

## CHARLES PEIRCE AND THE FIRSTNESS OF PROCESS

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In any discussion of Peirce's philosophy, Firstness is usually the most neglected of his categories. This, however, is not due to any unique clarity of the category of Firstness. Indeed, Isabel Stearns remarks that "Firstness is without any doubt the most elusive of Peirce's categories."<sup>1</sup> And, as Boler accurately summarizes the plight of Firstness, it "is certainly the least clear of the categories and the one that receives the least attention."<sup>2</sup> In the following essay, the focus of attention will be on the category of Firstness as it functions in Peirce's metaphysics.

Although the characterization of metaphysical Firstness which will emerge from the following discussion will differ quite markedly from the general trend of the commonly accepted interpretations, its justification will be threefold. First, it will be seen to follow directly from Peirce's statements concerning epistemological issues in accordance with a method Peirce himself advocates. Secondly, it will provide a more well-integrated category of metaphysics. And, finally, this integrated metaphysical category of Firstness which follows from Peirce's epistemology will be seen to fit in more adequately with and provide a unifying factor in the general spirit of Peirce's pragmatic philosophy. Pragmatists in general break sharply with the older static conceptions of philosophy and see this as a universe in the making; in their philosophies unchanging absolutes give way to process. The present interpretation is intended to better integrate the

<sup>1</sup> Isabel Stearns, "Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness," *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Weiner and Young (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 196-197.

<sup>2</sup> John Boler, *Charles Peirce and Scholastic Realism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963), pp. 122-123.

category of Firstness with the spirit of pragmatism and the concept of process as it is found in Peirce's metaphysical vision of cosmic evolution.

Before examining Peirce's metaphysical category of Firstness it will be necessary both to distinguish and then interrelate the metaphysical and phenomenological aspects of his categories. As Douglas Greenlee quite adequately characterizes the difference, the categories as metaphysical or ontological are "modes of being", while the categories as phenomenological<sup>1</sup> are "classifications of all that is in any way present to mind in experience."<sup>2</sup> This, then, is the distinction between the two aspects of the categories. However, as Greenlee further notes, since "what is present to the mind is not necessarily mental, there is so far no disparity between the categories as ontological and as phenomenological" (p. 52). Moreover, as Peirce's own statements will be seen to indicate, not only is there no disparity, but rather the categories as phenomenological provide the key to understanding the categories as ontological. That Peirce intends such a relationship between the two types of categories is evidenced in his assertion that "The premisses of nature . . . though they are not the perceptual facts that are the premisses to us, nevertheless must resemble them in being premisses. We can only *imagine* what they are by *comparing* them with premisses for us."<sup>3</sup> And, as he explicitly relates this general position to Firstness, "As premisses they involve qualities" (*CP*, 5, 119). Perceptual experience, then, indicates that the category of Firstness, as a "mode of being", implies qualitative richness. And, as Peirce further indicates, "No sensation nor sense faculty is requisite for the possibility which is the being of the quality"

<sup>1</sup> It is the categories as phenomenological that enter directly into Peirce's discussions of epistemological issues.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Greenlee, "Peirce's Hypostatic and Factorial Categories," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, IV (1968), 51-52. (The distinction made by Greenlee which is discussed above is not the distinction indicated by the title of his article.)

<sup>3</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, Vol. I-VI, ed. Hartshorne and Weiss (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1931-1935); Vol. VII, VIII, ed. Burks (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958). 5.119 (Hereafter cited in parentheses in the text preceded by abbreviation "*CP*" and using the conventional two-part number).

(*CP*, 1. 422). Metaphysical Firstness, then, would seem to involve both real possibility and real qualitative richness. And, taking Peirce at his word, it is with Firstness as phenomenological that we should begin in any attempt to better understand this qualitative richness and real possibility.<sup>1</sup>

Murphey gives a concise characterization of Firstness in its phenomenological aspect, stating that:

A First is not the same as what is usually called a percept . . . which has a structure and which combines a number of sense qualities. A pure First . . . is simple and devoid of structure. But every percept has a First which is the single impression created by the total ensemble of its elements. Moreover, if a single sense quality of a percept is prescinded from all the rest and is considered by itself, such a quality is a First.<sup>2</sup>

