

Such As It Is: A Short Essay on Extreme Realism

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DOI: 10.1177/1357034X15612896

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Abstract

C.S. Peirce begins his 1903 lectures on pragmatism from the premise that the starting point for pragmatic philosophy as he envisions it must not be a concept of Being but rather of Feeling. Pragmatism, he explains, will be 'an extreme realism'. Its first category will be 'immediate consciousness' conceived as a 'pure presentness' whose self-appearing is elemental to experience. Firstness cannot be couched in terms of recognition, cannot be contained in any first-person accounting of experience, and most of all can in no way be construed as being 'in the mind' of a subject, however the subject is conceived. This article follows some of the byways of Peirce's thinking on this constitutive field of experience prior to subject/object determinations, making links to James's 'pure experience', Whitehead's 'critique of pure feeling', and Deleuze/Guattari's 'being of sensation'.

Keywords

Deleuze and Guattari, Firstness, James, C.S. Peirce, pure experience, radical empiricism, Whitehead

In 1903, at William James's invitation, Charles Sanders Peirce gave a series of lectures on pragmatism at Harvard University. James had adopted the term 'pragmatism' after hearing a previous set of lectures by Peirce five years before. Propelled into the limelight by James's far greater public stature, the term created a firestorm of controversy. James's invitation would give the inventor of the idea, Peirce the obscure, Peirce the self-defeatingly idiosyncratic, Peirce the compulsively convoluted, a high-profile opportunity to set a few things

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straight. Pointedly, one of the things Peirce most wanted to set straight was the notion that any self-respecting pragmatic philosophy might ground itself in any way in psychology (Peirce, 1997: 4). He would have to set straight his own mentor, whose far greater fame attached to his role as a founder of American psychology.¹

Peirce would include in his second Harvard lecture a stern admonition. Pragmatism must not ground itself in any doctrine of being. Assuming the being of a psychological subject would be bad enough. The idealist alternative, then the neo-Hegelian rage, was worse. Its exalted notion of the absolute, Pure Being as abstract totality, which James would tirelessly and lengthily battle in his philosophical writings of the next ten years (James, 1996a, James, 1996b), is here summarily dismissed by Peirce as a patent 'falsity' (Peirce, 1997: 139). He doesn't even deign to refute it. Instead he recites some lines of poetry to 'rinse' his audience's mental palette of its bitter taste before continuing.

It is not that Peirce objects to ideas like 'immediate consciousness' or absolute 'presentness'. These he embraces. It is just that, for a pragmatic philosophy, the starting point must not be Being but Feeling. Pure feeling. Pragmatism will be an 'an extreme realism' (Peirce, 1998: xx) whose first category will be a pure presentness elemental to all feeling. It would qualify as a form of empiricism, since it would accept the principle that felt experience is the only source of knowledge (Peirce, 1997: 144). But this would be no garden-variety empiricism. As James would later say, its starting point would be all 'how' and no 'what'. It would be about 'constitution of the fact as given' (James, 1996a: 121), with the proviso that this is the sort of constitution 'behind which there is nothing' (James, 1996a: 118n). No substance behind, no being of a what behind, no a priori. Pure feeling, pure how ... pure process. A felt givenness of elemental presentness. This, as will become quickly apparent, is a most slippery processual thing. It is about quality first, as elemental to the constitution of whatful being; the being of a what: determinate being. It's not just that there is such a processual thing as pure feeling that stands to be pragmatically grappled with. More radically, as James will phrase it later, the world is *of* pure experience (James, 1996a: ch. 2), in the sense that the world comes of it. At this point, Peirce's dismissal of James's psychologism seems oddly misdirected. Pure experience is worlding. It is the constitutive process of the world's

emergence. The only being there is, is this becoming. Which, in the first instance, is nothing determinate. That's the rub. Pragmatism, as a radical empiricism, will have to generate its world from a coming-to-be behind which there is nothing determinate – *but emphatically not nothing*. Rather: an 'immediate consciousness' of pure 'presentness'.

