

SAMUEL RAMOS AS A PRAGMATIST: READING *PERFIL DEL HOMBRE Y LA CULTURA EN MÉXICO* THROUGH PEIRCE'S PRAGMATIC MAXIM

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INTRODUCTION

Samuel Ramos (1897-1959) is considered one of the most important Mexican philosophers of the first half of the 20th century. Indeed, in *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (1934), he articulated and defended the thesis that Mexicans are collectively afflicted by an inferiority complex which stems from the historical trauma of the Spanish conquest. This thesis had a deep impact on many subsequent Mexican philosophers (in particular, on various members of the *Hiperión* group), who subscribed to it in various degrees. However, Ramos' views are not as influential nowadays as they were in the 1930s and 1940s. Part of the reason for this is that, according to some critics of Ramos such as Eugenia Houvenaghel (2014a, 2014b), Ramos' argumentation for his claims is logically deficient. Indeed, for Houvenaghel, though Ramos stresses in several places of *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* that he offers a logical demonstration of his central claims (in particular, of the Mexican inferiority complex), there are in fact no real logical proofs of his central claims and Ramos' "demonstrations" are just rhetorical ploys.

My paper aims to show that, if we consider the Latin American philosophical tradition to which Ramos belongs and the US pragmatist philosophical tradition as complementary elements of an inclusive philosophical community that spans the Americas rather than as separate strands of thought, we can show that Ramos' argumentation for his claims is, *pace* Houvenaghel, not logically deficient but rather an instance of a particular type of logical argumentation that is exemplified in the US pragmatist tradition. To be more specific, what I aim to do in my paper is push back against Houvenaghel by examining Ramos' book through the lens of Peirce's pragmatic maxim (which Peirce considered as a logical principle) and argue, that if we interpret Ramos' claims through the pragmatic maxim, his "proofs" are not just mere rhetorical ploys but rather *bona fide* demonstrations underpinned by a logical principle. I will proceed in the following fashion. After rehearsing briefly in the second section of the paper the historical context in which Samuel Ramos lived and which shaped the composition of *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*, I will present in the third section in more detail the central claims that Ramos makes in the book and I will show briefly how these claims are articulated within a argumentative framework that Ramos intends to be systematic and subject to the same logical rigor of empirical science. In the fourth section, I will introduce in detail the criticisms laid down by Houvenaghel vis-à-vis Ramos' argumentation (in particular, the objection that Ramos' proofs are mere rhetorical ploys) and, in the fifth section, I will argue that one can push back against these criticisms by examining Ramos' book through the lens of Peirce's pragmatic maxim. Using both Peirce's primary works as well as the commentary of Hookway (2012), I will argue that, if

we interpret Ramos' work through Peirce's pragmatism by considering both authors as being part of an inclusive inter-American philosophical community, we can then provide a defense of Ramos' demonstrations against the objections raised by Houvenaghel. Finally, in the sixth section, I will offer a brief conclusion.

**SAMUEL RAMOS' HISTORICAL CONTEXT:
MEXICO'S PHILOSOPHICAL ATMOSPHERE IN THE
1920S AND 1930S**

As I mentioned previously, I want to address in this section the historical context in which Ramos lived and wrote *El Perfil del Hombre y la Cultura en Mexico*. Since Samuel Ramos was (after some initial studies at the San Nicolas College in Michoacan) educated at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) under the mentorship of Antonio Caso, Ramos was influenced by many of the philosophical concerns that that his mentor addressed. In particular, Caso published in 1924 an important book, *El Problema de Mexico y la Ideología Nacional*, in which he argued that the key problem that post-revolutionary Mexico faced consisted in the lack of racial and social unity (which resulted in a systematic underdevelopment). Indeed, insofar as the Mexican revolution had torn the country apart for over a decade (1910-1921), Mexican politicians and intellectuals in the late 1910s and 1920s were particularly concerned with creating and implementing effective policies or mechanisms that would unify country and homogenize the different groups that inhabited it. In fact, Vasconcelos' famous book *La Raza Cósmica* (1925) shows also clearly a deep concern about the social and racial fractures that

underpinned Mexico's population and articulated a tentative proposal -the program of *mestizaje* (i.e., race-mixing)- as a way to unify not only Mexico but also Latin America against the expansionist and interventionist endeavors carried out by successive US governments.

