how you could be considered a key founder of mathematical logic, though work by John Sowa has now detailed that.

80 But the bad news includes the fact that your semiotic was distorted into positivism by Charles Morris, and that numerous theories going as semiotics, such as that of Ferdinand de Saussure, are based on the very nominalism your semiotic realism sought to disprove. Your ideas are still poorly misunderstood, but there appears to be growing interest in them.

81 You saw what they did to your pragmatism in your lifetime; fortunately you did not live to see what they did to your semiotic. Charles Morris, who was a student (and not a very good one) of John Dewey's colleague and friend at Chicago, George Herbert Mead, was ironically a major force in undermining pragmatism and semiotic in the name of the glossy scientism of "logical empiricism." That was a school of thought which stemmed from Vienna, based largely in applied misunderstandings of a philosopher named Ludwig Wittgenstein, who gave away his family fortune just as you were dying in dire poverty around 1914. Too bad you two couldn't have met up then: He could have traded you his fortune for your mathematical logic and pragmaticism. As it happened, a friend and colleague of his, Frank Ramsey, later introduced him to your thought and turned him around in his work, though Wittgenstein didn't acknowledge your influence explicitly.

82 And talk about the "kidnappers" who stole your pragmatism; it got even worse: Morris used numerous terms from your semiotic without your name in his *Foundations of a Theory of Signs* in 1938, and twisted the triadic ideas into dyadic positivism. He defines a sign as having "three (or four)" factors, adding interpreter to his dyadic reductions of your first three triadic sign terms:

83 "This process, in a tradition which goes back to the Greeks, has commonly been regarded as involving three (or four) factors: that which acts as a sign, that which the sign refers to, and that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter. These three components in semiosis may be called respectively, the sign vehicle, the designatum, and the interpretant; the interpreter may be included as a fourth factor. These terms make explicit the factors left undesigned in the common statement that a sign refers to something for someone" (Morris 1938: 3). Notice how he takes your abbreviated definition of a sign as something which stands to someone in some respect or capacity, says it is a "common statement," conveniently bypassing your name, and then

introduces different terminology from your threefold sign, object, interpretant, without mentioning the switch.

- 84 Morris did not understand that “the man himself,” as you put it, is a sign, not merely, as he saw it, an interpreter considered as a “user” of signs not itself a sign. Here is a defense of your theory against Morris’s misuse by one of your old students from John Hopkins University, John Dewey, who you severely criticized in your letter of June 9, 1904 for treating logic as a developmental or genetic history rather than as a normative science. Forty years later Dewey had come to a better understanding of and appreciation for your work:
- 85 “The misrepresentation in question consists in converting Interpretant, as used by Peirce, into a personal user or interpreter. To Peirce, ‘interpreter,’ if he used the word, would mean, that which interprets, thereby giving meaning to a linguistic sign. I do not believe that it is possible to exaggerate the scorn with which Peirce would treat the notion that what interprets a given linguistic sign can be left to the whim or caprice of those who happen to use it. But it does not follow from this fact that Peirce holds that the interpretant, that which interprets a linguistic sign, is an ‘object’ in the sense of an existential ‘thing’” (Dewey 1946: 87).
- 86 Dewey knew firsthand what your scorn might be, though, yes, you also praised him in that same letter to him. He had already become the best known living American philosopher by the time he wrote those words in 1946, yet the positivism Morris helped spearhead into American academic life had already begun its ascension, despite what you and the other pragmatists had shown to be the untenability of foundationalism in science. Foundationalism and its false promise of scientific certainty captured the minds of those unable to appreciate the subtlety of your argument that all thoughts are signs, all signs are inferences, all knowledge consists of fallible sign inferences conditionally appealing to further interpretation. Positivist “verification” ruled the day, despite the fact that you showed that there is no objective meaning in an act of positivist “verification” or even in a scientific experiment per se, only, perhaps, some isolate scientist indicating an individual thing.
- 87 Pragmatic meaning is found, as you put it, “not in an experiment, but in *experimental phenomena...*,” not in “any particular event that did happen to somebody in the dead past, but what *surely will* happen to everybody in the living future who shall fulfill certain conditions” (Peirce 1938: 5.425). Hence there is no meaning in a present moment or immediate experimental result, but only in the living, mediate continuum of inferential, general semiosis. Galileo’s overturning of Aristotle’s physics was a great triumph of modern science, but Occam’s razor, as your critique of nominalism demonstrated, also cut off generality as a reality of the universe, despite the fact that science only traffics in signs and finds its objectivity in a conditional future community of interpretation, not in individual “things.”
- 88 In a few decades after your death, when the so called 20th century “Anglo American” philosophy had starved enough philosophers in America, the best alternative seemed to be “Continental” philosophy, with its phenomenology, hermeneutics, etc. This was a continental divide, a gulf of objectivism and subjectivism. But Charles, as you must know, you had already undercut that divide before it even occurred, in a philosophy more rigorous than positivism, more comprehending of signification than the Continental tradition. I mean, you developed your phenomenology independently of Husserl (even mentioning it in your 1904 letter to Dewey), calling it phaneroscopy so as not to confuse it