You can feel the convolution coming. The recoil from pure being into pure feeling was enough to propel Peirce's Harvard lectures into a spin. He generates three competing manuscript versions of this part of the second lecture. In the course of these versionings, a most curious conceptual character bursts upon the scene: the 'Strange Intruder'. The arrival of the Strange Intruder is an attempt by Peirce to try to find a way of articulating a fundamental point about his philosophy and logic. It is a point about which he privately confesses, in a letter to Lady Welby, a key interlocutor, feeling utter despair at the possibility of ever getting it across. The point is that if there is nothing 'behind', no being, no what, no a priori, then the presentness of immediate consciousness *is not in the mind* any more than it is in the classically empirical world of already-given material substance. It is not 'in' anything. It is outside. Outside, coming in. Suddenly, and in the event, unrecognizably. Not I – my strange intruder. Any notion of being that survives the intrusion will have to constitutively link its presentness to the abrupt appearance of a not-I. What is fundamentally 'given' to pragmatism, insofar as it is a radical empiricism, is an irruption of strangeness that *cannot be in the first-person*. So much for psychology. And so much for phenomenology as we later came to know it, as revolving around the refound familiarity of the pre-reflective first-person experience. The true phenomenon, by this account, is an authentic return to the truth of being's pre-reflection. Being is its own phenomenal home-coming. For Peirce, it is more like a home invasion.

Peirce's confession of despair comes in a summary restatement of his theory of signs. The semiotic process pivots on the action of the sign as the 'determination of an effect'. In his stock definition of the sign, as a matter of course he adds to the 'determination of an effect' the words 'upon a person'. He is acutely aware that saying that the taking effect of semiosis is 'upon a person' falsifies his entire philosophy. Another rinse of poetry please. Homer comes to mind (excuse the expression). 'My insertion of "upon a person" is a sop to Cerberus, because I despair of ever making my own broader conception understood' (Peirce, 1998: 478). The idea that semiotic process

assumes a substantive first-person feeler of an effect is pragmatism's ferry ticket to metaphysical hell. The feeling of the sign's effect is pivotal to a semiotic process. Since semiosis is the process of the emergence of meaning, a definition of the sign is a take on the genesis of thought. Peirce's definition telescopes the genesis of thought into feeling. Pure feeling, by all intrusive appearances. That the genesis of thought is flush with pure feeling is a truly radical proposition. It entails that there is also such a processually slippery thing as *pure thought*, and that it comes with the same strange immediacy as phenomenal presentness. This is the broader conception. The world's phenomenal constitution must be understood as the infractive appearance of a pure *thinking-feeling* behind which there is neither substance nor subject. Peirce integrates into his logic the project of articulating this as a mode of reasoning. To the traditional categories of induction and deduction he adds an aboriginal third. Abduction is the mode of thought from which the other two emerge. It strikes with the strange immediacy and presentness of pure feeling. It is actually First, not Third. It comes felt-first as a 'perceptual judgment' as elemental to feeling as feeling is, for a radical empiricism, to the constitution of the world. When Peirce sopply throws feeling to the hydra-headed first-person, thought gets swallowed along with it. It is no longer a constitutive element for an 'extreme realism' of the outside of the event. It's in the maw. It makes a monstrous home-coming to interiority. In one toss Peirce damns his metaphysics and his logic with his semiotics.

Peirce's despair was well warranted. Few and far between are uses of his work which resist the sop. The soppieness is especially dominant in uses of his concepts which privilege its semiotic aspect at the expense of the metaphysics and the logic. Late 20th-century semiotics was very often soaked in it. Approaches developing out of the semiotic turn of the 1960s and 1970s, such as cultural studies and social constructivism, were also wont to feed at the trough.

Sop aside, Peirce's 1903 lessons seem to have been appreciated by one of their targets. Within a year, William James had embarked on a series of seminal essays later collected into the volume *Essays on Radical Empiricism*, quoted from above. In that collection James tries to convey to a sceptical public the philosophical framework he felt was the necessary correlate to pragmatism. The concepts he develops are clearly marked by Peirce's Harvard lectures. Peirce's extreme realism becomes James's radical empiricism. Peirce's First

category of immediate consciousness and presentness becomes James's pure experience. Correlates to Peirce's Second and Third categories are also not difficult to identify. To James's credit, he fights valiantly against the sop of the first-person. In view of what American pragmatism would become, his own success on that front might be called into question. But, optimist that he was, he did not despair. His formulations are their own poetry.