Peirce most succinctly expresses such a characterization in his brief but highly illuminating discussion of quale. As he states, "There is a distinctive quale to every combination of sensations so far as it is really synthesized . . . (*CP*, 6. 222). But, as he goes on to note, "Each quale is in itself what it is for itself, without reference to any other . . . Nevertheless, comparing consciousness does pronounce them to be alike. They are alike to the comparing consciousness, though neither alike nor unlike in themselves" (*CP*, 6. 224). Peirce clarifies the meaning of this latter assertion in another passage. Taking the example, "Yesterday I saw a blue color; and here is a blue color," he notes that "some beginner may object that they have both blueness in them; but I reply that blueness is nothing but the idea of these sensations and of others I have had, thrown together and indistinctly thought at once" (*CP*, 7.392). Thus, we cannot compare presentations in terms of the quality, "blueness", for the repeatable quality

<sup>1</sup> In "A Pragmatic Concept of the Given," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, III (1967), 74-95, I have given a somewhat detailed analysis of the role of Firstness in perceptual experience. In the present essay only a brief sketch of this role is presented in order to reveal and then explore its implications for an interpretation of the metaphysical role of Firstness. Further support for the brief sketch presented here can be found in that paper.

<sup>2</sup> Murray Murphey, *The Development of Peirce's Philosophy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 307.

is itself dependent upon the assimilation of past and present presentations.<sup>1</sup>

It would seem, then, that Firstness, as qualitative immediacy, must be considered in two ways. First, it is a repeatable and recognizable quality or quale – that which has been seen before and may be seen again.<sup>2</sup> But, secondly, this repeatability is itself a product of the synthesizing activity of consciousness acting upon unique qualia. This more fundamental level of unique qualia gives significance to Peirce's statement that "Firstness is predominant, not necessarily on account of the abstractness of that idea, but on account of its self-containedness. It is not in being separated from qualities that Firstness is most predominant, but in being something peculiar and idiosyncratic (*CP*, 1.302). Indeed, it is precisely such a characterization which leads Peirce to speak of Firstness in terms of qualities of feeling (*CP*, 5.444), for what are the characteristics of feeling according to Peirce? "There is no resemblance at all in feeling, since feeling is whatever it is, positively and regardless of anything else, while the resemblance of anything lies in the comparison of that thing with something else" (*CP*, 1.310).<sup>3</sup>

This level of unique qualitative immediacy is the important level for our present purposes, for if qualia are unique in the most primitive experience of them and if it is "comparing consciousness" that makes them repeatable, then Firstness in its metaphysical aspect would seem not to indicate any sort

<sup>1</sup> This assimilation by which comparing consciousness "produces" repeatable qualities is similar to what Professor Lee calls 'proto-generalization'. Harold N. Lee, "Suggestions Toward a Contemporary Epistemology," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, II (1964), 93.

<sup>2</sup> The awareness of qualities as repeatable and recognizable qualia is still a more primitive epistemological level than that of the awareness of qualities as objective properties indicating possibilities of future experiences. The only type of possibilities of future experiences inherent in repeatable qualia is the possibility of repetition. Here, however, it should be noted that qualities as qualia and qualities as objective properties are not meant to be numerically distinct, but epistemologically distinct. They represent different levels of interpretation.

<sup>3</sup> To think of feeling as used by Peirce in terms of psychology is to be misled by a word, for as Peirce himself emphatically states, "If by 'psychology' we mean the positive or observation science of the mind or consciousness . . . psychology can teach us nothing of the nature of feeling, nor can we gain knowledge of any feeling by introspection, for the very reason that it is our immediate consciousness" (*CP*, 1.308).

of determinate repeatables. To allow the repeatability of qualia to lead to a metaphysics which gives an independent ontological status in any sense to determinate repeatables is completely to ignore this most basic mode of Firstness as it enters into experience.

But even the unity of a unique "self-contained" quale has lost some of the original diversity, for as Peirce notes: "That very same element of experience, the quale-element, which appears upon the inside as unity, when viewed from the outside is seen as variety" (*CP*, 6.236). And, again, "No unity can originate in concentration . . . but any unity there (sic) was there already may in that way, be many times intensified" (*CP*, 6.227). And, since an uninterpreted quale is itself a "synthesis of sensations" then surely at this level also, what is seen on the inside as unity will be seen on the outside as variety. Here, however, it is crucial to note that although Peirce uses the terms 'impression' or 'sensation' quite often, he explicitly indicates both that there are no first impressions of sense (*CP*, 5.213; 7.465) and that when he does use the term 'impression' it is used as a limiting concept to indicate the boundary of consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the concept of a synthesis of impressions or a "total impression" merges with the concept of the point of organism environment interaction or the concept of strands of stimuli as seen. Just as recognition unifies diverse qualia, so qualia unify diverse stimuli.<sup>2</sup> And, just as the unifying function of recognition must have some basis upon which to work – however vague this basis may be – so the unifying function of the "production" of qualia must have some objective basis, no matter how vague, upon which to work.