Given this historical and philosophical context, Ramos was also deeply concerned with questions revolving around national unity and Mexican identity. However, in contrast to his mentor Caso and to Vasconcelos, Ramos did not believe that the problems that Mexico faced could be addressed by developing group-fusing policies based either on forms of racial nationalism (as Vasconcelos advocated) or on communitarian Christian-inspired ideals (as Caso maintained). For Ramos, the approaches articulated by both Vasconcelos and Caso to the problems faced by Mexico were inadequate insofar as both manifested a kind of utopian impulse to create a homogenized and unified human collective. In the prologue of the third edition, Ramos warns that these approaches are problematic since "all ideas and political regimes which seek to convert man into an animal of the herd, nullifying his freedom (...) all these are forces which lead into inhumanity" (1962, 13). Instead of these following these approaches, Ramos contended that the best way to address Mexico's problems (in particular, its lack of unity and its underdevelopment) involved performing initially a detailed analysis of the Mexican character and culture to uncover the deep roots of these problems. Indeed, for Ramos, the lack of unity and underdevelopment are not the primary ills that afflict Mexico, but rather the visible manifestations or symptoms of a more systemic condition. In order to uncover this condition, Ramos proposes in his book to examine in a systematic fashion the character and culture of Mexico through the lens of Al-

fred Adler's psychological theories. Following Adler's key suggestion that excessive boasting or affirmation of personality is typically a manifestation of an inferiority complex, Ramos suggests that, since one of the central traits of character of the Mexican character is that "the Mexican is full of boasting and believes he demonstrates this potency in courage" (1962, 61), it is then adequate to use Adler's psychological theory in order to provide an initial analysis (or, rather, diagnosis) of the source of Mexico's problems:

In this essay a methodical application of Adler's psychological theories to the Mexican is attempted for the first time. One must presuppose the existence of an inferiority complex in all those people who show an excessive concern with affirming their personality, who take vital interest in all situations that signify power, and who demonstrate an immoderate eagerness to excel, to be the first in everything. Adler states that the inferiority complex appears in a child as soon as he recognizes the insignificance of his own strength compared to the strength of its parents. Mexico at first found itself in the same relationship to the civilized world as that of a child to its parents. (1962, 56)

After demarcating himself from his predecessors Caso and Vasconcelos and introducing the key methodology that he deploys throughout the book in order to examine both Mexican character and Mexican culture (a methodology that he characterizes as systematic and scientific), Ramos then proceeds to deploy the methodology in order to establish or demonstrate a series of claims that constitute the central theses of his book. In the next section, I will briefly present these claims and show briefly how Ramos argues for them.

RAMOS' CENTRAL CLAIMS IN *EL PERFIL DEL HOMBRE Y LA CULTURA EN MEXICO*

The central thesis of the book is undoubtedly the claim that the character of Mexicans is shaped by an inferiority complex that is manifested in different ways in various areas of Mexican culture. In order to support this claim, Ramos proceeds in the following fashion. First, he maintains that, in order to provide an analysis of the character of the Mexican people and of Mexican culture, it is necessary to focus on "the Mexican *pelado*, for he constitutes the most elements and clearly defined expression of national character. (1962, 58). To be more specific, Ramos maintains that offering a detailed analysis of the attitudes and the psychology of the *pelado* will provide a good window into Mexican culture and institutions to the extent that 'Plato maintained that the state is an enlarged image of the individual' (1962, 57). Thus, an analysis of the various attitudes and the psychology of the *pelado* will provide, according to him, an appropriate model to analyze Mexican culture and institutions. When Ramos turns to consider in detail the attitudes of the *pelado*, he remarks that one recurrent feature is a kind of double life. Indeed, the *pelado* exhibits in many circumstances aggressiveness and loud boastfulness, but these attitudes mask according to Ramos a deep sense of vulnerability and inferiority:

He is an animal whose ferocious pantomimes are designed to terrify others, making them believe that he is stronger than they and more determined. Such reactions are illusory retaliations against his real position in his life, which is a nullity. (...) Any exterior circumstance that might aggravate his sense of inferiority will pro-

voke a violent reprisal, the aim of which is to subdue his depression. The result is a constant irritability that incites him to fight with others on the most insignificant pretext. But his bellicose spirit does not derive from a sentiment of hostility toward all humanity. The *pelado* seeks quarrels as stimulus, to renew the vigor of his downtrodden ego. (1962, 59)

Thus, for Ramos, the bellicosity and ferocity that are displayed by the *pelado* are just fronts or smoke-screens that conceal a wounded ego and a state of depression. In virtue of this, Ramos stresses that the central trait of character of the *pelado* is an overcompensated inferiority complex. In addition, Ramos also maintains that this inferiority complex is intimately related to other traits that Mexicans exhibit. In particular, Ramos contends elsewhere in his book that “the most striking aspect of Mexican character is distrust”, where distrust is not understood as a lack of moral principles, but rather as an existential attitude in the sense that it “is not limited to the human race; it embraces all that exists and happens” (1962, 64). In virtue of this, since the Mexican character is dominated according by this visceral distrust vis-à-vis everything, one of the consequences that he highlights of this is the following:

Thought presupposes that we are capable of expectation, and one who expects is receptive to the future. Obviously, a life without future can have no norms. Mexican life is accordingly at the mercy of the four winds; instead of sailing, it drifts. (...) With neither discipline nor organization, Mexican society not unnaturally finds itself in a chaos in which individual beings move unpredictably like disperse atoms. (1962, 65)

As we can appreciate, for Ramos, one of the consequences of the inferiority complex and the *distrust* of the pelado consists in the emergence of social institutions that are dysfunctional (e.g., schools that educate haphazardly students or political parties that maintain their bases through coercion rather than through persuasion) and a culture that, under the veneer of pride, self-aggrandizement and boastfulness, conceals a sense of shame, of disarray and of vulnerability. Though far more could be said about the analysis of Mexican character and culture that Ramos presents, I want to limit myself to these core observations since I want to turn to the examination that Houvenaghel offers of Ramos' arguments for his claims.

HOUVENAGHEL'S CRITICISM OF RAMOS: AN ILLOGICAL ARGUMENTATION

In a series of recent papers, Eugenia Houvenaghel (who is a literary scholar specializing in the Mexican essay in the 20th century) has offered a critical examination of Ramos' book, focusing on features such as the self-presentation and the general structure that the work displays, the argumentative strategies that Ramos employs and the logical maxims or inferences that he uses throughout his book. In particular, Houvenaghel contends that, although Ramos aims to write a treatise that is logical, systematic, and scientific, the book falls short from his ambitions. To show this, Houvenaghel offers an analysis of some sections of the book, and she argues the work displays some important methodological shortcomings. What is of primary concern for me is Houvenaghel's contention that, though Ramos stresses throughout his book that his argumentation is logical (i.e., that he relies on

certain inferential rules or maxims of reasoning to establish the claims he makes), he does not really rely on any logical principles, which makes his “proofs” or “demonstrations” a series of rhetorical ploys. In particular, Houvenaghel offers as an example of the absence of logical argumentation in Ramos’ work the following passage:

There is no reason why the reader should be offended by these pages in which the affirmation is not that Mexican is inferior but that he feels inferior. This is quite different. (...) If, despite these explanations, the reader is hurt, we are sincerely sorry, but we will prove that there exists in our countries of America, as Keyserling puts it, ‘a propensity to be offended’; thus, an indignant reaction would be the most resounding proof of our thesis. (1962, 57)

For Houvenaghel, this passage is particularly problematic because, even though Ramos mentions at other points in his book inferential rules and reasoning principles such as instantiation or deduction, he does not visibly employ any of those when he contends that potential offended reactions from Mexican readers would provide “proof” of his thesis. In virtue of this, Houvenaghel writes that “in spite of Ramos’ pretensions and of the omnipresence of logic in the vocabulary and the style of the passage, it is evident that his argumentation is not logical and that his text does not prove anything or lead to a necessary conclusion” (2014, 30). In addition, Houvenaghel presents also as an example of the absence of logic in Ramos’ argumentation the following passage where he defends another central claim -namely, that the inferiority complex of the Mexican character is not rooted in a certain social class, but rather in the very national identity:

To see how nationality in itself creates a feeling of inferiority, one need only note the susceptibility of the *pelado*'s patriotic sentiments and his pompous expression of words and exclamations. The frequency of individual and collective patriotic manifestation is symbolic of the Mexican's insecurity about the value of his nationality. Decisive proof of the affirmation is found in the fact that the same sentiment exists in cultivated and intelligent Mexicans of the bourgeoisie (1962, 63).

In her analysis of this passage, Houvenaghel writes that, since there is no inferential rule or maxim of reasoning that Ramos relies on here, "we can conclude that there is a tension between the picture that Ramos presents on one side of his argumentation through the lexicon and the figures of speech he uses, displaying as if it was a logical argumentation with demonstrative value, and, on the other side, of the likely, probable character of his rhetorical argumentation." (2004,) In response to Houvenaghel's claims, I want to argue that, if we read Ramos as a pragmatist (in particular, if we interpret him as relying throughout his book on Peirce's pragmatic maxim), one can push back effectively against the criticisms that Houvenaghel raises concerning the absence of logic in Ramos' argumentation.

RAMOS AS A PRAGMATIST: READING *EL PERFIL* THROUGH PEIRCE'S PRAGMATIC MAXIM

In order to appreciate that Ramos employs Peirce's pragmatic maxim in his work (though he does not explicitly mention it nor does he make reference to Peirce), let us first remind what Peirce maintains in regards to the pragmatic maxim. Though Peirce offers at different points in his writings different characterisations of the pragmatic

maxim, one of the first (and most widely recognised) expressions of the maxim appears in Peirce's 1878 article *How to make our ideas clear*:

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (W 3, 266)

As various Peirce scholars have repeatedly pointed out, the formulation of the maxim in this passage is somewhat vague. How is the maxim to be interpreted? What does Peirce mean exactly by "practical bearings"? Though I will address this question further down, one point that I want to make clear before doing this is that Peirce conceives this maxim as a logical principle in the following sense: though the pragmatic maxim does not express an axiom or an inferential rule that enables us to demonstrate certain claims on the basis of others and, consequently, is not part of a logic conceived as a *calculus ratiocinator*, the maxim is for Peirce a principle that enables us to clarify our concepts, to define them with an increased precision (or to show that no definition of them is possible) and, in virtue of this, it is certainly part of a logic conceived as a *lingua characteristica universalis*, which aims to be able to express and clarify all mathematic, scientific and philosophical concepts within the framework of a universal language.

