

Posudek vedoucího

Dinh Huyen My, Charles S. Peirce on the Continuity of Thought

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For her bachelor's thesis, Dinh Huyen My chose to explore the complex philosophy of Charles Peirce, seek greater clarity as to Peirce's notions of the function of time in the continuity of thought. This alone is worth comment: Peirce is a notoriously difficult philosopher. To grasp and use his ideas well requires extensive reading within his body of work and familiarity with the deep and varied scholarship thereof, as well as a strong background in the history of thought, both mathematical and analytical skill, and an ability to work with a constantly shifting multiplicity of perspectives. In this work, this student well demonstrates all the above. More, they have demonstrated all this with a remarkable ease of familiarity with both Peirce's writings and significant works of Peircean scholarship, producing a thesis that far exceeds the expected requirements of a bachelor's work.

The subject of the thesis was, of course, the student's initiative – and knowing this student I harbored no qualms as to her ability handle it well. Her research began with material drawn from the several advanced courses she has had with me, but quickly moved beyond that as she familiarized herself with the larger world of Peirce's philosophy. In consultation, she did not request direction on where or what to research, but asked probing questions as to the various positions of various scholars who are significant in the field, as well as proposing her own interpretations of Peirce's writings in light of established scholarship. Just as importantly, I witnessed her originally broad thesis shape into a focused monograph that, after cleaning up some few typographical and grammatical errors as well as instances of substandard referencing, would be readily acceptable as a peer reviewed academic work in the most reputable journals of Peircean scholarship. Not only does this thesis far exceed the requirements of a bachelor's work, the student's approach to the process exemplifies the very best of the intellectual tradition.

Following a concise and relevant introduction, the thesis is divided into two broad sections, the first of which sets up the second. The thesis concludes by proffering a discretely identified 'thirdness' – a well-mediated upshot of the possibilities and interactions explored in its previous sections. In structure, it is exceptionally focused; each subsection builds coherently on the previous, leading the reader through the argumentation to the conclusion, with no diversions into side issues or digressions into irrelevant filler.

In the first long chapter we are introduced to the centrality of synechism to both ontology and epistemology (specifically, time and thought), the radical continuity and inherently interconnected nature of Peirce's cenopythagorean categories, the inherently multifarious nature of Peirce's epistemology (i.e., the multiplicities of

perspectives that Peirce both employed and considered necessary for properly coherent thought), and the ultimately *a posteriori* method of Peirce's pragmatism. While this section neither offers novel arguments nor an in-depth analysis, it well summarizes relevant established scholarship and directs the reader to specific essays wherein Peirce developed these positions. This alone is generally sufficient for a bachelor's work, however this student uses this section to prepare the reader for a more nuanced exploration of Peirce's hypothesis on the nature of time in the function of thought, thus producing a truly exceptional bachelor's thesis.

In the second section, the student analyses Peirce's concept of time as it relates to thought; here we see the fulfilment of the earlier presentation as she combines the previous study with well developed insights into a valuable monograph. The argument moves from Peirce's notion that that which is authentically continuous (in the sense of radical continuity, or synechism) does not exhibit mechanised interaction as it represents a whole that contains no 'definitive' parts (meaning the parts themselves have no discrete ontological being but exist as a continuation of other parts).

In discussing continuity, I have a small disagreement with the student, it is less that "in interpreting continuity, one need not strictly look for a definition to arrive at the definition" but rather that (*sensu stricto* Peirce) one *cannot* look strictly for a definition precisely due to the reasons stated in the thesis: because continuity defies the discernment of discrete qualities by which a continuity can be defined. Thus the best we can do is follow Peirce's lead and offer a wide variety of perspectives on the phenomenon, by which we can generalize its function and existence. This is but a quibble, of course; but in my opinion, the section on continuity leading into a comparison of Peirce with Kant is one most in need of further development (should the student seek to publish).

The argument moves on to compare and contrast Peirce's synechism with Kant's notion that space and time can be infinitely divided. The key insight here, and what I see as the point on which the conclusion rests, is the use the student makes of Peirce's statement that "Kant's real definition implies that a continuous line contains no points." Extrapolating from this well-known position, they move to demonstrate that "The relatedness or unbrokenness of parts is an indispensable feature of continuity [thus] ... as with time and space, a flow of thoughts is unbroken." What follows is an analysis of time in which each momentary quale begins within the previous and ends within the following – thus creating an ontological whole that cannot be isolated in its particulars without destroying the whole. This is further developed by an analysis of Peirce's concept of Infinitesimal duration – that indivisible instance of time that defies definition as "distinction only comes upon reflection when we abstract the instances from present consciousness." And then it moves on to the continuity of inference, which returns the reader to a practical analysis of the upshot of the cenopythagorean categories, leading us to the student's conclusion that "Peirce's notion of reality and experience is better understood through his concept of temporal synechism." Precisely because "Our

understanding of the world undergoes constant reinterpretation precisely because all there is in the universe, including our minding of it, exhibits characteristics of time, and time exhibits a character that is radically continuous.”

As the opponent suggests, the student’s ease of writing and confident expression of complex thoughts may represent a drawback of the thesis. But if so, it is one that Peircean scholars commonly experience. One must choose between presenting simplified descriptions of his notions to ease the uninitiated into his philosophy, or a nuanced exploration of complexities that are generally inaccessible to all but the well versed. Peirce has left us with little room to maneuver between these rhetorical options, and few have managed to do both simultaneously. I advised her to write as if for an educated audience, and her skill is demonstrated in having produced as her bachelor’s work a monograph of remarkable quality, one that is clearly suitable for submission to a journal of Peircean scholarship.

As such, **I recommend this thesis for defense**, and propose it be graded as **excellent (A)**.

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Dr Gerald Ostdiek, PhD