Thus, the stimuli presented for organization, though not fully structured, have a vague character of some sort. In short, the repeatable and recognizable qualia have a somewhat indeterminate but objective basis in the diverse qualitative stimuli. In more Peircian terms, the First Category is

<sup>1</sup> Murphey, *op. cit.*, p. 415; Appendix, Draft 4 of Peirce Manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'qualia' and 'stimuli' are not meant to indicate a numerical distinction but rather a logical or epistemological distinction: qualitative richness as grasped by consciousness and as independent of consciousness respectively. Peirce holds quite emphatically to a theory of direct perception. (See *CP*, 5.56.)

applicable to being (*CP*, 1.487). It is to Firstness as applicable to being that we will now turn.

As a preliminary step in discussing metaphysical Firstness, certain terminological confusions must be clarified. Peirce, in his writings, uses the term 'possibility' to characterize not only Firstness but also Thirdness. And, as an added confusion, he indiscriminately interchanges the terms 'possibility' and 'potentiality'. Peirce's dual use of the term 'possibility' is quite understandable, for since Secondness comprises the domain of the actual, the possible, in a broad sense, must include both Firstness and Thirdness. What Peirce means, however, can be clarified in the light of a few illuminating statements. He holds that "A quality is how something may or might have been. A law is how an endless future must continue to be" (*CP*, 1.536). Again, at times he characterizes his three categories of being as possibility, actuality, and destiny (*CP*, 4.547). Finally, he states that "Generality is either of that negative sort which belongs to the merely potential, as such, and this is peculiar to the category of Firstness, or it is of the positive kind which belongs to conditional necessity, and this is peculiar to the category of law" (*CP*, 1.427). What the contextual meaning of the various pairs of terms used to characterize Firstness and Thirdness indicates in each of these examples is that Firstness involves a weaker type of possibility than does Thirdness. The most appropriate terms to distinguish the possibility involved in each of the two categories would be 'possibility' to indicate the First category, 'potentiality' to indicate the Third category. However, because Peirce indiscriminately switches back and forth between these two terms, the present essay would often be using one term precisely where Peirce is stressing the other term. To avoid such confusion, the terms 'negative possibility' and 'positive possibility' will be used to characterize the possibility involved in Firstness and Thirdness respectively, though what will be meant by these terms is roughly the distinction between mere possibility and potentiality, or, in Peirce's terms, the difference between "a mere may be" (*CP*, 1.304) and a "would be" (*CP*, 2.664). Furthermore, this terminology has an advantage in its own

right, for it will indicate clearly the relationship between possibility and generality.

The term 'generality' must be clarified because it also serves a dual function. As Buchler notes, Peirce means by the general the opposite of the singular.<sup>1</sup> Since the singular belongs to the category of Secondness, generality must, in a wide sense, characterize both Firstness and Thirdness. As indicated above, Peirce calls the generality of Firstness negative generality and the generality of Thirdness positive generality. The meaning of these characterizations, however, can best be approached indirectly.

When the category of Firstness was discussed from the perspective of Peirce's theory of perception, it was indicated that Firstness as ontological would be characterized by diverse qualitative stimuli. However, to understand the difficulties that arise in examining ontological Firstness, one further statement made by Peirce in connection with perception must be cited again here. Though Peirce states that the quale element which appears on the inside as unity appears on the outside as variety (*CP*, 6.236), he adds that "no unity can originate in concentration . . . but any unity there (sic) was there already may in that way, be many times intensified" (*CP*, 6.227). Thus, the ontological basis for the experience of Firstness is not merely "pure" Firstness or diverse qualitative stimuli in their aspect of diversity, but rather pure Firstness "overlaid" with some unifying element. And, if some element of unity within the diversity is required for the experience of Firstness in the sense of a unified quale, then this unity itself must be "part of" ontological Firstness. Thus, a further distinction between the element of diversity and the element of unity is necessary if Peirce's characterizations of Firstness are to be understood. This, however, leads straight to the problem of positive and negative generality.

