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PART I

Peirce's pragmatic writing

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Chapter 1

Introduction: reading Peirce's pragmatism

Even though many of his contributions to the discipline may still appear idiosyncratic, Charles Peirce's name no longer needs introduction to an audience of professional philosophers. For many years after his death in 1914, Peirce's largely unpublished works were known only to a band of devotees – or known only second-hand through the works of those he influenced, such as William James, John Dewey, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Now, however, Peirce's innovations in the theory of language and of signs (he called it *semeiotic*[1]), in phenomenology, in the logic of relations, in the philosophy of mathematics and in pragmatism have been the subject of dozens of scholarly books, hundreds of essays, and have begun to enter into the standard curricula of graduate schools in philosophy. Beyond the profession, an increasing number of literary scholars, hermeneuts, theologians, and postmodern theorists of various descriptions find themselves surveying the secondary literature, and also venturing into Peirce's labyrinthine corpus.

I address this study of Peirce, first, to members of this latter group. I imagine they may have turned to his work for some of the reasons I first did, twenty years ago, when I was studying the philosophy of rabbinic thinking, as displayed in the literature of classic Judaism: the Talmud and the *midrash* in particular (the collections of rabbinic interpretations of biblical narrative and biblical law that were compiled, roughly, in the 1st–6th centuries, in what were then Babylonia and Palestine). I found it difficult to map out meaningful units of rabbinic discourse with the instruments offered up by modern textbooks in the philosophy of religion. The most helpful guide was Max Kadushin, a little-known rabbinic scholar at the Jewish Theological Seminary tutored in early twentieth-century "organicist" approaches to social science and in Mordecai Kaplan's Jewish pragmatism. Kadushin's analyses of the quasi-logic of rabbinic thinking were vague enough to adjust to rabbinic discourse but too vague to be fully convincing. In one tantalizing footnote, however, he also cited Peirce's contribution to his thinking. That was enough to send me off to graduate work on Peirce and related thinkers. I brought with me interests I imagine other readers may share: a

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concern to find reasonably precise ways of talking about imprecise things without losing the meaning of the imprecision itself; a belief that phenomena of everyday language, including the everyday practices of religion, are among those things; a love of critical reasoning but an acquired distrust of criticism that has lost sense of having a purpose; disillusionment with "modern" or Enlightenment attempts to make a metaphysics – and also a religion – out of the rational critique of inherited traditions of knowledge and practice; a conviction that post-Enlightenment anti-rationalism – including romanticisms, emotivisms and a variety of totalizing ideologies of power, history, experience and so on – may prove, logically, to be the other side of the rationalist coin; fascination with the irrevocable contextuality – temporal, historical, linguistic, social, biological – of rational judgments, but also with their persistent "rationality" (to be identified through this study with such powers as "the capacity to be diagrammed in a system of Existential Graphs" and as "the capacity to guide the repair of problematic modes of conduct").

Readers who share these concerns may expect Peirce's various inquiries to contribute significantly to their work. If, however, they have gone past the secondary studies of Peirce, they may also discover how difficult it is to understand his contributions. So much formal detail and all those tantalizing generalizations about history, meaning, truth and relativity, but couched, in their details, in abstruse mathematical allusions! And, for those who have gotten past the details, all those misleading changes in Peirce's arguments from one period of work to the next! All those apparent contradictions, vague concepts, incomplete arguments, and unfinished essays! In the face of these challenges, my goal is to offer readers who share the interests I have just mentioned a way of reading through the contradictions and vagueness of Peirce's writings, to hear his responses to their concerns.