with Hegel's Phenomenology, and allowing the phaneron per se as its object. It is more radical than Husserl's phenomenology in "bracketing off" Husserl's transcendental subject in order to consider the phaneron itself. You also elaborated a comprehensive semiotic well before Saussure. You developed a rigorous philosophy of science that demonstrated why truth could not be found in a dyadic positivist reference, but only through a thoroughly social conception of an unlimited community of inquirers. Truth is a public matter, not a private positive "verification."

- 89 I don't mean to sweet-talk you, but in my opinion, your demarcation of a "psycho-physical universe," of "a universe perfused with signs"; of the idea of a semiotic realism in which the life of science resides, has yet to be comprehended as the great achievement it is. It seems to me as significant as Einstein's theory of relativity, which appeared in the last years of your life but which you unfortunately were not aware of. But the world cannot yet accept the reality of signs as an irreducible mode of being, because still trapped in the modern error of nominalism.
- 90 Enough praise! I know that you love criticism, and I have some for you. I also know that I am likely to get my ass kicked in a debate with you, master philosopher of science as you are. But that is how learning happens, isn't it?
- 91 One thing that bothers me about your view of science is your unwillingness to allow that the very nominalism you see in its development thus far, which you criticize while celebrating the achievements of modern science, might be so potentially destructive as to open a final Pandora's Box from which humankind, and the science so dear to you, might never recover. I wonder why you never corresponded with Henry Adams, whose sense of the dangerous increases of power without corresponding human controls was as prescient as his methods were flawed. I think you could have really helped his thinking on historical method, even as he could have sensitized you to how science, allied to power technology, could undo itself if left without some sense of human limit. Around the time of your letter to Dewey, and of Einstein's publishing of his theory of relativity, Adams wrote to Henry Osborne Taylor on Jan. 17, 1905: "The assumption of unity which was the mark of human thoughts in the middle-ages has yielded very slowly to the proofs of complexity. The stupor of science before radium is a proof of it. Yet it is quite sure, according to my score of ratios and curves, that, at the accelerated rate of progression shown since 1600, it will not need another century or half century to tip thought upside down. Law, in that case, would disappear as theory or a priori principle, and give place to force. Morality would become police. Explosives would reach cosmic violence. Disintegration would overcome integration" (1947: 558-9).
- 92 Science and technology grew to the powers imagined by Adams, even as politics by mid-century had realized total police states. In less than a half century, in 1945, atomic explosives reached cosmic violence, and police states had broken out in the name of morality. Henry Adams foresaw in 1905 what you did not, which is curious to me given how farsighted you were in so many different areas of inquiry.
- 93 New technical powers and systems emerged, such as computing machines, vastly elaborated beyond the electric one you attempted to build in the 1890s, which we have not yet figured out how to harness for human welfare. Our society is threatened by depersonalization, our biosphere is threatened with vast extinctions, deforestations, and climate change; toward all of which science and technology are no innocent bystanders. To this, your maxim of "do not bar the road of inquiry," as though science should be left unfettered, bearing no responsibility to life while disemboweling it, seems to me, with all

due respect, empty. I would not, of course, write in such underscored terms to any man with whom I did not feel a very deep respect and sympathy, if I may paraphrase your own words to Dewey.

94 Yours sincerely,

95 Gene Halton

Peirce letter 2: On semiotic

96 Dear Charles,

97 I wanted to get back to you on Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs, which came to prominence in the twentieth century, and how it compares to your semiotic, and what implications this might have for social science today.

