

Difference with Respect (To)*

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Vincent Colapietro's invitation to this session enables us to address an issue that is not only philosophically interesting but also morally urgent. If difference is the rage today in academic circles, it is not only the difference between the letters *a* and *e* in *différance*. It is also the differences among the various academic in-groups that now vie for attention after the demise of western metaphysical imperialisms. And it is also the differences among the various ethnic, religious, and political in-groups that vie for power after the demise of the most recent western totalitarianisms. I do not mean to suggest that these different sets of differences are unconnected, but, to the contrary, that part of the pragmatist project is to discover their connections *and* to include *urgency* among the necessary rules of connection.

I said "moral" urgency, but pragmatic urgency would be more precise. This is the force that distinguishes real doubts from what Peirce calls paper doubts: to borrow Jamesian language, call it the sentiment that something is really wrong, which means not just wrong in some finite realm of ideas that I have constructed for myself, nor even within the sets of expectations that some community of special scientists has prepared for itself. (For the latter, the term "doubt" or "surprise" would suffice). I mean *wrong* among the sets of expectations that the coenoscopist (or philosopher of the everyday) would attribute to common sense (at least a given community's common sense).¹ The dynamical object of this sentiment is *suffering* — or the condition in which someone is deprived of the means to remedy pain.²

In this essay, I am going to offer several claims about how postmodern preoccupation with DIFFERENCE may be reread, pragmatically. The claims are based on the following, creatively interpretive model of the pragmatic maxim, as applied to what Peirce calls "intellectual concepts." According to the model, the maxim may have a variety of uses, but it can be *proven* only in so far as it is applied to the one *species* of "intellectual concepts" that results when real doubts are misrepresented as paper doubts. These concepts are the products of theoretical inquiries that represent themselves as

merely theoretical, when in fact they are stimulated by urgent concerns. The pragmatic maxim offers a rule for *converting* this species of what appear to be *merely* intellectual concepts into symbols of some theoretically minded inquirer's attempt to respond to these urgent concerns.³ But what kind of urgent concern would tend to be misrepresented in this way? According to the model, these are not concerns about failed rules of everyday conduct — or about concrete cases of flesh-and-blood suffering; they are, instead, concerns about failed rules for *repairing* everyday suffering. The attempt to repair such rules of repair is both theory-laden *and* urgent (urgent because failed rules of repair are ultimately sources of suffering; theory-laden because they are not immediately so). According to the model, Peirce's name for the practice of urgent theorizing is philosophy, or coenoscopy: not a science of common or everyday practices, but of rules for repairing everyday practices. It is philosophy that is most prone to misrepresenting what is urgent AS what is merely theoretical, because both theory and urgency are proper to it. The pragmatic maxim is, in this view, a rule specifically for repairing urgent philosophy that presents itself as merely paper philosophy.

The maxim is provable in this form alone, because in this form, the maxim is analytic: it is simply the *logica utens* of urgent philosophy and thus the rule according to which urgent philosophy repairs its own tendencies to lose its center and *allow urgency and theory to separate*.

On the basis of this model, then, let me proceed to several claims.

1. The first claim concerns the conditions for applying the pragmatic maxim. *Let us define pragmatic inquiry as the work of applying the maxim. We may then say that pragmatic inquiry is stimulated by the observation of a certain kind of difference — what I will call contrariety, as opposed to contradiction.* By contraries, I mean pairs of mutually exclusive concepts, *a* vs. *b*, where *a* and *b* define the entire universe of possibilities, and thus where the law of excluded middle applies. By contradictories, I mean pairs of concepts, *a* and *b*, that differ with respect to some third concept *c*, so that *a* and *b* do not define an entire universe of concepts and so that their difference is not asserted with respect to the law of excluded middle. In the abstract, *we will say that pragmatic inquiry is stimulated by contrariety and takes as its end the recommendation of ways to convert conditions of contrariety into*

conditions of contradiction. Now, I have also said that pragmatism converts paper-like intellectual concepts into symbols of response to urgent concern and that the dynamical object of this concern is suffering. What do these various elements have to do with each other?