Toward this goal, I have written about the single thread of inquiry that responds most generally to all the concerns I have mentioned: Peirce's "pragmatism." This term will be redefined through the study, but, for now, it will refer to his theory about how to correct inadequate – because overly precise – definitions of imprecise things. For Peirce, the prototypically imprecise things are matters of fact. The prototypically inadequate way modern philosophers define matters of fact is to define them with too much precision. Philosophers may also sin in the other direction, however, by overreacting against philosophic precision and concluding that matters of fact cannot really be defined at all. Differently put, the sin of over-precision is rationalism; the sin of under-precision is irrationalism. Peirce's response is to offer pragmatic definitions of imprecise things. My thesis is that pragmatic definition is not a discrete act of judgment or classifica-

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tion, but a *performance of correcting other, inadequate definitions of imprecise things.* Pragmatic reasoning is thus a different sort of reasoning than the kind employed in defining things precisely. It is a corrective activity. Pragmatic reasoning displays the pragmatic rationality of things in the way it corrects our abstract definitions of the rationality of things. My thesis is therefore not a thesis in the usual sense. Since my claim is that to define pragmatically is to correct and that to correct is to read, my "thesis" is better named my "corrective reading." But that is not quite right, either, since my claim is that reading cannot be done "in general," or "for anyone," but only for someone: for some community of readers. My thesis about Peirce's pragmatism is thus a corrective reading of his pragmatic writings for some community of readers. And this is not to correct Peirce *per se* but *to correct problems in the way Peirce would be read by a given community*. The point is not that Peirce is wrong and I can see better! Not at all. Only that his pragmatism can show itself to another thinker only in the way that thinker acquires the practice of corrective reading. The only way to learn pragmatism from Peirce's own writings is thus to read those writings correctively. It will take us many chapters to share a sense of what "correction" means.

To exhibit the meaning of pragmatism will therefore be *to perform some way of correcting the meaning of pragmatism.* For this study, I read Peirce's writings on pragmatism as his corrective performance *of* pragmatism, and I offer the following chapters as one way of pragmatically and thus correctively studying his performance. Since pragmatic reading can be done only *for* some community of readers, I cannot presume that my study will make sense or be of interest to everyone. I therefore address different levels of reading to different communities of would-be readers. *In this chapter, I describe my method of reading in a way that may be helpful, in particular, to literary and scriptural text scholars who are not specialists in philosophy. In chapter 2, I redescribe my method, at greater length, for philosophers and Peirce specialists.*

The pragmatic method of reading: a rabbinic analogue

In short, this book offers a textual-rhetorical study of Peirce's four published series of writings on pragmatism (from 1867–8, 1877–8, 1902–3 and 1905–6). My method of study is to read through problems in these writings *with my intended readers* until I can imagine our having gained some shared sense of how Peirce would correct himself and, thus, of what pragmatism means. For text scholars, it may make most sense to describe my pragmatic method of reading as if it were modeled on the classic methods of rabbinic scriptural interpretation. On one level, I offer a straightforward explication of what I call the "plain sense" of Peirce's pragmatic writings. I take the term "plain sense" from

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the exegetical practice of medieval Jewish scholars, for whom the "plain sense" (*peshat*) of a text is its meaning within the *rhetorical* context of some body of received literature. Here, "plain sense" is contrasted with "interpreted sense" (*derash*), much in the way we might contrast textual exposition with hermeneutical or performative *use* of a text – provided that we do not grant epistemological authority to one sense over the other. This epistemological model comes from the pre-medieval scholars or "rabbis" of the Talmud, for whom, as I read them, the lived meaning of a scriptural text will be found in its *derash*, but only when the *derash* is itself performed within the grammatical, philological and semantic rules of the *peshat*: as the Talmud says "the scriptural text must not be deprived of its plain sense."[2] To identify the plain sense of Peirce's writings, I assume that he says what he means, and I explicate his arguments according to the contextual meaning of his philosophic terminology.[3] On the level of plain-sense reading, however, I also find that each of Peirce's arguments on behalf of pragmatism is equivocal, confused, or contradictory. I interpret these burdens as warrants for conducting a second-level interpretation of Peirce's writings.