98 Saussure's is a nominalist theory of signs in which actual conduct (speech or *parole*) is a mere instance, meaningless in itself; an instance of deep structure (*langue*) wherein meaning resides as convention, untouchable. An anthropology based on it would hold that to be human is to be avatars of convention, whose live beings mean nothing more than the conventions they represent. Saussure's semiology is the antithesis of the Socratic model of philosophy as living speech, or of your view of semiosis as living conduct. It is a marked contrast with your view of semiosis as processual; in which "structures" are habits, perhaps you would say congealed habits. Further, Saussure does not allow, as you do, that habits of conduct, or semiosis, are potentially modifiable through criticism and self-control.

99 A lot of contemporary thought remains under the shadow Saussure's semiology casts, from figures such as Derrida, through Eco, and a number of others labeled postmodernist. Lacan seems a Freudian Saussurean. A philosopher who did much to derail pragmatism, by the name of Richard Rorty, was under the Saussurean shadow, not a pragmatist, in seeing meaning nominalistically as either convention or contingency. Derrida, it seems to me, sought to escape structuralist totality by swinging the Saussurean pendulum from totalistic convention to "fissioning" of signs.

100 Consider the irony of these theories of meaning: Saussure's structuralist semiology cannot account for emergence of new meaning, leaving it to poststructuralists to try to account for it as "contingency." It is a structuralism that cannot account for the emergence of structure!

101 What can one say anthropologically to those thinkers today who blankly believe that human communication and representation exemplify a mode of being discontinuous with earlier forms of communication and organization. Such a belief requires blindness to the place of gestural signification in human language, which clearly is continuous with earlier, prehuman and even preprimate communication. George Herbert Mead's philosophy of signification provides such a continuous view from "the conversation of gestures" to what Mead terms "the significant symbol." But believing in the false abstraction of structuralism requires a false belief of discontinuity.

102 Many sociologists today still buy into the outlook of Durkheim and his use of the sacred in social life to account for symbolization: Durkheim is another structuralist limited to a conceptualist view of representation, holding what I elsewhere term a "bubble boy" theory of meaning, unable to touch the world. When one goes to the beliefs held by

hunter-gatherer peoples, such as the Australian aboriginals Durkheim discussed, one sees that, contra Durkheim, they hold mind to be continuous with the living landscape, not some discontinuous product of a structuralist mind cage. So does your semiotic, which allows the object of a sign to be part of the sign, including the actual objects of habitat. Your semiotic allows that human mind emerges in transaction with the living intelligence of habitat, that indeed, it is an adaptation to that habitat and of mind in general. Your critical common-sensism allows that evolved, tempered habits of mind percolate from deep within the human body-mind, providing us with, if I may express it tersely, indubitable yet fallible ideas for the practice of life.

- 103 The Scottish common-sensists' idea of "original and natural judgments of common sense" also raises the question of inborn ideas. What if there are such, so deeply engrained as to be indubitable? The typical response today is to say that ideas are social, and that a naturally given idea could not be social, so that inborn ideas are not possible. But this seems to me to falsely assume that human biology is not itself social. The physiological capacity for speech stems from genetically encoded, developmentally released biological capacities that are themselves the result of prior social experience and selection, yet requiring social interaction for their release and cultivation.
- 104 Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's popular theory of "habitus" cannot handle the possibility of biologically engrained habits, because his conception of habit is too conceptual. Between the habits of conduct and the situation is the living and spontaneous "I." Habit is not limited to dead convention, as it is in Bourdieu, and habit change can be more than contingency, which is where a number of postmodernists unnecessarily limit themselves. It makes me wonder why Bourdieu's overly conceptualized conception of habit has become so fashionable in the social sciences, given the vast role, more richly conceived, that habit has played in Anglo-American philosophy in the past few hundred years? Pragmatism alone makes it central, and more deeply thought out than Bourdieu's conception, allowing the possibilities of living habit and self-correcting habits of conduct. But Bourdieu applies his idea fruitfully to interesting studies of status as social capital, so perhaps a more generous route might be to consider what a pragmatic conceptualization of habit could add to typical phenomena that Bourdieu considers. Actually Thorstein Veblen, who you might remember from your time at Johns Hopkins University, did something like that decades before Bourdieu.
- 105 Still, Bourdieu cannot, in the end, deal with something like aesthetic taste as anything more than habitualized social conventions. He works that vein to great effect, and it's a rich vein, but to see taste as only rote conventions is to my mind ultimately, well, tasteless. What about taste in the literal sense of *con gusto*, as sensual experience? What about the whole realm of qualitative experience and signification you and Dewey showed to be an irreducible modality of signification?
- 106 You, with some humor, designated humankind as a "degenerate monkey," acknowledging the evolutionary significance of human neoteny. I think that idea can be put to good use in considering the long evolutionary path to anatomically modern humans and the significance of that evolution for society today. But it needs to be joined to other conceptions not considered by you.
- 107 The "original exchange" is not mere human concepts of "sacred" anthropocentric "structure," but what Paul Shepard termed "the sacred game," the interplay of predator and prey, and the literal and spiritual incorporation of the wild Other (a game is a process, a sign process in the sense of your semiotic). The sacred game is where the