2. The second claim. Within the limits of my restrictive model of the pragmatic maxim, *pragmatists* are in the driver's seat when they are examining the concepts generated by other philosophies. According to my model of Peirce's definition of coenoscopy, philosophy repairs everyday rules of repair — without which rules everyday pains will go unrelieved and thus cause suffering (which, again, means being deprived of the means of repair). To say that pragmatic inquiry transforms conditions of contrariety into conditions of contradiction means this: *broken rules of repair generate conflictual modes of reparative inquiry* and the logical mark of such modes is that they *portray* conditions of suffering (which they need to repair) *as* conditions of contrariety — where some *a* stands over-against some *b* with no mediator possible. The problem is that, in this case, no mediation *is* possible: in phenomenological terms, you cannot generate a 3 out of a 2 — Thirdness, or a condition of mediation, out of Secondness, or a condition of contrariety. For the philosopher to repair broken rules of repair is to know how to discover the conditions of mediation *in* the conditions of what would appear to be contrariety. *But many of our modern philosophies do not know how to do that*. God knows, they are not indifferent. Faithful to philosophy's *urgent concern*, they are compassionately moved by the suffering that is left unrepaired by philosophies that no longer know how to repair rules of repair. But, lacking the logic that would guide successful reparation, they remain in effect *overwhelmed* by the brokenness. *Despite their earnestness and their reliable work of disclosing to us the places where repair is needed, their reparative efforts tend only to compound the problem*, because the logics that do guide them tend to reproduce rather than repair conditions of brokenness.

My second claim, in sum, is that frustrated philosophies of this kind leave a tell-tale sign. They will, in various ways, describe the universe as a place of irremediable or ultimately unmediated contraries — contrary differences, for example, between body and soul, reason and emotion, male and female, the oppressed and the oppressors and so on. These contraries are the species of *intellectual concept* I

mentioned earlier: the ones that pragmatists should *read* as the products of inquiries that *misrepresent real doubts as paper doubts*.

Part of my second claim is that there is a likely cause of such misrepresentation. When a philosopher's urge to help is stronger than the capacity of his logic *to help*, then he will invent solutions that are in fact not so (what Descartes called stretching the will past the limits of reason). These solutions are of mere paper, because they are not *actually warranted by the actual conditions* of brokenness that they are meant to repair. *Un-determined* by actual conditions, they have the capacity to take on conceptual lives of their own: the kind that produces what Peirce called *aprioristic* thinking, or autonomously generated metaphysics.

3. The third claim. Paper philosophies of this kind will tend to represent their own mode of activity as the contrary of some other, errant activity, which they are to replace. We may have, for example, Cartesian over-against scholastic modes of inquiry, analysis over metaphysics, feminist over-against patriarchal or, as we will see, postmodern over against foundationalist philosophy. The assertion of such difference is both a mark of the philosopher's *frustration*, and an efficient cause of yet more frustrations for others: since these contraries, when institutionalized, will interrupt other rules of repair that might not yet be broken.

The work of pragmatic inquiry is, first, to *identify the intellectual concepts* that mark such philosophies; second, to recommend rules for converting them into *symbols* of their authors' *actual* failed efforts; third, to recommend rules for *converting* these efforts into successful ones.

One of the many geniuses of Peirce's is to have shown that successful rules of repair do not impose solutions, but, rather, show us how *to discover the reparative rules that are already embedded in the conditions of brokenness*. *The method of repair is thus to read some conflict of contraries as signs not only of a need for repair, but also of the very presence and character of the agent of repair* — in other words, as signs of that ontologically prior activity (or inquiry) about which these contraries, *a* and *b*, are simply signs of some disagreement. *With respect to this prior activity, a and b are, in fact, not contraries, but contradictories* — whose relation can be mediated only by re-relating them to the shared

activity that informs them. The primary work of re-relating them is, by way of *abductive* inferences stimulated by the conflict, to offer diagrams of the prior activity. As *logica utens*, these diagrams identify the embedded logic of activity (which is the dynamical object of pragmatic inquiry). As *logica docens*, these diagrams become the logic that repairs the conflict (the *interpretant* of pragmatic inquiry). Pragmatism does not import such a logic from without, but offers a rule for disclosing it in this way from within (making known the unknown — which process is itself diagrammed prototypically in Peirce's Existential Graphs).

In this view, *semiotics* diagrams the relationship that interrelates (a) a conflict of contraries; with (b) the embedded activity with respect to which the contraries actually differ; by way of (c) the reparative rule of pragmatism that *diagrams* this embedded activity. ABC. As theory, semiotics is an iconizing science whose diagrams should be as simple as ABC. But to assert the relationship among *a*, *b* and *c* is to respond with urgency to the conflict between some *a* and some *b* that is now to be mediated with respect to this *c*. Semiotics thus performs its theoreticity in a reparative manner, exemplifying in its very performance the integration of urgency and iconicity that defines the rule of philosophy.

