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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to suggest that Charles S. Peirce's conception of *reasonableness* paves the way to a deeper understanding of human reason, which is able to overcome the poverty of contemporary scientific naturalism and skeptical postmodernism. A good number of Peirce's texts are provided which testify his conception about reasonableness being essentially the same in its operation in the universe, in nature, and in the human mind. A special mention is made of Walker Percy and his defense of Peirce's approach to the triadic nature of our linguistic activity and our communicative practices as a key to a more integrated understanding of human reason, that is, of reasonableness.

Keywords: C. S. Peirce, W. Percy, Rationality, Reasonableness, Scientism, Thirddness.

“. . . experience of life has taught me that the only thing that is really desirable without a reason for being so, is to render ideas and things reasonable. One cannot well demand a reason for reasonableness itself.”
[C. S. Peirce: “Review of *Clark University, 1889–1899. Decennial Celebration*,” *Science* 11 (1900), 620]

Introduction

This presidential address is dedicated to the late Peter Hare, who used to bear gracefully upon his shoulders a big part of the burden of the Society and most of the daily management of *Transactions*. When I received his invitation to become Vice President of the Society, I was presenting a paper at a Peirce meeting in Argentina, co-authored with Sara Barrena on some key features of Peirce's conception of human

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action.² I mentioned that for Peirce the *summum bonum* is reasonableness, the growth of reason in concrete events. At the end of my paper a colleague from a university of the north of Argentina asked me what reasonableness really is according to Peirce. I improvised a quick answer and I thought to myself that this could be a good topic for a presidential address.

The exposition will be arranged in four sections: 1) a brief presentation of the central role of the notion of rationality in contemporary philosophical debate; 2) a recollection of Peirce's main texts dealing with his notion of reasonableness; 3) a personal remembrance of my discovery of Peirce sixteen years ago; and 4) a defense of how a better understanding of Peirce's reasonableness can overcome the poverty of that contemporary naturalism of a scientific stripe which downsizes thirdness into dyadic relations.

The Central Role of Rationality

The question about the role of reason in our lives and in our civilization is probably the central philosophical question that permeates the last two centuries of Western culture and philosophy. Let us remember the emphatic closing words of Edmund Husserl in his Vienna lecture of 1935 referring particularly to Europe, but addressed to all the Western world:

The crisis of European existence can end in only one of two ways: in the ruin of a Europe alienated from its rational sense of life, fallen into a barbarian hatred of spirit; or in the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy, through a heroism of reason that will definitively overcome naturalism.³

The intellectual history of the last century is really complex. It may be affirmed that the rise of logical positivism in America after the Second World War almost eliminated pragmatism from the philosophical scene. Murray Murphey writes in the penultimate paragraph of his recent biography of C. I. Lewis (1883–1964):

One can see in Lewis's work the struggle to preserve and develop the ideas and ideals of Peirce, James and Dewey in a philosophic climate that was increasingly hostile. As committed as they had been to the free creative role of the mind in knowledge, to the concept of knowledge as a human creation for the furtherance of action to serve human values, and to the moral critique of conduct, he was the one American philosopher who was able to defend these views effectively against the onslaught of a naturalism that he believed had become a dogmatic worship of science. He was the last of the great American pragmatists.⁴

In my view the last—until now—of the great American pragmatists is still alive and presided at the Charles S. Peirce Society in 1989. I am referring to Hilary Putnam: with his work and his continued debate for

years with the late Richard Rorty, he has been immensely influential in the revival of pragmatism on the American scene and all over the world. The notion of rationality is at the core of the evolution of Putnam's views from a scientific approach typical of the logical positivism of the fifties to an open pragmatism, to a realism with a human face.⁵ I will bring only one—long, but extremely interesting—quotation from his *Reason, Truth and History* of 1981:

That rationality is defined by an ideal computer program is a scientific theory inspired by the exact sciences; that it is simply defined by the local cultural norms is a scientific theory inspired by anthropology. . . . All this suggests that part of the problem with present day philosophy is a scientism inherited from the nineteenth century—a problem that affects more than one intellectual field. I do not deny that logic is important, or that formal studies in confirmation theory, in semantics of natural language, and so on are important. I do tend to think that they are peripheral to philosophy, and that as long as we are too much in the grip of formalization we can expect this kind of swinging back and forth between the two sorts of scientism I described. Both sorts of scientism are attempts to evade the issue of giving a sane and human description of the scope of reason.⁶

That is the core of the contemporary debate. Is it possible to present a sane and human description of the scope of our reason? My suggestion is that Peirce's conception of *reasonableness* paves the way to a deeper understanding of human reason. But before going into Peirce's texts, something obvious to be noticed is the contrast between "rationality" and "reasonableness." As one colleague told to me, our computers are rational, but not reasonable, and she added: "My child Charlie is very rational, but he is not yet reasonable." We all understand that under these familiar contrasting expressions is hidden an intense debate about what human reason really is. Is it an algorithm, is it a mere form of discourse, or is it a communicative human practice anchored in nature?