I call this second-level interpretation "pragmatic reading," or the philosophic equivalent of the rabbis' *derash*. In the Talmudic literature, the rabbis tend to move from plain sense to interpretive reading only when something burdensome in the plain sense stimulates them to do so: some apparent contradiction (*stira*) or textual difficulty (*kashia*). Because the plain sense in question is the plain sense of Scripture (*torah*) as God's revealed word, the rabbis assume that the textual burden is merely apparent and that the non-burdensome meaning of a given passage will be disclosed through further "searching out" (*derasha*: "interpreted meaning," or the result of "searching out"). Unlike ancient allegorical or esoteric readers – such as the Essenes or Christian Gnostics or Jewish Platonists – the rabbis do not believe that any single activity of searching out could disclose a meaning that was not apparent in Scripture's plain sense. The non-evident meaning of a burdensome passage would be disclosed only through the indefinite give-and-take of past, present and future readings. Otherwise put, a particular interpretive meaning for a particular passage could be identified only for a particular reader in a particular context. New contexts of interpretation would disclose new aspects of meaning. On this model, I search after a pragmatic interpretation of Peirce's writings only when burdens in the plain sense of his texts stimulate me to do so. In these contexts, I believe that pragmatic reading will reveal a meaning otherwise hidden in the plain sense, but I do not believe that any one activity of interpretation will suffice to reveal that meaning. My own pragmatic reading, for example, will at best disclose the meaning of some burdensome text of Peirce's *for some particular context of inter-*

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pretation. This reading would not preclude other readings for other contexts, although it could also contribute to them. The success of the reading would be judged by how well it resolves the given problem in Peirce's writings *for a given community of interpreters*.

Part I of this study treats three series of Peirce's strictly "pragmatic," as opposed to "pragmaticist" writings on pragmatism. Part II treats in more detail one reconstructed series of Peirce's post-1905 writings on what he then called "pragmaticism," as opposed to his earlier "pragmatism." Peirce introduced his pragmaticism as a way of correcting what he considered his peers' (and his own) misinterpretations of pragmatism. By the middle of part II, I will suggest that Peirce's pragmaticism may be interpreted as a pragmatic method for rereading and thus correcting equivocal, confused or contradictory texts of pragmatism – Peirce's and others'. According to that rereading, I will suggest that Peirce's pragmatism may be interpreted more generally as a program for rereading equivocal, confused or contradictory philosophic texts. I will add that pragmatic arguments may appear confused when they are not interpreted in the context of such programs.

In terms of the rabbinic model of interpretation, I am thus depicting Peirce's pragmatism as a hermeneutical-and-performative interpretation of burdensome philosophic texts; pragmatism is relabeled "pragmaticism" when the texts in question are texts of pragmatic philosophy. This analogy between rabbinic and pragmatic modes of interpretation has strengths and weaknesses. One strength is that the rabbinic model counters persistent tendencies among some philosophic scholars to reread pragmatism as yet another epistemological *theory* or model: one of several, competing pictures of how humans know the world. The counter reading is to suggest that, like the rabbinic interpreter of Scripture, the pragmatic reader is not in the business of constructing possible models, but only of offering corrective readings of existing claims, read *as* texts. The readings are guided by interpretive principles that are shared by some particular community of interpreters for whom these texts offer significant, but somehow confused instructions about how to conduct some practice. According to these interpretive principles, the texts' confusions or contradictions are to be reread as signs of recondite or suppressed meanings whose disclosure would both clarify the texts' meanings and contribute in some significant way to the life of the community. Since there is, however, no single way to reread the confused texts, the rereading may amplify but never supersede the original text, from which this or other communities may derive other readings in the future. A second strength of the analogy is that it may have a prototype in early Hellenistic hermeneutics. As I will discuss at the end of part II, however, I can refer to such a prototype only in

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the context of offering a community-specific, pragmatic interpretation of Peirce's lifetime of pragmatic inquiries.

One weakness of the analogy is that the rabbinic interpretation is addressed to a community of rabbinic practitioners, for whom a scriptural text offers instructions about how to criticize and correct all dimensions of everday practice. Peirce's pragmatic readings, on the other hand, are addressed to a community of empiricist-*cum*-pragmatic philosophers, for whom pragmatic writings offer instructions only about how to criticize and correct the empiricist philosophic practices. The pragmatist's work is thus more circumscribed. Furthermore, the rabbinic interpreter claims to search out the intentions of a text's divine author, which is to exhibit the foundational principles of a particular people's created order. The pragmatic reader, on the other hand, claims to search out the intentions of a text's human author, which is to exhibit the principles of interpretation according to which one person attempted to make sense out of and refashion a given world. In this sense, the pragmatic reading of a text is also a study of human character and its relation to a public practice. We cannot generalize the work of pragmatic reading too far beyond the scope of the public practice of western, academic philosophy.