4. The fourth claim. To turn, then, to my urgency, which is the concrete case that informs this paper. The case is the postmodern concept of *différance*, which I take to be an example of the species of "intellectual concepts" that results when real doubts are misrepresented as paper doubts. This postmodern concept is epitomized in the semiological tradition that links the writings of de Saussure, Derrida and Lyotard. I have three claims to offer with respect to this tradition.

Claim #4a is that this tradition tends to generate theoretical inquiries that represent themselves as merely theoretical, when in fact they are stimulated by urgent concerns. Derrida's 1982 essay, "Différance," offers a classic illustration of this. It begins as the mere study of a letter, in a term coined for the sake of theory: *différAnce* — whose phonetically inaudible "a" leaves us, who are not also readers, uncertain about which of its two possible graphemes is in place, "a" or "e" — the difference between which, we will learn, is an index of the difference between the two possible meanings of the term *différance*. "We know," he writes, " that the verb *différer* (Latin verb *differre*) has two meanings

which seem quite distinct"⁴ — in English these two meanings "have become two separate words: to defer and to differ."⁵ In the first sense, difference refers to what he dubs "temporization" — to defer temporally — to put off until later and, in that sense, to conceal. The second sense is "the more common and identifiable one: to be not identical, to be other."⁶ This is prototypically a spatial distinction: not to be in the place of the other. Derrida's prime example of the equivocity of difference is the equivocity of the sign according to de Saussure: on the one hand, the *signe* "stands for its *signifié* as its absent referent."⁷ On the other hand, the *signe* participates in a chain or system of signs in which it is distinguished and defined only by its *difference* from every other. Thus "in the *system* of language, there are only differences."⁸

Note that, within the theoretical world Derrida has constructed, the letters "a" and "e" differ as contraries; as do the presence and absence of a sign and its referent, the being here and there of any two spatial locations considered in relation to each other; AND the equivocal pair to *differ* (spatially) and to *defer* (temporally). If, in the latter case, you would say, "But no, they differ as contradictories with respect to a spacetime continuum," then I would answer: "Indeed, your move signals the pragmatic response to Derrida's play of difference, but he does not signal the response here; he is not playing the game of remedies. Instead, he plays out the *ontological* consequences of his distinctions."

The first consequence is that the concept signified by a sign "is never present in and of itself";⁹ it too belongs to a chain of concepts among which it is distinguished only by its differences. In the system of linguistic signs, such differences are not originary, but "are themselves *effects*" that are "produced," but "which do not find their causes in a subject or a substance."¹⁰ Whatever is made present is so only as a trace, relating "to something other than itself"¹¹ of which it is the effect. In William James terms, you might say that you wouldn't find tigers even if you went to India; you'd find signs — not lion, nor zebra, and so on. As with spacetime, there is a hint here of something that might mediate contrariety, but that something remains absent. Perhaps it is as Job suggest, "my creator is here but I do not see him..."

For Derrida, the final ontological consequence is that if the origin of this present cannot by definition be made-present — if it is, in Levinas' terms "a past that has never been present,"¹² then

being-itself — as the character of that which could be cause — must always be absent. In Derrida's words, " it is the domination of beings that *différance* comes to ... make tremble in entirety.... *Différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom."¹³ Except the kingdom of difference. Note that Derrida does not in this case cross out the word being, but allows himself to write that being is absent. The distinction of presence/absence remains meaningful. I believe this is a sign of a remedy, as is the suddenly extreme and in that sense urgent tone of Derrida's claims about *subversion*.

My claim #4b is that several semioticians have offered helpful and formally accurate criticisms of these semiological tendencies — Floyd Merrell in particular, as abbreviated in his SIGN, TEXTUALITY, WORLD.¹⁴ Claim #4c is that these semiotic criticisms do not, however, complete a pragmatic study of semiology, since they do not also take up their inquiry urgently, as a task of repair as well as analysis. The semioticians therefore tend to distinguish semiotics from semiology as if they represented contrary positions — which, however, is to re-assert the very species of difference that typifies semiological as opposed to semiotic study. Let me discuss these claims in some more detail.

4b. As critic, Merrell explains that Lyotard offers the starkest example of semiology's tendency to reproduce what it would call modernist oppositions within its very critique of modernity. Merrell writes that "Lyotard . . . takes pains to remind us that any and all territorial imperatives and hierarchies should be looked at as provisional at best Nevertheless, he constructs what . . . proves to be another bipolar edifice in his posited conflict between traditional narratives and master narratives: narrative knowledge (*savoir*), he tells us, simply cannot bear reduction to scientific learning (*connaissance*)."¹⁵ All this despite the fact, as Merrell notes, that Lyotard presents his case in discursive, non-narrative form.

