

THE CASE OF THE PEIRCE BIOGRAPHY

Nathan Houser

(Opening remarks for the St. Louis round table on the perplexities of philosophical biography.)

I want to begin by applauding Joe Brent for his tremendous contribution to our understanding of Peirce. Brent's intelligence, his instinct for the underlying currents of Peirce's remarkable life, and his peirce-istance (perhaps matching that of Peirce himself), have served to bring the entire community of Peirce scholars to a turning-point. Brent has made it impossible for us to continue in the same vein as before—we must now take Peirce's life into account, even if we disagree with Brent. A principal thesis of Brent's book, and of tonight's discussion, is that it is impossible to understand Peirce's philosophy and its development without understanding Peirce's afflicted life. I think this thesis is too strong although I agree that one can come much more easily and fully to an understanding of Peirce's thought if one studies his life. So I regard Brent's *Life of Peirce* as a real land-mark event in Peirce studies, perhaps comparable only to the publication of the Harvard edition of Peirce's writings for its immediate impact on the course of Peirce scholarship.

The facts of Peirce's life revealed in Brent's book shed much light on the genesis of many important stages and moments in Peirce's cognitive development. Some of these facts were known before, principally from the writings of Max Fisch, and also from the writings of Lenzen, Weiss, Eisele and others; but restrictions on the use of Peirce's private papers, as well as self-imposed censorship on the part of some of his followers, limited our ability to see the complete fabric of Peirce's life. The story Brent tells in which the facts are woven into a unified whole gives them new impact and significance.

Now we may feel as though we begin to understand Peirce for the first time. Yet I am reminded of Peirce's account of perception in his "New List": we understand manifolds of sense impressions when we succeed in reducing them to the unity of propositions. This reduction depends on hypothetical inference. Just as with perception, so with biography, the price of unity is hypothesis, and hypotheses always call for caution. Hypotheses are slippery things and can easily deceive us with their soothing harmonies. So how can we be sure that we have the right biography? The proof of a biographical hypothesis is not that it helps bring unity to the undisputed facts of a person's life—all good biographical hypotheses do that. A good biographical hypothesis, like a good hypothesis of any kind, might turn out to be dead wrong. If it comes to be accepted as proved, or as established, it will be because it has turned out to have more staying power than competing hypotheses, to yield more useful predictions, to groove better with the flow of ideas, and so forth. Brent clearly does not dispute this, and he certainly never claims to have given the final and privileged version of Peirce's life. But it may be worthwhile to remind ourselves that every set of facts can be explained by any number of unifying hypotheses. Fortunately not all are equally plausible nor satisfying in the long run. The tremendous importance of Brent's book is not that it gives us the definitive account of Peirce's life, but rather that it gives us the first, and I might add an exceedingly interesting and informative, account that succeeds in reducing the manifold of facts about Peirce's life to unity.

Even though I believe that it is next to impossible to understand Peirce's philosophical development without understanding his life, I do not agree that it is also impossible to understand his philosophy without knowing about his life. Peirce labored over his philosophical writings, often working through several drafts before deciding that his views were adequately expressed. He expected to be understood on the basis of what he wrote. Clearly our written language is a public language based on general social and community conventions and standards—that is why it works. The idea that one cannot really be understood fully without revealing or having revealed the intimate facts of one's life is tantamount to a denial of the possibility of a public language, and it comes close to an endorsement of the doctrine that one's language is private and unique. A sort of rough and ready counter-proof of this private-language view is that you all understand very well, certainly well enough, what I am saying, even though not many of you know the intimate facts of my life. That is the beauty and the power of language.

Now if it is true, as I believe, that Peirce's contributions to thought are quite accessible independently of any very extensive knowledge of the facts of his life, then we can ask what might lead well-intentioned scholars to restrict access to such facts. Is there any reason to suppose that the obvious benefits from understanding a life could be outweighed by some negative result, perhaps an irrational dismissal or denial based on conservative prejudice and unenlightened social practice? That is not out of the question. To what extent does the view that revealing the truth is always a good thing presuppose sane and fair-minded (perhaps even liberal-minded) readers and colleagues? Was it not the case that once Peirce's peers got wind of the facts of his life they no longer cared much for what he had to say? Could it have been to avoid a repeat of that disaster that

members of Harvard's faculty and others urged restraint and even withheld permission to use Peirce's private papers? Perhaps they were not so righteous; still the issue is not an easy one to decide. When is the right time, or a good time, or even a safe time, to reveal truths that are likely to excite immature or perverse and repressed passions? As a matter of principle, I am not an advocate of censorship and, what's more, I believe that censorship usually proves to be counter-productive anyway, at least in the long run. Nevertheless, full disclosure is not always prudent.