Peirce's Main Texts on Reasonableness

The term "reasonableness" appears very late in Peirce's texts, since his usage of it covers only the ten years between 1899 and 1908. The first occurrence that I have found is in Peirce's critical review of Renouvier and Prat's *La Nouvelle Monadologie*:

What is it that philosophy ultimately hopes to accomplish? It is, if we mistake not, to find that there is some intelligible truth, some absolutely valid reasonableness, to ascertain how far this reasonableness governs the universe, and to learn how we may best do its service. It may be this hope is not destined to be realized, although, being reasonable, it acts to strengthen itself. It may be that reasonableness essentially requires an element of unreason, a brute force,

on which and with which to accomplish itself; but in that case we hope that this unreason may turn out capable of becoming infused with reason. There must be nothing hopelessly and finally unreasonable, or in so far philosophy is to no purpose and its hope is vain. [CN 2.208, 1899]⁷

Peirce himself mentions in this review that his conception of philosophy as a search of “some absolute valid reasonableness” governing the universe and in which service is to work the scientific philosopher is “some corrected Hegelianism.” A few months later, Peirce will add in another review:

The true devotee of science, so long as he enacts that role, never thinks or cares about Philistine utility. In his mind, to learn the ways of Nature and the reasonableness of things, and to be absorbed as a particle of the rolling wave of reasonableness, is not *useful*, but is the *summum bonum* itself towards which true usefulness tends. [CN 2.220–1, 1899]

This contrast between the growth of reasonableness and mere practical utility, which so many times characterizes vulgar pragmatism, clearly manifests the *power* (CP 5.520, 1905) of Peircean pragmatism. Reasonableness is not for Peirce simply mechanical or algorithmic rationality, since reasonableness includes also the instinctive elements essential for generating and selecting hypotheses in the scientific work: “Human mind is akin to the truth in the sense that in a finite number of guesses it will light upon the correct hypothesis,” since “the existence of a natural instinct for truth is, after all, the sheet-anchor of science” (CP 7.220, 1901). In this respect, it seems enlightening to remember some lines of Peirce taken from a draft (MS 1434) that Arthur Burks included in a note to Peirce’s review of *The Grammar of Science* of Pearson:

The scientific man is deeply impressed with the majesty of truth, as something reasonable or intelligible which is bound sooner or later to force itself upon every mind. It is not too much to say that he worships the divine majesty of the power of reasonableness behind the fact. From that sentiment springs his ardent desire to further the discovery of truth. If he cannot discover it himself he wishes to lay a sure foundation from which some successor may come to the truth;—and the more far-reaching and general the particular question that he aims [at], the more it inspires him. It may be that all that he himself expects to ascertain is a minute fact,—say the parallax of a star. But he anticipates that this fact along with many others will ultimately lead to a great discovery. Will not every scientific researcher acknowledge the substantial accuracy of this statement of his motive? [CP 8.136, n.3 c.1900]

For Peirce “the highest of all possible aims is to further concrete reasonableness” (*CP* 2.34, 1902). Even logic should be subordinated to reasonableness:

“Logic came about for the sake of reasonableness, not reasonableness for the sake of logic.” Let us never lose sight of that truth, forgotten though it is, every day, in every walk of life, especially in well-regulated America! [*CP* 2.195, 1902]

Moreover, the growth of reasonableness should be identified with the creative process of the universe reaching its fullness, not only for “the vision of the attainment of that Reasonableness . . . the Heavens and Earth have been created” (*CP* 2.122, c.1902), but also for

the creation of the universe, which did not take place during a certain busy week, in the year 4004 B.C., but is going on today and never will be done, is this very development of Reason. I do not see how one can have a more satisfying ideal of the admirable than the development of Reason so understood. The one thing whose admirableness is not due to an ulterior reason is Reason itself comprehended in all its fullness, so far as we can comprehend it. Under this conception, the ideal of conduct will be to execute our little function in the operation of the creation by giving a hand toward rendering the world more reasonable whenever, as the slang is, it is “up to us” to do so. [*CP* 1.615, 1903]