Indicating how Peirce accounts for the semiologists' contributions, without suffering their errors, Merrell notes, for example, how the equivocality of what Derrida calls spatial differing and temporal deferring corresponds to the irremediable *vagueness* of Peirce's genuine symbols.¹⁶ By way of its dynamical interpretant, the symbol, we may say, *traces* or indicates its dynamical object as temporally absent while, by way of its immediate interpretant, it also *presents*, or iconizes, its object as spatially or ordinally different from any other. The symbol is, however, no merely equivocal sign, because its

vagueness represents no *mere* possibility, but a *real* possibility that actually acts itself out in the world. It therefore *defers* its meaning only in some ways, but not in others, and it *differs* from other symbols only in some particular ways, and not in others. Differences among symbols are therefore not differences as such, but differences with respect *to* something — they are, if we can be allowed a postmodern-like pun, *respectful* differences, since the assertion of one inter-relates with, rather than excludes, the assertion of another.

#4c. As stated, however, semiotic criticisms like Merrell's do not fully complete the task of pragmatic inquiry, as I have described it, because, while adequately displaying the iconicity of semiotic analysis, they inadequately take up its *concrete urgency*. We may say that they faithfully present the semiotic critique in its Firstness and Secondness, but not yet in its Thirdness: in the first place, they diagram appropriate logics of semiological and of semiotic inquiry; in the second place, they set these diagrams over-against each other; but, in the third place, they do not adequately perform the reparative work that would inter-relate the two inquiries with respect to their shared philosophic heritage.

In the case of this one book of Merrell's, the beginnings of such a work are all there, just not the endings, which must be led both by the formal logic of semiotics that Merrell provides *and* by concrete instances of philosophies that perform their iconic analyses urgently. Consider, for example, Merrell's illustrating semiology through the triad of thinkers, de Saussure, Derrida, and Lyotard. This triad could be re-read, reparatively, as a concrete instance of urgent philosophizing: where de Saussure's inquiry overplays iconicity, Lyotard's overplays urgency, and Derrida offers the best attempt to mediate these two. Appropriately enough, Merrell favors Derrida's efforts above the others: as if he fails only because, like Kant, his urgent desire to integrate the two poles of philosophic inquiry advances beyond the capacities of his logic. If, as I am suggesting, Merrell underplays the urgency in his own inquiry, then it may not be surprising that he appears least favorably inclined toward Lyotard — the most urgent of the semiologists. Here, pragmatic inquiry calls for an even more careful look at the urgency *behind* Lyotard's theory. It is most starkly glimpsed behind his notion of *le différend*. As Merrell does mention in a note, Lyotard describes *le différend* as the case where a plaintiff cannot even have her complaint

heard, since the defendant, judge and jury lack the language to hear it: the plaintiff, for example, in Auschwitz, standing before those would be his executioners.¹⁷ I would suggest that Lyotard's report on *le différend* is of urgent significance to semiotics, because it describes the prototypical condition of suffering. There is no *contrariety* in Lyotard's report, because the philosopher has as yet made no *assertion*. Here is the report of a condition that has not yet located its logic: the stark face (almost pre-semiotic) of that which needs repair — at once, almost an icon of absence and almost an index of the *presence* that would repair. This is the index of an *urgency* that has compelled some observer to offer this report.

If we were to bring that hidden urgency to light — which means to the clarity of a semiotic diagram — then I suggest we would show how to *convert semiological observation into reparative, semiotic inquiry*.

I will close by offering a first step of this conversion, which is to ask, without having an answer to it, what enables Lyotard to *report le différend without* inserting those paper contraries into his report? The semiotician may offer the following abduction. Lyotard's effort to write is an index of pragmatic hope, which asserts itself in the face of a suffering that has no hearer by *becoming* that hearer: it injects something new *into* the situation, so that the report is no longer a report, but a declaration: there *is* suffering, after all. This means that, despite semiology's paper doubts about presence, Lyotard's declaration can be re-read as witness to the *presence* of suffering, which means the presence of a condition of absence. Semioticians can *see* this presence, because their logic tells them that presence means *presence with respect to someone*. In this case, suffering is present with respect to this observer, Lyotard. Without the *iconicity* of semiotics, Lyotard cannot now say of his urgency what Merrell could say — provided he offered his logic as a way of diagramming Lyotard's pragmatic hope. It is this: that suffering *can* be heard, because *for the one who hears it, the suffering is itself a sign of the one who will repair it*. They are the same one. The redeemer is simply the one who hears, for that hearing, alone, removes *le différend*, embracing the sufferer into the three-part relation that inter-relates *one person who suffers and the other who hears*, by way of the rule of hearing. This is simply the rule of semiotics,