human mind emerged, a game so subtle it required all the abilities it summoned forth from its human players, even as it fed them with those emerging abilities and helped them to evolve and incarnate them, including... perhaps you would agree?... language.

108 With regards,

109 Gene Halton

To Charles Peirce, final letter

110 Dear Charles,

111 Part of your outlook is that rationality is the most evolutionarily immature of our brain capacities, requiring connection in life to other, more mature capacities such as sentiment and instinct from the older passionate brain centers, in order to operate optimally. Hence, as I understand you, rational science, which you champion, is inadequate as a guide to practical life, because it does not draw deeply enough from the bodily resources available to practical reason. This I get. Indeed, so much of the morass of modernity is due precisely to the outlook which takes rational reason as defining what reason is, and the unlimited expansion of rational reason as progress and enlightenment, rather than a form of infantilization. Unhinged expansion of rationality results in rational madness. Yet rationality limited, conceived as a not fully matured capacity requiring its synaptic tethering to the larger community of passions both constituting brain and incarnating the broader community of organic reasonableness, results in optimized rational capacity for the practice of life. Rationality optimized is not maximized rationality.

112 But then consider the possibility that “the degenerate monkey” that you characterized humanity as being is even further infantilized in its form as scientist. You saw, rightly as I understand you, why science is too thin to be practical, why it must be limited as a theoretical pursuit. But you did not see how scientists, qua scientists, may for the same reason be subhumans, limited in their precision to what the nominalized goals of our age sets for them. As such they become dangerous when they rise to prominent positions to advocate science policies for practical life, speaking from their scientific (and by you limited) perspective, and from a nominalistic conception of science at that. They begin making nuclear bombs and altering the very genetic basis of life itself, often in the service of governments or corporations who care only about power and profit. Not that the other extreme, politicians ignorant of science, are any better. This is the issue Dewey was wrestling with, in trying to find a way for a conception of inquiry as a basis for democratic life. His answer was unsatisfying to me, because he did not allow that scientific inquiry per se may be too narrow a model. But at least he was concerned with the problem, which you seem to have glossed over.

113 Dewey was trying to argue against authoritarian models of society. But his quest for a democratic good life rooted in the idea of scientific inquiry amounted to an unwitting blueprint for technocracy, rule by elite technocratic authorities, where your view allows that life is broader than science, and that science should be restricted in its place in society. Your critical common-sensism seems to me a way that allows intelligent inquiry a place in practical life, but bases it in the more mature passions of reasonableness, acknowledging that those passions evolved and adapted over a longer stretch of time, and hence embody matured capacities of impassioned reasonableness. Still, your indifference

to the dangers of actually existing science, even in your day but particularly now, remains problematic. You assumed the scientific method would eventually work out false assumptions of nominalism, but in my view, neglected how those assumptions could be suicidally toxic, to the point of aborting a human “long run.”