As Kelly Parker writes, “Peirce’s metaphysics provides us with a complex picture of the universe as a vast semiotic process, evolving under the gentle guidance of agapism toward greater rationality and order.”⁸

For Peirce, the central problem of the philosophers and scientists of his time is that they are nominalist, that is, that they are in a state of mind too undeveloped to apprehend thirdness as thirdness, as the mediation between firstness and secondness:

The remedy for it consists in allowing ideas of human life to play a greater part in one’s philosophy. Metaphysics is the science of Reality. Reality consists in regularity. Real regularity is active law. Active law is efficient reasonableness, or in other words is truly reasonable reasonableness. Reasonable reasonableness is Thirdness as Thirdness. [*CP* 5.121, 1903]

But the saving truth is that there is a Thirdness in experience, an element of Reasonableness to which we can train our own reason to conform more and more. If this were not the case, there could be no such thing as logical goodness or badness; and therefore we need not wait until it is proved that there is a reason operative in experience to which our own can approximate. [*CP* 5.160, 1903]

The only admissible view is that the reasonableness, or idea of law, in a man’s mind, being an idea by which objective predictions are

effected . . . must be in the mind as a consequence of its being in the real world. *Then the reasonableness of the mind and that of nature being essentially the same*, it is not surprising that the mind, after a limited number of guesses, should be able to conjecture what the law of any natural phenomenon is. [CP 7.687, 1903, my italics]

For Peirce, the good pragmatist adores “the creative power of reasonableness, which subdues all other powers, and rules over them with its sceptre, knowledge, and its globe, love” (CP 5.520, 1905). Nevertheless, as the latest Peirce’s text mentioning “reasonableness” describes,

there has been during the nineteenth century a decided leaning of scientific opinion to discredit any other sort of action in the external world than that of dynamical force; to understand a dynamical force to be a purely brute force with no element of inherent reasonableness in it, but merely to be the only force that scientific research could discover. . . . exact logical analysis shows dynamic causation (if every element of it be considered) is more than the mere brute force, the dyadic action, that it appears to superficial thinkers to be. For it is governed by law; and to him who bends his ear to that law it articulately testifies, though in a whisper, to the existential might of reasonableness. [CP 6.239, 1908]

I have accumulated a number of Peirce’s texts in a couple of pages, but they clearly testify to Peirce’s conception about reasonableness being essentially the same in its operation in the universe, in nature and in the human mind.⁹ This element of thirdness and of law is essentially irreducible to a dyadic analysis, as scientific materialism of Peirce’s times tried to do, and as contemporary naturalism tries to do today as well, perhaps even with more force than in previous times.

A Personal Remembrance: My Discovery of Peirce

Let me now turn your attention to something more personal. The origin of my presence here tonight goes back to what was for me an illuminating experience: my reading of the wonderful *Jefferson Lecture* given by the American novelist Walker Percy in 1989. In the summer of 1992 I found myself as Visiting Scholar at Harvard University trying to write an introduction to the contemporary philosophy of language; my goal was to show that an historical understanding of the development of analytic philosophy enabled me to forecast a pragmatist renovation of this philosophical tradition in that vein.¹⁰ At the same time, given that I found myself in the homeland of the founder of pragmatism, I was hoping to attain a certain acquaintance with his thought, his writings, and with the scholarship that had arisen in recent years around his figure. Well, one day a lawyer friend of mine suggested that I read Walker Percy’s conference “The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind”

which appears in the posthumous volume of his essays published in 1991 under the general title *Signposts in a Strange Land*.¹¹ That reading had an effect on me very similar to Helen Keller's remarkable experience with the water from the fountain, referred to so many times by Percy.¹²

In my reading of that text—which can be considered the intellectual testament of Percy, at that time critically ill—I discovered the unification of my diverse intellectual interests, which had been for years pursued separately. For some time I had been interested in seemingly disparate segments of our culture like the philosophy of language, semiotics and the theory of communication, the argument concerning the limits of artificial intelligence, the possibility and limitations of mechanically processing human language, the attempts to teach language to primates, “wild children” and their linguistic capacities, the language of the deaf-mute, the creativity of language or even the revolution in linguistics provoked by Chomsky's generative grammar. Well, my reading of that text by Walker Percy, physician and humanist, astonished me by revealing as clear as day both the diagnosis of the most serious illness of our present-day culture, as well as its cure.