Having clarified that the pragmatic maxim is, according to Peirce a logical principle in the above mentioned sense, I want to turn now to discuss what Peirce means by "practical bearings". In a paper that aims to discuss and clarify the content of Peirce's pragmatic maxim, Christopher Hookway connects the above-mentioned expression of the maxim with a remark that

Peirce makes on a 1907 manuscript. Peirce maintains the following in this manuscript:

Intellectual concepts (...) essentially carry some implication concerning the general behaviour either of some conscious being or some inanimate object, and so convey more, not merely than any feeling, but more, too, than any existential fact, namely the ‘would-be’ of habitual behavior; and no agglomeration of actual happenings can ever completely fill up the meaning of a ‘would-be’. But that the total meaning of the predication of an intellectual conception consists in affirming that, under all conceivable circumstances of a given kind, the subject of the predication would (or would not) behave in a certain way (...) that proposition I take to be the kernel of pragmatism. (EP 2: 401-402)

In virtue of this, Hookway contends (and I agree with him) that what Peirce’s pragmatic maxim expresses is a mechanism or rule to clarify concepts where “the clarification is achieved by providing a list of description of the effects we take the object to have; presumably, this will involve of how we think the object would behave and how we think other objects would behave as a result of being affected by the object of the conception” (2012, 170-171). And, in regard to the ‘practical bearings’, what Peirce suggests is that some of effects described will have involve implications pertaining to how human beings should act. For instance, when Peirce applies the pragmatic maxim to the concept of weight, he maintains that “to say that a body is heavy means simply that, in the absence of any opposing force, it will fall. This (...) is evidently the whole conception of weight” (W 3: 267) Thus, the application of the pragmatic maxim to the notion of weight shows that, if we want to lift a body from

a lower position to a higher one, an opposing force must be applied.

In a similar fashion, I contend that, when Ramos suggests that one of the possible reactions of his Mexican readers vis-à-vis his thesis that the Mexican character is shaped by an inferiority complex consists in being offended, he is employing the pragmatic maxim in the sense that he offers a description of how most Mexicans would behave as a result of being exposed to evidence supporting the thesis that the Mexican character is shaped by an inferiority complex. For Ramos, being offended (in the case of Mexicans) by his thesis is “proof” of it to the extent that the potential reaction provides a clarification of the concept of “Mexican inferiority complex” by showing how the concept can, in some circumstances, influence the behavior of Mexicans. Moreover, when Ramos claims that his thesis that the feeling of inferiority of Mexicans is rooted in their nationality is “proved” by the fact that the same feeling of inferiority is shared by cultivated Mexicans of the bourgeoisie, he is employing the pragmatic maxim in the sense that he clarifies the concept of “Mexican inferiority complex” by showing what effects the concept when it is deployed in certain circumstances -in particular, when it is presented to members of the Mexican bourgeoisie. And, in this respect, Ramos stresses that one of the effects of the concept is that, when it is used to confront openly cultivated Mexicans about their character, they often shed the veneer of politeness and become as rude and uncouth as the *pelado*: “Every cultivated Mexican is susceptible to display, during a fit of anger that makes him lose self-control, the tone and the language of the lower classes. (...) The Mexican bourgeois has the same patriotic susceptibility as the lower classes and same favor-

able prejudices vis-à-vis the national character” (1972, 65). In virtue of this, I then conclude that, when Ramos maintains that he offers “proofs” of certain claims, he is, *pace* Houvenaghel, not just using rhetoric ploys but rather arguing logically insofar as he relies on Peirce’s pragmatic maxim.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude. I have argued that Ramos employs to support some of the claims that he makes in *El Perfil del Hombre y la Cultura en Mexico* Peirce’s pragmatic maxim and that, in light of this, Houvenaghel’s claim that there an absence of logic in Ramos’ argumentation is unjustified. Now, if it is indeed the case Ramos employs Peirce’ pragmatic maxim, this suggests that certain currents of thought in classical (North) American philosophy (in particular, pragmatism) and certain currents of thought in Latin American philosophy (in particular, Mexican philosophy of culture) are not radically distinct, but that there are important parallels and commonalities between them. Whether these parallels and commonalities are underpinned by a deeper unity is something that I intend to explore in future work.

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