- 114 Stricter safeguards on new technologies seem to me a moral necessity where relevant, and today, scientific inquiry cannot be strictly separated from its conjoined schizoid twin, technology. Together they are destroying the earth, the social fabric, and us. That’s the gap I don’t see you addressing.
- 115 In Aldous Huxley’s 1932 novel *Brave new World*, a controller of a technologically advanced society hundreds of years in the future, based on the principles of mass production Henry Ford was developing in your last years of life, expresses exactly the expedient perversion of inquiry to serve practical concerns that you were fearful of:
- 116 “I’m interested in truth, I like science. But truth’s a menace, science is a public danger. As dangerous as it’s been beneficent. It has given us the stablest equilibrium in history. China’s was hopelessly insecure by comparison; even the primitive matriarchies weren’t steadier than we are. Thanks, I repeat, to science. But we can’t allow science to undo its own good work. That’s why we so carefully limit the scope of its researches – that’s why I almost got sent to an island. We don’t allow it to deal with any but the most immediate problems of the moment. All other enquiries are most sedulously discouraged. It’s curious,” he went on after a little pause, “to read what people in the time of Our Ford used to write about scientific progress. They seemed to have imagined that it could be allowed to go on indefinitely, regardless of everything else. Knowledge was the highest good, truth the supreme value; all the rest was secondary and subordinate. True, ideas were beginning to change even then. Our Ford himself did a great deal to shift the emphasis from truth and beauty to comfort and happiness. Mass production demanded the shift. Universal happiness keeps the wheels steadily turning; truth and beauty can’t. And, of course, whenever the masses seized political power, then it was happiness rather than truth and beauty that mattered. Still, in spite of everything, unrestricted scientific research was still permitted. People still went on talking about truth and beauty as though they were the sovereign goods. Right up to the time of the Nine Years’ War. *That* made them change their tune all right. What’s the point of truth or beauty or knowledge when the anthrax bombs are popping all around you? That was when science first began to be controlled – after the Nine Years’ War. People were ready to have even their appetites controlled then. Anything for a quiet life. We’ve gone on controlling ever since. It hasn’t been very good for truth, of course. But it’s been very good for happiness. One can’t have something for nothing. Happiness has got to be paid for. You’re paying for it, Mr. Watson – paying because you happen to be too much interested in beauty. I was too much interested in truth. I paid too.”
- 117 Comfort and happiness: who would want to fight that? Yet these words give lie to the cost they bring when elevated to ultimate goals of life. Life in earnest, life for real, cannot be reduced to comfort as a basis for happiness. Ultimate happiness, even in practical life, must be more than comfort. It must involve creative participation in the greater community of life, engaging it, living to sustain it. And science, though narrower, lives to sustain the bringing into being of truth, regardless of happiness. As you showed so well, science, as a human practice, serves general truths greater than human comfort, and should be regarded as the valuable yet impractical practice it is: it should be kept in its place, limited. When turned to considerations of comfort, science becomes a loose

- cannon, subject to passing fashions and bureaucratic control. That is the grave problem we now face.
- 118 New technologies and devices and even life-forms now bubble forth from labs in ever greater profusion. The question is whether such safeguards are “blocking the road of inquiry” or what I will call “building the road of inquiry.” It just seems to me infantile to open Pandora’s box scientifically, but to treat the consequences of that scientific opening of the door as not themselves part of the pragmatic meaning of “scientifically opening the door.”
- 119 Unfettered exploration, under the eye of public scrutiny, is perhaps like Gandhi’s response to the question, “Mr. Gandhi, What do you think of Western civilization?” He said “I think it would be a very good idea.” Consider how the foundations of Big Science today are rooted in the legacy of the Manhattan Project, which gathered the greatest minds for an amazing project which had all the essential characteristics of science *except* public scrutiny. Consider massive funding by the Pentagon for projects such as the internet, or massive funding of research by private corporations who maintain privacy for commercial purposes, even patenting the genetic blueprints of life for private gain. Public scrutiny is too easily shunted aside, and today, I fear, we may be cooking the “primordial soup” of the Apocalypse in commercial ventures involving genetic recombination, including the unintended ones wafting from toxic manure lagoons of the unfettered agricultural complex. The recent pandemic of 2009 originated in La Gloria, Mexico, where a giant high-tech Smithfield pig slaughtering plant operates unfettered, with huge toxic manure lagoons blending pig, human, and, from a nearby industrial poultry operation, avian DNA: Recombinant Roulette!
- 120 No thought is given to how to close Pandora’s Box before opening and patenting it, or such thoughts are repressed from public hearing by money and power interests. J. Robert Oppenheimer, director of the Manhattan Project, which developed the first atomic bombs used as weapons against Japan, said: “In some sort of crude sense which no vulgarity, no humor, no overstatement can quite extinguish, the physicists have known sin; and this is a knowledge which they cannot lose.” Oppenheimer was later betrayed by fellow physicist Edward Teller, who lied that Oppenheimer was a security risk, and Oppenheimer was blackballed. Science-fused-to-tech has become Krishna, avatar of Vishnu, manifesting unfettered to Arjuna, multi-armed and saying, as Oppenheimer put it: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.” So where do you stand in today’s world, Charles, where nominalism is perfecting itself through the avatars of its scientific-industrial complex, not, as it has claimed, in a non-teleological manner, but instead allied to an ultimate goal of dehumanization? Modern nominalistic science you see, or at least as I am claiming, is avatar of a mythic projection of the machine, of a clockworks symbolism of automatism, onto the cosmos. And it seems bent on strangling itself before correcting itself.
- 121 OK, I came across a variant of your “do not bar the road of inquiry” maxim I can live with, from your letter of 1905 to Dewey: “Never permanently bar the road of any true inquiry” (CP 8.243). By introducing “permanently,” it seems to me to allow for questioning of potential harmful effects of some inquiries, and the barring of them when needed until adequate safeguards can be established.
- 122 Charles, you are the *vox clamantis in deserto* of modern thought. Your devotion to science and logic led you to develop a philosophy with more rigor than any other accounts of modern science, in my opinion. It also led you to reject the nominalistic foundations of