Percy was suggesting that the unifying element in all those topics that had attracted me so much was to be found in the insufficiency of the scientific narrative that, permeated with a simplified Darwinism, has dominated the Anglo-American academic scene during the second half of the past century with the aim of explaining the most characteristic behaviors of human beings such as language and communication. The cure—in the judgment also of Percy—ought to be looked for in Charles Peirce and his discovery of the irreducibly triadic nature of all linguistic behavior: the remedy to overcome the San Andreas Fault, the gap that divides our culture between natural sciences and humanities, making an integrated understanding of human beings and their activity impossible, was to be found in “the work of a human scientist who, I believe,” Percy wrote, “laid the groundwork for a coherent science of man, and did so a hundred years ago.”¹³

Scientism, as held by the Circle of Vienna and its positivist heirs, became from the 1950s the dominant culture, converting itself into a materialist realism which sought to explain everything *right now*, or which trusted blindly in the progress of human reason and its ability to explain, in a definitive way and in the immediate future, all problems. In contrast with this optimism, post-modern thought, widely spread in the last two decades, oscillated between a presentation of science as a mere power structure or as just another form of literature. The presence of both approaches is detected clearly in many levels of our culture that present a curious amalgam of vulgar pragmatism, scientific foundationalism, and literary skepticism.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that the recent revival of pragmatism¹⁴ draws attention to the growing evolution of a new sensibility disillu-

sioned with the vain promises of scientific progressivism, but anxious at the same time, in accordance with the best philosophical tradition, to forge a future which might be different from the past.¹⁵ In fact, a feature of this new sensibility is the preferred attention it gives to our communicative practices, to the human ability to build bridges between both individual and cultural differences. Walker Percy, who considered himself a “thief of Peirce,”¹⁶ discovered in the thought of this American philosopher some decisive keys that—as opposed to contemporary scientific reductionism and literary deconstructionism—allow a better understanding of the peculiar nature of our linguistic activity and our communicative practices. One of these keys is Peirce’s notion of reasonableness.

Reasonableness: Overcoming the Poverty of Contemporary Scientific Naturalism

Sixteen years have passed since that illuminating experience. And now, even more than then, I am convinced that in Peirce’s philosophy and in his general view—described in these pages—that there is reasonableness in nature and that the human mind is able to discover it, and even to increase it, lies the most powerful argument to overcome contemporary scientific naturalism.

Let me mention—following a suggestion of Vincent Colapietro¹⁷—that the commonsensical equation of reasonableness with open-mindedness captures something essential about what reasonableness really is. Reasonableness is openness: the openness of nature to be understood by reason (what the old Schoolmen called “the ontological truth”), and the openness of mind to the reasons of others. Both dimensions seem to me epitomized in the beautiful quotation that I used as a motto for this address. It comes from Peirce’s review in *Science* of the volume published by Clark University to commemorate the celebration of its tenth anniversary, which in fact Peirce personally attended:

experience of life has taught me that the only thing that is really desirable without a reason for being so, is to render ideas and things reasonable. One cannot well demand a reason for reasonableness itself. Logical analysis shows that reasonableness consists in association, assimilation, generalization, the bringing of items together into an organic whole—which are so many ways of regarding what is essentially the same thing. In the emotional sphere this tendency towards union appears as Love; so that the Law of Love and the Law of Reason are quite at one.¹⁸

Reason and Love converge in an *agapastic* world. Reasonableness overcomes the dichotomy between theoretical and practical reason,¹⁹ and openness to the reasons of others paves the way for convergence and growth. For Peirce, the growth of reasonableness is the only admirable ideal and the highest good to which all of our actions, inten-

tions, and projects must answer: “We are destined to reach the truth in the sense that experience and argument would, we hope, lead to a belief which would not be overturned.”²⁰

At the beginning of the twenty-first century this Peircean optimism is no longer present on the scene. It seems to me that it is not an overstatement to affirm that reason is in danger nowadays. Reasonableness is not the hallmark of our politicians or businessmen all over the world, and it seems also that it is far away from the real practices of our scientific colleagues. We philosophers who feel ourselves to be “civil servants of humankind,” in Husserl’s expression, might find in Peirce’s pragmatism a fruitful middle way in which the confidence in the power of our reason, pursued in a communitarian way, can be united with the experience of our fallibility and also of our ability to recover from our failures in the search of truth. It seems to me that in the understanding and defense of this notion of reasonableness lies very likely one of the key elements of Peirce’s relevance for the philosophy, science and culture of the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

1. An oral version of this text was presented as the Presidential Address in the annual meeting of the Charles S. Peirce Society, held in Philadelphia the 28th of December, 2008, in connection with the APA Eastern Division Annual Meeting. I wish to express my gratitude to Ruth Breeze, Vincent Colapietro, Seamus Grimes and Tom Short for their suggestions and to Erik Norvelle for polishing my English.