Boler, though recognizing the significance of Peirce's switch from substance to process in most areas, states that "there is still a sense in which Peirce argues as Scotus does

<sup>1</sup> Justus Buchler, *Charles Peirce's Empiricism* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1966), p. 23.

for a real common object.”<sup>1</sup> Why is this? “According to Peirce, the commonness of qualities, which interested the schoolmen, is but one form – a degenerate form at that – of real generality.” Thus, according to Boler, at one point at least real generality for Peirce indicates “real commonness” or repetition of form in some sense. Boler’s argument seems to hinge on the unstated assumption that Peirce’s ontological category of Firstness implies repeatable, fully structured qualities. On this assumption, since Peirce declares that Firstness involves generality, the “real generality” of Peirce’s position, at this point at least, would be similar to the scholastic concept of the common nature as a “real common object”. On this view, then, the degenerate or negative generality of Firstness provides a unifying factor by providing a rigid structuring of determinate repeatables. But questions remain. In what sense is this a negative or degenerate generality? Furthermore, did not Peirce’s discussion of phenomenological Firstness lead toward the expectation that the unity of the diverse stimuli would be not a rigid structure of repetition but rather a somewhat indeterminate basis for a rigid *epistemological* structuring of repeatable qualities? However, this latter view appears to run into problems of its own, for it is not readily evident that Firstness as diverse qualitative stimuli can in any way be characterized as general. And, if the present interpretation is to find justification in Peirce’s writings, then the real negative generality of Firstness must be accounted for.

What characterizes the general, as opposed to the singular, is the fact that the law of excluded middle does not apply to the general (*CP*, 5.448). It would seem, then, that one could hold the diverse stimuli of the evolving universe, in their diversity, to be general in the negative sense that *no* determination can be made of them. Thus, though it is true that “a triangle in general is not isosceles nor equilateral; nor is a triangle in general scalene” (*CP*, 5.505), yet a triangle in general is triangular, and the generality of triangularity does limit the possible alternatives of further determination.

<sup>1</sup> John Boler, *op. cit.*, p. 158.



However, it would seem that the diverse stimuli, in their diversity, display a negative generality in that they are limited by nothing whatsoever. Peirce's reference to Firstness in this pure sense which emphasizes the qualitative uniqueness of each of the stimuli can be seen from his statement that "I cannot call it (Firstness) unity, for even unity supposes plurality" (*CP*, 2.83).

At this point, however, another problem arises, for the negative generality of Firstness has not accounted for the unifying element required by Peirce. The clue to the nature of this unity is found in Peirce's statement that "The general is seen to be precisely the continuous" (*CP*, 8, p. 279). Generality, then, must involve continuity; hence, the generality of Firstness can only be fully understood when this category is viewed from the aspect of the unity or continuity which pervades it. Here it may be objected that continuity belongs to the category of Thirdness. However, if the general is the continuous, then the negative generality of Firstness must imply a negative continuity which belongs to the category of Firstness rather than Thirdness. The negative continuity of Firstness, like the negative generality, indicates a negative possibility or mere "may-be" which contains no positive possibility or "would-be" and which thus provides no positive range for further determinations. As Peirce states the position, "Firstness is essentially indifferent to continuity" (*CP*, 6.205). Indeed, just as feeling was seen above to refer to that quale element which in its purity can be related to nothing beyond itself, so the negative generality and continuity of Firstness, which forms the cosmological basis for our experience of qualia, can be related neither to what has been nor to what will be; it has no relatedness, it contains no "would-be"; in short, it is a qualitative continuum of negative possibilities, a "substratum" of pure chance. Perhaps this clarifies the meaning of Peirce's statement, usually interpreted as indicating an idealistic metaphysics, that "wherever chance-spontaneity is found, there in the same proportion feeling exists. In fact, chance is but the outward aspect of that which within itself is feeling (*CP*, 6.265.)

Observing the fact that both "abstract qualities" and

"chance variations" belong to the category of Firstness, Greenlee notes that they seem to have in common only the fact that they are neither Seconds nor Thirds and therefore are relegated to the category of Firsts. And, as he notes, it may well be asked why chance variations should not be assigned to some new fourth category.<sup>1</sup> On this view, Firstness seems to have become the systematic dump-heap for that which will not fit into the categories of Secondness and Thirdness. Yet, if Firstness is indeed first, one would expect it to provide the significant starting point for the metaphysical functions assigned to the other categories. If, as is here held, qualitative immediacy and chance variation are intimately related, then the need for some "new fourth category" dissolves and Firstness does indeed become the significant starting point of Peirce's metaphysics, for it indicates the infinitely varied, concrete qualitative richness of a universe in process, the substratum of pure chance within which random activities occur and begin to take on habits.<sup>2</sup>

Peirce's discussion of Firstness as ontological possibility (as opposed to ontological generality) has frequently led to its identification with some type of Platonic essence. This approach may at first glance seem a mere repetition, couched in different language, of the points made above in connection with Boler's analysis. However, this approach brings to light an entirely different aspect of the problem of interpreting Peirce's category of Firstness.