A that which is not yet any definite *what*, tho' ready to be all sorts of whats; full both of oneness and of manyness, but in respects that don't appear. . . . Pure experience . . . is but another name for feeling. (James, 1996a: 93)

The instant field of the present . . . a plain unqualified actuality, a simple *that* as yet undifferentiated into thing and thought, and only virtually classifiable . . . (James, 1996a: 74)

Only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet. . . . Its passing is always truth, something to act on, at its own movement. If the world were then and there to go out like a candle, it would remain truth absolute and objective, for it would be the last 'word,' would have no critic, and no one would ever oppose the thought in it to the reality intended. (James, 1996a: 23)

Its purity is . . . the proportional amount of un verbalized sensation which it still embodies. (James, 1996a: 94)

It no sooner comes than it tends to fill itself with emphases. (James, 1996a: 94)

These passages should be sufficient to disabuse anyone of the idea that the philosophical stance implied by American pragmatism is necessarily a functionalism or utilitarianism. What James delivers in such passages are less definitions than evocations. They invoke a problematic field for philosophical construction that James himself will not systematically carry out in metaphysical detail: A passing to act on, at its own movement . . . An acting in passing, without either object or subject as yet . . . A passing truth . . . A would-be absolute of movement, would only the world cease . . . An instant field of presence, full of respects that don't appear . . . A simple actuality that is a something virtually . . . The virtuality of an un verbalized last word . . . Already with a true thought in it, potentially contrary to what its reality intended . . . A oneness of a readiness of manyness . . . With a pronounced tendency to emphasis.

Peirce's is not the only systematic philosophy constructed in this problematic field. When Whitehead characterizes his philosophy as 'a critique of pure feeling' he is there (Whitehead, 1978: 113), his ingressive 'eternal object' carrying into his system the infractive strangeness of the bursting upon the scene of Peirce's Firstness of pure presentness as immediate subjectless consciousness. The same field is being worked through wherever there is a sustained effort to develop an extreme realism featuring a genesis from a nothing determinate that is a tendency to something emphatically not nothing, starting from the principle that 'to be is to be felt' (Whitehead, 1978: 220), or that 'there is nothing outside of perception', or that there can be such a troublesome processual thing as a 'pure being of sensation'. The last two formulae are from Deleuze and Guattari (Deleuze, 1993: 91–5; Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 166). From today's vantage point, their retroactive shadow covers the radical empirical field with a projected angle on the oneness of the manyness of the authors of its workings through.

Sleeping Feeling, Infinite Ache

James remarks that 'only new-born babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure' to the highest degree (James, 1996a, 93). Peirce is not big on drugs or illness, but he often comes to sleep and blows.

Pure and simple feeling is a quality of experience 'present without compulsion and without a reason' (Peirce, 1998: 4). 'Imagine a person in a dreamy state . . . thinking of nothing but a red color' (Peirce, 1998: 4). Since he is thinking about it dreamily, he is also 'not thinking about it, either, that is, not asking or answering any questions about it, not even saying to himself that it pleases him, just contemplating' (Peirce, 1998: 4).

Saying that this contemplation 'is a slumbering feeling', however, 'does not make it less intense, perhaps the reverse' (Peirce, 1992: 259). Could anything be more intense than the presence of a quality 'just as it is, regardless of past and future, utterly ignoring anything else', in absolute immediacy: 'just positive character'. No multiplicity, no change, no comparison, no reflection: 'absence of all relation'. Pure 'such as it is positively all of itself'. Being all of itself, such 'as it *is*, it is its own universe. There is nothing else' (1997:

140–1). Not even parts composing its unity. It is absolutely, immediately simple.

This, Peirce says, is the first element. Firstness. Its name is Quality, with a capital Q (Peirce, 1997: 140–1).

Present without compulsion or reason, dreamily, it needn't be red at all. It could just as well be turquoise blue (Peirce, 1998: 4). Or, Peirce's all-time favorite, magenta. Or it could be an odor, say of attar. But then again, what if the person is not saying to himself that the quality pleases him, because it doesn't? Quality might just as well be 'a piercing endless whistle'. Or 'just one infinite ache' (Peirce, 1997: 140). One infinite ache, and nothing but. A universe of ache. Can you imagine?

Save yourself the pain. For in order to make the full measure of a Quality absolutely, immediately, simply present, you must 'now imagine that the rest of your consciousness, memory, thought, everything except this feeling . . . is utterly wiped out' (Peirce, 1992: 259). You're not even there. Quality is, of itself, such as it is, and all and only as it is, its own universe, regardless. To call its being without your soppy first-person testimony merely 'abstract' would be to mistake it. Slippery as it is, this is not an abstraction in any ordinary sense. It is qualitative immediacy at its intensest: 'just positive character' (Peirce, 1997: 140). Not in the mind. Self-contemplating. Thinking-feeling such as it is all of itself.