modern thought, including modern scientific thought, and to replace them with a broadened understanding of reason.

- 123 Your 1893 essay “Evolutionary Love” was anthologized and read, but for many it served to illustrate your ideas as out of touch with accepted evolutionary principles of natural selection. Of course your point was precisely to criticize natural selection as a precise but partial aspect of evolution, which, when taken as the totality of evolution, amounted to a false “philosophy of greed.” Instead you saw it as corresponding to your category of firstness, as a doctrine of chance or what you termed *tychism*. You added two other modalities, corresponding to your three modes of being: evolution by secondness or mechanical necessity, which you termed *anancasm*, and evolution by thirdness or habit taking or evolutionary love, which you termed *agapasm*. The typical response to these two other categories was that they do not fit the natural selection model.
- 124 But then the second modality of necessity you described, using Clarence King’s idea of catastrophic events causing sudden shifts in populations, seems to receive support by the idea of “punctuated equilibria,” though no credit was given to you. Similarly, your use of Lamarckian-like inheritance through habit seems now justified by the discovery of the epigenome, which encodes an organism’s experience onto the heritable DNA. But biologists still refuse to consider natural selection per se as incomplete, as one modality involved with others.
- 125 As one degenerate monkey to another, I just want to let you know I find your ideas on evolution, on semiotic realism as allowing mind in nature and brain as in mind rather than the reverse, to hold many suggestive possibilities for further lines of inquiry, especially, for me, on the larger perspective of human development. Your devotion to your work despite the punishing indifference of the world seems to me well worth your effort, and I simply want to thank you for all that you have given me.
- 126 Cheers,
- 127 Gene

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NOTES

1. References to the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (8 vols., Harvard University Press, 1931-58) are given in volume and paragraph: for example, CP 8.265 is volume 8 paragraph 265. References to *The Essential Peirce* (2 vols., Indiana University Press, 1992, 1998) are given in volume and page numbers: for example, EP2: 2 is vol. 2, p. 2. References to Peirce's manuscripts follow the Robin Catalogue of the Peirce Papers in the Houghton Library at Harvard University (*Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1967).

ABSTRACTS

If pragmatists conceive of thought as an internal dialogue, then why not externalize that thought as a dialogue in the form of letters to the major pragmatists concerning their ideas in the contemporary world. This piece consists of letters fired off to William James, Charles Peirce, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, concerning key ideas from each and how these ideas relate to contemporary social thought.

Queries are posed concerning what modifications of pragmatists' ideas might be needed today, how, for example, Charles Peirce's semiotic became known through the systematic misinterpretations of Charles Morris, how Peirce's view of science as disconnected from practical life and Dewey's view of society as requiring a model of inquiry derived from science might be reframed today, in the age of scientism; how William James's critique of science as unnecessarily excluding "the personality as a condition of events" might be reconciled with Peirce and contemporary outlooks; how Dewey's aesthetic theory and public philosophy address contemporary issues; how George Herbert Mead's idea of the generalized other might be critically refined in a time when what I term "the mechanical other" seems predominant, and what the evolutionary origins of the generalized other might be.

The form of the letter not only provides a way to illustrate the dialogical nature of thought, but also to highlight how pragmatist ideas continue in dialogue with contemporary life, and to do so with panache: not simply epistles, but e-pistols.

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