Haas defends this "Platonic" line of interpretation, holding that "The possible seems to include for Peirce the universe of logical possibility or an ideal world. Some of these ideal, logical possibilities occur in the real world also. 'The sensible world is but a fragment of the ideal world.'"<sup>3</sup> And, notes

<sup>1</sup> Greenlee, "Peirce's Hypostatic and Factorial Categories," *op. cit.*, 55, 58. It should be noted that the present interpretation does not characterize the qualitative aspect of metaphysical Firstness as abstract, as does Greenlee, but rather as an infinitely rich concreteness. In "A Pragmatics Concept of the Given," *op. cit.*, 86-87, I have attempted to show that Peirce's characterization of Firstness as abstract refers to an epistemological function, not an ontological status.

<sup>2</sup> The view that the universe evolves from chance toward uniformity through the habit taking tendencies of originally random flashes of activity is explicitly developed in Peirce's cosmology. See *CP*, 1.412-1.414.

<sup>3</sup> W. P. Haas, O.P., *The Conception of Law and the Unity of Peirce's Philosophy* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), p. 99 (*CP*, 3.527).

Haas, Peirce insists that "the possible is a positive universe of being" (CP 8.303).

Peirce, however, offers a clarification elsewhere which places these statements in a quite different light. He notes that "My old definition of the possible as that which we do not know not to be true (in some state of information real or feigned) is an anacoluthon. The possible is a positive universe . . . but that is all. Of course, there *is* a general logical possible . . . but there is also a possible which is something else" (CP 8.308). This possible which is something else is a "positive universe of being". And, this possible as a positive universe of being is the negative possibility of Firstness indicated above. The possibility of the ideal world, of which the sensible world is but a fragment, is not another Platonic world which in some way allows the actual sensible world to participate in reality, but rather is an ideal world of logical possibilities whose structure is dependent upon the intelligence of man. As Peirce states, "It has come about through the agencies of development that man is endowed with intelligence of such a nature that he can by ideal experiments ascertain that in a certain universe of logical possibility certain combinations occur while others do not" (CP, 3.527). Again, Peirce observes that "It is a part of the process of sensible experience to locate its facts in the world of ideals. This is what I mean by saying that the sensible world is but a fragment of the ideal world" (CP, 3.527). In short, the ideal world as indicating a realm of logical possibilities within which the actual world must be located is not some realm of metaphysical forms; indeed, it is not a topic for metaphysics at all, but rather belongs to the area of epistemology. The ideal world is the conceptual world of the logically possible or the consistently thinkable within which the facts of experience must be located. To turn such a "conceptual world" into an ontological world is an unwarranted reification which leads to a static conception of the metaphysical possibilities of Firstness.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In "The World of C. I. Lewis," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, XXIX (1969), 589-597, I have attempted to show that a similar confusion between the conceptual and the ontological by critics of Lewis leads to their assertions of inconsistencies in his pragmatic conception of a reality in process.

We have seen that the real possibility of Firstness is a negative possibility which must be carefully distinguished from the positive of Thirdness and from the logical possibility which belongs in the discussion of epistemological issues. The real qualitative richness of Firstness is the richness of diverse qualitative stimuli which "contain" two distinct aspects, an aspect of total diversity and an aspect of somewhat indefinite unity, characterized by negative generality and negative continuity respectively. These two aspects of the qualitative richness are analytically distinct only, and together they constitute a continuum of qualitative diversity which is the very being of the negative possibility of Firstness and the substratum of pure chance.

Thus, there emerges in Peirce's philosophy a metaphysical category of Firstness which is neither a remnant of traditional conceptions of determinate repeatable qualities, nor a remnant of traditional conceptions of eternal Platonic possibilities. Rather, what emerges is a Firstness of process which attributes to process an intimately interrelated set of precisely those characteristics most antithetical to such traditional conceptions.