'What originally made such a quality of feeling possible? Evidently, nothing but itself. It is', after all, 'a First' (Peirce, 1992: 259). Its self-immediacy is aboriginal.

Congeries in a Lump

The fact that Peirce uses color, sound and pain as examples of Quality's aboriginality should not be taken to mean that the 'simplicity' at issue has to do with basic building blocks, as in the classical empirical notion of sense-data. This is the idea that experience builds up from a diversity of punctual sense-impressions materially occasioned by other bodies impinging in a congeries upon our body. The impressions are then composited. They are bound to one another into a minimum lump of registered experience. Which lumps in turn composite, until higher-order cognitive functions rise up from the material ground like a monumental edifice to experience, laid brick by

impressive brick. From the observation deck atop the monument, a first-person subject of the experience keeps watch. I recognize arriving lumps pressing for ascent. My recognition adds them to the building register, authorizing them to rise to their appropriate level where they will gainfully contribute to the ongoing construction. I keep careful track of the contributions, and memorialize the design.

All of the authors intent on exploring the radical empirical field roundly reject this 'sensationalist' doctrine as a begging of all the fundamental metaphysical questions. The bit-by-bit constructionist model implicitly assumes everything it is ostensibly designed to explain. The lofty I atop is surreptitiously assumed in advance, below the ground level at which the account begins. It pre-figures as a receiver of impressions and lump-together of construction material. In addition to this underground subject, there is an implicit assumption of a pre-given material world, prior to and physically outside of experience.

For a radical empiricism, the persistence of this model of a bit-by-bit agglomeration of basic given building blocks composited into a whole must be avoided like the infinite metaphysical pain that it just is. Firstness first. The relation of part to whole must be entirely rethought. This requires a rethinking of the relation of oneness and manyness. Nothing determinate may be pre-assumed. Cause, space, and time-order must all be derived, factoring in an aboriginal Quality that is neither predicated by an assumed subject, nor the property of a pre-given objective world, and carries no a priori structure. James concentrated heavily on the issue of oneness and manyness, and the closely related issue of continuity and discontinuity. He insisted that it is not a matter of choosing one or the other. They have to be taken as they come (James, 1996a: 49), such as they are, with immediate presentness, regardless. Regardless of their apparent contradiction, they always actually come together. This he translated into a tongue-in-cheek rallying cry: 'taking a congeries in a lump' (James, 1996a: 120). That is radical empiricism's first pragmatic step. Regardless of the false alternative foisted upon the history of philosophy by the squabble, shrill as an endless whistle, between idealism and classical empiricism.

The rethinking of oneness with manyness called for by James implies a need to reassess the continuist implications of his own 'stream of consciousness'. Paradoxically, in the event of a quality

of experience's appearing, the oneness of the absolute presentness of immediate consciousness cannot demarcate itself from manyness. If it did, it wouldn't be absolute. It would be relative to its rejection of the many. It wouldn't be such a one as it is of itself, regardless of anything else. It would be one against all.

James's word for the paradoxical coming-together of unity and diversity is the 'conflux' of pure experience (James, 1996a: 120). Whitehead frequently used the word 'fusion' for it, although without highlighting it as a term (Whitehead, 1967: 181–3, 186, 1985: 37–8). Deleuze and Guattari also had a rallying cry: 'PLURALISM = MONISM' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 20). One-All (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 20, 340–1). To Whitehead's fusion corresponds in Deleuze's early work 'passive synthesis' (Deleuze, 1994: ch. 2), returning later in the work with Guattari as the 'block of becoming' which appears as a 'block of sensation' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 232–309; Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 163–99). Peirce, for his part, suggests the shadowy concept of 'umbral union' (from the Latin for shade; Peirce, 1997: 125). The complication is that none of these concepts work without a concept of the virtual (Peirce, James, Deleuze, Guattari) or pure potentiality (Whitehead): 'respects which don't appear'.

Five o'clock in the Morning

Because radical empirical inquiry does not begin with a search for smallest units concatenating into large-scale conglomerates, and all the more so because it does not a-prioritize space, scale is not a first concern for pure experience. How big is red? As big as it comes and as small as it gets. As wide as a sunset, and as bitsy as a pixel. What size is pain?