2. Cf. S. Barrena y J. Nubiola, “Antropología pragmatista: el ser humano como signo en crecimiento,” *II Jornadas Peirce en Argentina*, September 2007: text available at <<http://www.unav.es/gep/IIPeirceArgentinaBarrenaNubiola.html>>

3. The lecture ends with: “Europe’s greatest danger is weariness. Let us as ‘good Europeans’ do battle with this danger of dangers with the sort of courage that does not shirk even the endless battle. If we do, then from the annihilating conflagration of disbelief, from the fiery torrent of despair regarding the West’s mission to humanity, from the ashes of the great weariness, the phoenix of a new inner life of the spirit will arise as the underpinning of a great and distant human future, for the spirit alone is immortal.” E. Husserl, “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man,” 10th May 1935. Text available at <http://www.users.cloud9.net/~bradmcc/husserl_philcris.html>

4. M. G. Murphey, *C. I. Lewis. The Last Great Pragmatist*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2005, p. 406.

5. See, for instance, H. Putnam, “What Makes Pragmatism so Different,” in *Following Putnam’s Trail: On Realism and Other Issues*, in M. U. Rivas Monroy et al (eds.), Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2008, pp. 19–34.

6. H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 126. For a lucid discussion of this approach see, V. Colapietro,

“Toward a More Comprehensive Conception of Human Reason,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXVII/3 (1987), pp. 281–298.

7. For Peirce’s texts standard abbreviations, followed by volume, paragraph number and year, are used: *CN* stands for C. S. Peirce, *Contributions to “The Nation”*, vols. 1–4, K. L. Ketner and J. E. Cook (eds.), Texas Tech Press, Lubbock, TX, 1975–79 and *CP* for *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1–8, C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss and A. W. Burks (eds.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1931–58.

8. K. A. Parker, *The Continuity of Peirce’s Thought*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, TN, 1998, p. 222.

9. For the relation between reasonableness and God, see D. Anderson, *Creativity and the Philosophy of C. S. Peirce*, Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1987, ch. 4, and his discussion of D. Orange, *Peirce’s Conception of God*, Institute for Studies in Pragmatism, Lubbock, TX, 1984, and D. Pfeifer, “Charles S. Peirce’s Contribution to Religious Thought,” *Proceedings of the C. S. Peirce Bicentennial International Congress*, K. L. Ketner et al (eds.), Texas Tech University Press, 1981, pp. 367–373.

10. Cf. J. Nubiola, *La renovación pragmatista de la filosofía analítica*, Eunsa, Pamplona, 1994.

11. That conference was given by Percy the 3rd of May, 1989 as the 18th *Jefferson Lecture* in the *National Endowment for the Humanities* (Washington D.C.). It was published with the title “The Divided Creature” in *The Wilson Quarterly* 13 (1989), pp. 77–87, and included by Patrick Samway in the posthumous book *Signposts in a Strange Land*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1991, pp. 271–291).

12. Cf. W. Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1976, pp. 34–36 and in many other places.

13. W. Percy, “The Divided Creature,” p. 80.

14. R. Bernstein, “The Resurgence of Pragmatism,” *Social Research* 59 (1992), pp. 813–840.

15. R. Rorty, “Philosophy & the Future,” in H. J. Saatkamp, (ed.), *Rorty and Pragmatism*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 198.

16. Letter of W. Percy to K. Ketner, 27 February 1989, in P. H. Samway, (ed.), *A Thief of Peirce. The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, MS, 1995, p.130.

17. V. Colapietro, “Toward a More Comprehensive Conception of Human Reason,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* XXVII/3 (1987), pp. 297–298. See also, R. P. Mullin, *The Soul of Classical American Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2007, pp. 131–312.

18. C. S. Peirce, “Review of *Clark University 1889–1899. Decennial Celebration*,” *Science* XI, 20 April 1900, p. 621.

19. Cf. D. Orange, *Emotional Understanding*, Guilford, New York, 1985, p. 39.

20. Ch. Misak, “C. S. Peirce on Vital Matters,” *The Cambridge Companion to Peirce*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2004, p. 171.