Peirce belonged to an empiricist practice of philosophy. This means that his community of interlocutors were empiricists (Wright, James, Mill and so on) and that he addressed traditional philosophic problems as they were posed by the tradition of inquiry that links Descartes to Locke, Kant, Mill etc. Within that practice, he was dissatisfied with a tendency of empiricist argumentation he labeled variously Cartesianism, nominalism, seminary thinking, *a priorism* and individualism. Each of Peirce's writings on pragmatism is an attempt to identify and correct this errant tendency. What we call "pragmatism" refers to any of his attempts to define the method of correction. The problem is that Peirce displayed these errant tendencies, as well, in his own philosophic inquiries and in his pragmatic critique. As a result, his pragmatic writings challenge not only his peers' but also his own intellectual proclivities. These writings are therefore remarkably complex and, paradoxically, unpragmatic. Each of them may be read as both a philosophic critique and a document of Peirce's developing philosophic self-understanding. I say "developing," because Peirce was neither lucidly self-aware nor immune to his own criticism. Arranged chronologically, each of the writings may be read as a critical commentary on the previous one, identifying as a philosophic error one of the previous writing's dominant principles of interpretation. Each of the writings therefore displays the progressive development of Peirce's own pragmatic tendencies and the progressive weakening of his unpragmatic tendencies.[4] The culmination of this development is

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Peirce's post-1905 series of writings on pragmaticism: reinterpreted in this study as *his* attempt to reinterpret pragmatism as a method of correctively rereading the confused, equivocal or contradictory texts of empiricist philosophy. In part II, I argue that these writings are no longer burdened by such confusion, but only by a persistent vagueness that calls for yet another kind of pragmatic reading. This is a species of *definitional*, rather than of corrective reading: one that, for some particular community on some particular occasion, defines the meanings of inveterately vague symbols. I suggest that, in the tradition of great wisdom literatures, Peirce's pragmaticist writings defer the activity of completing their definitions or meanings to some other occasion: prototypically, this means the occasion of some community's reading them for some particular purpose.

According to the method of pragmatic reading I employ and examine in this study, vague symbols may be defined only with respect to particular contexts of interpretation ("interpretants," in Peirce's vocabulary). The resulting definitions display, nonetheless, a species of indeterminacy that would enable interpreters to draw lessons from one context to another. This phenomenon is significant, since it discloses a way of generalizing the results of pragmatic inquiry without transgressing the limits of context-specific interpretation and, thus, without recourse to the universalisms (or "foundationalisms") the pragmatists criticized. In chapter 7, I examine Peirce's attempts to write a logic of this species of indeterminacy: what he calls, variously, the logic of vagueness or of relations or of signs, and what he frames, variously, in terms of a predicate calculus or of a "mathematical" system of existential graphs. My descriptions of these logics belong to a plain-sense reading of Peirce's pragmaticist writings. The plain sense of these logics is also irremediably vague, however, which means that it also stimulates a pragmatic reading that gives it definition within the reader's context of interpretation. I tend to identify the latter with the reader's "community of interpretation." At the close of part II, I offer a series of such pragmatic readings of Peirce's logics of vagueness, and so on, appropriate to a series of increasingly defined and thus narrow communities of interpretation. I assume my plain-sense readings of Peirce's writings are appropriate to any community of Peirce readers, but that my pragmatic readings will interest only those who find themselves included in my characterizations of the communities of readers I address. These are not necessarily self-described communities but, rather, communities of would-be readers, who would read Peirce with respect to given sets of assumptions. The only way I atttribute some *pragmatic* reading to "Peirce" (as author of his writings) is to attribute it to some community of would-be readers *within which a given proportion of scholars would tend to include Peirce*. I assume

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this proportion would be greater for more broadly defined communities (such as the "pragmatic empiricists") and less for more narrowly defined communities (such as "Christian (or Jewish) Scriptural pragmatists"). There are literary-historical warrants for including within such communities the authors of a series of philosophic-hermeneutic writings which, if placed in reverse chronological order, would link certain of Peirce's writings to those of primordial communities of Bible scholars. I make no historical claims about such hermeneutical linkages, however, but only pragmatic claims: that such linkages may help certain small communities of contemporary pragmatic scholars solve certain philosophic-hermeneutic problems. I also claim that the domain of readers who would read a certain, vague text in a certain way defines the *generality* or breadth of that text's vagueness. This means that the way I refer various pragmatic readings of Peirce's vague texts to various domains of readers *illustrates* the logic of vagueness that Peirce presents in those texts.