I want to make a final point about the time of Peirce's life. When you picture Peirce on a usual day, how do you imagine him spending his time? If you go to Brent's book with this question in mind it will not take you long to discover that Peirce was a scholar through and through; yet since Brent's purpose was not to deliver an intellectual biography, but rather the long-neglected life-story of Peirce the troubled man, one might slip into thinking that Peirce's life consisted mainly of the sorts of striking events and activities that make up so much of Brent's story. But remember that if we take into account all known archival deposits, Peirce left us nearly 100,000 pages in manuscript. Some of these pages are short and would not have taken much time to compose, but some are very long and complex and full of alterations or time-consuming calculations. Suppose that Peirce averaged about 30 minutes per manuscript page—that seems a conservative estimate. If he worked 10 full hours a day, 6 days a week, to compose those pages, it would have taken him 16 very concentrated years to produce them.

If we calculate, along similar lines, how much time Peirce must have spent on his 10,000 pages of published writings, his 6,000 definitions for the Century Dictionary, and his 350 book reviews for *The Nation*, we find that it would have required at least another nine years.¹ Thus we have accounted for 25 full-time

¹The following three paragraphs elaborate on the content of this sentence (and might be substituted for it):

It is estimated that the writings that Peirce himself published run to at least 10,000 pages. The manuscript collection contains few printer's copy pages for these publications, which suggests that time should be added in to account for those lost efforts. Besides the time required to prepare printer's copy for 10,000 published pages, we should account for proofreading and correction of galleys and proofs which we know Peirce attended to with much care. It is conservative, I believe, to add 2 hours per published page to account for the initial composition, copy marking, proofreading, etc. (remembering also that some printed pages are very long and very dense). Again supposing that Peirce worked 10 solid hours per day, 6 days a week, it would have taken him about 6 more concentrated years to produce the published writings.

We know that Peirce contributed to about 6000 definitions for the Century Dictionary. Most of these definitions added very little to the bulk of his published writings, yet many of them required a lot of research. Granting Peirce one hour of research, composition time, proofreading time, etc. per definition (and knowing that his research for some words was very extensive and may have taken days—see, for example, his definition of "theorem") we must add at least two more years.

We also know that Peirce wrote over 350 book reviews for *The Nation*. No doubt he spent very little time with some of these books, perhaps not even hours, but many he read thoroughly and gave a great deal of thought. Supposing that he spent on the average of one 10 hour day per book, we have to add another year of full-time reading.

work-packed years with no lunch or dinner breaks and with only one day of rest per week. This is more than one-third of Peirce's lifetime. We have not considered what might almost seem like a separate lifetime of reading books for knowledge or pleasure, not for review, his extensive correspondence, and his occasional reporting on scientific meetings for newspapers and journals. We have not taken into account the long stretches of time devoted to physical experimentation during his 30 years of service for the Coast and Geodetic Survey, his lectures and metaphysical club meetings at Harvard and at the Johns Hopkins University, the many days he spent at scientific meetings at the American and National Academies and at the Mathematical Society at Columbia University, his five journeys to Europe, his days in the New York Public Library as a consultant for scientific books, his work as a structural and also as a chemical engineer, and I could go on and on. My point is simply this: as we form our impression of Peirce the man, we must not fail to bear in mind that much of his life was quite literally spent with pen in hand or in the diligent and single-minded pursuit of experimental science. Another large portion of Peirce's life was spent in scientific or academic meetings or in conversations related to the advancement of knowledge. Peirce's failures as a human being should be understood in this context. Let me emphasize that in this I agree with Brent, who urges the same point, but it is a point that I believe needs to be stressed again, following the excitement aroused by Brent's revelations. Peirce's life was very much a life of thought and the imperatives of the moment may often have seemed but distractions to him. I think of Einstein who is said to have sometimes lost his way home from his office in Princeton or who sometimes forgot to put on his socks. Einstein brings to mind Peirce's 1898 description of "the pure mathematician":

The typical Pure Mathematician is a sort of Platonist. . . . The Eternal is for him a world, a cosmos, in which the universe of actual existence is nothing but an arbitrary locus. . . . Once you become inflated with that idea vital importance seems to be a very low kind of importance, indeed. (Ketner, Harvard Lectures, 121)

It may be that Peirce was more flawed than Einstein and that his failures were greater and more blame-worthy, but they too were the failures of a great and preoccupied mind, a mind preoccupied not with the facts of his own life but with the more abstract universe shared by all of us.