Qualities have intensity, not scale. Not having parts comes with not having scale. This means that an immediate presentness of Quality may make itself felt in situations we would normally think of, by non-radical empirical standards, to be large-scale and composed of many sub-units. Like stepping off a train into the bustle of Central Station at five o'clock on a winter Monday morning. There is a quality of feeling to that. There is a different quality to five o'clock in the afternoon (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 263). Passing the threshold to home as twilight falls and all around the neighborhood a nation of

televisions flicker on to keep company with the night. You could analyze these situations by decomposing them into any number of component parts. But what would possess you to do that, had the quality of the feeling not *already* appeared? And if you take an honest look at your analytic parts, you quickly sense that the Quality is not in any of them. Your five o'clock in the evening is not in the home 'rather than' the dusk or television nation. My five o'clock in the morning is as much in the crowd and the climate and the work-week as it is in my individual stepping into the station. Separate out any of those 'parts' and the Quality dissipates.

Quality is the immediate presence *to each other* of every part you might conceivably parse out of their having come together. Quality is in the event of that coming-together already having made itself felt, unparsed. The already-First of pure experience, equals reflection always disappointed. The quality, such as it is of itself, gives analysis the slip. It cannot be the object of analysis for the simple reason that it is not an object. It's a Quality. This is in no way to say that analysis is irrelevant to it, or it to analysis. Again, it wouldn't even occur to you to reflect and analyze had the Quality not appeared. It is in pure experience that the conditions for reflection first appear. The Firstness of Quality is an overture to reflection. It is a lure for reflection. Far from being irrelevant to analysis, its allure is analysis's impetus.

And the Beat Goes On

A good first step toward extracting Quality from the shrillness of the idealism-classical empiricism debate is to realize that, having no parts, the 'manyness' of Quality is not numerical. The manyness is not in the First instance a diversity of parts. It is in an immediate mutuality of what will secondly appear as having been its parts. Neither is the 'oneness' numerical. It is the lingering nondecomposability of this coming-together. It is what is felt to give the slip to any parsing.

Whenever a reminder is necessary that the oneness-and-manness of Quality aboriginally has no scale or countable parts, it helps to return to Peirce's base definition: a 'such as it is all of itself regardless of anything else'. Deleuze and Guattari have a formula that expresses the link between non-numerical suchness and the divisions of analysis. The immediate presence of self-appearing Quality of

feeling is ‘that which cannot be divided without changing in nature’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 33, 483). Divided, its nature has changed, for example into an object of analysis. This connotes a process. Deleuze and Guattari’s formula has the merit of emphasizing that the distinctions worthy of a radical empiricism pertain directly to process. Quality always already having given the slip, the process has no where to go but past it. It is in the going-past it that diversity comes to figure numerically. Process comes to number, and in doing so has given itself a count. It has divided itself into two phases: the First-appearing and the appearing’s superseding in analytic reflection. A processual one, a processual two, and the beat goes on.

It now appears, after all, that the First that appears all of qualitative itself cannot appear without being Seconded. We’re moving to a numerical conundrum again. A recurrence to Peirce’s definition will restore to suchness its all of itselfness. The concepts conveyed in Peirce’s formula (‘such as it is all of itself regardless of anything else’) and in Deleuze’s (‘cannot be divided without changing in nature’) are two which do not supersede each other. This is another kind of twoness, unphased. The formulae only work when they go together. If you divide them from one another, their philosophical effect immediately dissipates. It’s like you have to move back and forth between them quicker and quicker, accelerating to the limit of the speed of thought, so that their circling becomes a circuit, a dynamic coming-together. Maximally charged. The two conceptual formulae now come together immediately and intensely *in virtue of* their once and future diversity. Future, because this too will slip away. It can’t be held on to. It can only be returned to and recharged.

How else to name this charged conceptual coming-together of the diverse, but a Quality of thinking? It is not reflection exactly, and doesn’t proceed by analysis. It is a thinking-feeling. More an intuition. A conceptually rigorous intuition. Conceptually rigorous intuition is the return of Firstness in thought, in virtue of thought’s own once and future diversity. This return of Firstness in virtue of the diversity of thought is one with an obligation of thought to return to Firstness, however disappointingly slippery it may continue to be.

Funding

The author wishes to acknowledge the generous support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Note

1. For an account of the intellectual and personal relations between Peirce and James as they bear upon the development of pragmatism, see Houser (2011). The aim of my evocation of these relations here is not to make any particular historical claims about influence, but only to set the stage for the project of constructing a conceptual confluence around issues of qualities of experience and thought, located at a potential intersection of their thought with that of Deleuze and Guattari and Whitehead.

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