which may be restated this way: that *you* whose redeemer is absent (like the absent signifié) are for me a sign that that redeemer will in fact be here soon. Since his or her form is already here binding us together (*in the rule of semiotics*), can the whole body be far away?

* My thanks to Vincent Colapietro for originally inviting this essay and for reviewing and offering most helpful and instructive comments on its earlier forms.

¹ For more detailed treatment of this sentiment, see my "The Sentiment of Pragmatism: From the Pragmatic Maxim to a Pragmatic Faith," *The Monist* 75 #4 (October, 1992): 551-568; and *Peirce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge, 1998).

² Cf. a related notion of suffering in Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Crawford (New York: Harper & Row, 1951) 118-19 (cited in Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, Revisioning Moral Philosophy, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990: 181f). I am also grateful to Adi Ophir, Edith Wyschogrod, and Robert Gibbs for drawing my attention to Jean-François Lyotard's work on a related notion of suffering (see below). I offer additional, hermeneutical treatment of this notion of suffering in "Compassionate Postmodernism: An Introduction to Rabbinic Semiotics," *Soundings* LXXVI#1 (Sp. '93): 140-152; and in "Rabbinic Semiotics," *The American Journal of Semiotics* 10 Nos. 1-2 (1993): 35-66.

³ This notion of "conversion" is, as far as I know, stimulated in part by Peirce's logical notion of "substitution" as the activity through which a conclusion replaces (is substituted for) certain premises, and, in part, by the Israeli philosopher, Adi Ophir's discussion of ways in which societies "convert" various goods into other goods and various evils, including suffering, into other evils (see his "Beyond Good: Evil — An Outline for a Political Theory of Evils," which appears, in Hebrew, in *Teoria ve Bikoret (Theory and Criticism)*); and of which a briefer version appears in *The Philosophical Forum* XXI Nos. 1-2 (1989-90). Peirce writes "every conclusion may be regarded as a statement substituted for either of its premises, the substitution being justified by the other premises" (*Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, eds., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934-35, Vol. 2, Par 470. Future references to this collection will be to volume and paragraph number): we are

referring here to the general activity of simplifying propositions or syllogisms, rather than to logical conversion per se (exchanging subjects for predicates). Ophir writes, "The idea that suffering is convertible belongs to the most basic level of social existence. A person may bear a suffering that he might have prevented, not only for his own use, but also in order to lighten the suffering of others" (p. 28 of the English manuscript). I am thus attributing to the pragmatic maxim a conversion rule that is at once logical and practical (or socio-political).

⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 3-27: p.7 (originally delivered 27 January, 1968).

⁵ *Ibid.* n7.

⁶ Différance, p. 8.

⁷ Différance, p. 9.

⁸ Différance, p. 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Différance, p.12.

¹² Cited in Différance, p. 21.

¹³ Différance, pp. 21-22.

¹⁴ Floyd Merrell, *Sign, Textuality, World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

¹⁵ *Sign, Textuality*, p. 101.

¹⁶ *Sign, Textuality*, pp. 76ff.

¹⁷ Lyotard asks us to "imagine the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue [accuse] and becomes for that reason a victim" (*The Différend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988: par #9; cited in E. Wyschogrod, review of *Renewing the Covenant*, by Eugene Borowitz, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, forthcoming). Lyotard identifies the victim as one whose suffering is not recognized within a given language system ("phrase

regimen," he calls it; a kind of "interpretant" in Peirce's terms): thus, "it is in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong" (*Ibid.*, cited in Adi Ophir, "Victims Come First," unpub.). For discussion of the cultural context of Lyotard's report, I am indebted to Susan Shapiro's discussion of Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the jews"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), in S. Shapiro, "Écriture judaïque: Where are the Jews in Western Discourse?" unpub. paper delivered at the Lehigh University Conference on Judaism and Postmodernism, Jun3 1994. See also her "Failing Speech: Post-Holocaust Writing and the Discourse of Postmodernism," *Semeia* No. 40 (1987).