What texts I am examining, to what degree of precision

Going against the thrust of recent Peirce scholarship, I examine the more famous essays that Peirce published in his lifetime and/*or* that have been since published in the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. For Peirce scholars, this topically arranged selection of writings, edited by Paul Weiss and Charles Hartshorne, has been recently superseded by the Peirce Edition Project's *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, founded by Edward Moore, with Max Fisch as general or, currently, senior editor, and Christian Kloesel as current director.[5] Hartshorne and Weiss published six volumes of edited selections on all of what they considered Peirce's major areas of philosophic and mathematical/logical inquiry (in 1958, two volumes were added on scientific writings and on correspondence and reviews, edited by Arthur Burks). The Peirce Edition Project, on the other hand, is publishing a comprehensive collection, without editorial changes or topical rearrangements, according to the chronology of Peirce's work. Both collections draw from the manuscript collection of the Charles S. Peirce Papers, housed at the Houghton Library of Harvard University and now generally available on microfilm. The vast majority of Peirce's writings were unpublished in his lifetime. The Peirce Edition Project will remedy that situation, but not yet: it has currently completed volume 5, 1884–6, with completion of all its approximately forty-seven volumes anticipated in about twenty years (volumes 26–7, including the 1905 *Monist* essays on pragmatism may be out in about ten years). Current Peirce scholarship tends therefore to draw on the manuscript collection itself, but there are several reasons why I am not (with some exceptions[6]) basing this pragmatic reading on the manuscripts.

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Addressing this book, first, to sophisticated readers of Peirce who may not be specialists in the discipline, I want to comment on writings that these readers would most likely read and, in doing so, to contribute to *their practice of reading Peirce*, rather than to the specialized scholarship on Peirce. Since the Peirce Edition Project (*the* primary source of the future) will not for some time get to the 1902–8 essays that have most influenced my study, and since most general readers will not be reading the microfilmed manuscripts, I focus primarily on essays that appear in the trusty old *Collected Papers*. I realize this means my work will soon be dated, but I also acknowledge that temporal and other sorts of finitude must accompany a pragmatically non-foundational effort.

In this spirit, another aspect of pragmatic reading is appropriate vagueness and a resistance to the perfectionism that may accompany more ambitious readings. Historical-critical expositions of Peirce's manuscripts are as essential to a pragmatic reading of Peirce's writings as they are to other forms of Peirce scholarship. For a pragmatic reading, however, it is also essential to avoid what I will label "textualist" attempts to reduce the study of Peirce's writings to a study of "what Peirce actually wrote at a certain time in his life" and, then, to avoid historicist attempts to reduce this to a study of "what, on the evidence of this writing, Peirce the man must have thought at a certain time in his life." In the terms of Peirce's semiotic, I understand both textualist and historicist readings to be attempts to refer Peirce's writings, as symbols, to their indexical objects (or what the theological hermeneut Hans Frei calls their "ostensive referents") considered independently of the particular interpretive interests that textualist and historicist scholars bring to their scholarship. While these readings have value, the value is displayed precisely only with respect to these interests and, thus, only once these interests are identified. I do not, therefore, assume that the latest critical reading of the most recently edited manuscript of Peirce's is going to reveal something fundamental about "what Peirce really thought." I trust such readings will contribute to plain-sense study by expanding our sensitivities to the semantic range of Peirce's writing. But, beyond that, I assume manuscript or documentary study constitutes its own subfield of inquiry with its own pragmatic interests; this study may, but need not, illuminate other pragmatic readings. I thus find that philological, rhetorical, historical, biographical, psychological, logical, and other forms of inquiry all contribute to the work of pragmatic reading, but none in a privileged way. Pragmatic readings are made precise only by the way they speak directly to the vaguely defined interests that lead them.

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