



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

Rhythmic Foundations, and the Necessary Aesthetic in Peirce's Categories

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ABSTRACT: There has been a tendency in scholarship to steer quite clear of discussions of Peirce and Aesthetics, and I believe that the main reason that Peirce's works lacks, perhaps even intentionally, a clear aesthetic theory is because his entire architectonic of experience is aesthetically founded. This thesis is based, in part, on the necessary aesthetic descriptions one is forced to use when describing something such as the categories. For example, Secondness necessarily elicits aesthetic descriptions of relations and tensions, Thirdness is described most accurately with words such as harmony and arrangement, and the process by which we come to attain a belief is an "aesthetic" endeavor aimed at satisfaction. Focusing particularly on the categories, and secondarily on the method for attaining belief, I hope to show that Peirce's foundation is, itself, an aesthetic awareness of life.

There has been a tendency to steer quite clear of discussions of Peirce and Aesthetics. Over and over, statements by Peircean scholars attest to the lack of philosophical guidance regarding the status and judgment of art that is available in his writings.⁽¹⁾ Peirce himself states that, "My notion would be that there are innumerable varieties of esthetic quality, but no purely esthetic grade of excellence."⁽²⁾

Doug Anderson also states that a Peircean aesthetic is hard to piece together because it was a "very late addition to Peirce's classification of the sciences." That is, even though aesthetics is presupposed by ethics, logic, and metaphysics, in Peirce's prioritization of the sciences, his intention was that aesthetics was to be understood through the work he had already done in the other branches of his system.⁽³⁾

This vagueness hasn't, however, prevented scholars from speculating on the aesthetic *in* Peirce's works. Yet even so, we are still faced with many problems. First is the "paleontological reconstruction", as Herman Parret states, of the various minuscule references by Peirce regarding the aesthetic. Second, it is claimed that if any approach to a Peircean aesthetic is going to be worthwhile, it will probably be too large to handle because it must incorporate his views on logic, metaphysics and theology.⁽⁴⁾ Third, as pointed out by Beverly Kent, Peirce seems to conflate two senses of the aesthetic, where it is both a quality that is immediately present and an ultimate ideal.⁽⁵⁾

I will argue that the main reason that Peirce's works lacks, perhaps even intentionally, a clear aesthetic theory is because his depiction of experience is aesthetically founded. This

thesis is based, in part, on the necessary aesthetic descriptions one is forced to use when describing something such as the categories. For example, descriptions of Secondness elicits aesthetic depictions of relations and tensions, Thirdness is described accurately with words such as harmony and arrangement, and the process by which we come to attain a belief is an aesthetic endeavor aimed at satisfaction. Focusing particularly on the categories, and secondarily on the method for attaining belief, I hope to show that Peirce's foundation is, itself, an aesthetic awareness of life.

As C.M. Smith has said, "There is virtue in vagueness as the qualities or 'suchnesses' that make up category the first are also the source of spontaneity, freshness, and freedom (1.302), which should help explain the affinity between firstness and the aesthetic".⁽⁶⁾ And so it is with Firstness that we shall begin. Unfortunately, to speak clearly and accurately of Firstness is to attempt the impossible.

What one really does when thinking about a first or Firstness, is to think about something for which the first quality in its possibility is *already* turned into existence. Such thinking changes Firstness into something else, which is Secondness. But insofar as there is a Secondness thought, the real matter one is thinking about is already a Thirdness. ⁽⁷⁾

The point is that to speak "of" Firstness one must do so through Thirdness—the mediating and organizing manner through which the mind harmonizes the tensions going on in the immediacy of life (which is Secondness). Keeping this in mind, we can approach Firstness using the terms which describe Secondness. This is profitable, as the lexicon used to describe Seconds is comprised mainly by words which emphasize rhythmic elements. If the Seconds which comprise raw experience are rhythmically organized, then the Firsts which they presuppose must somehow require a similar aesthetic potentiality. It is an awareness of this immediate rhythmic continuity that gives one the ability to locate an intelligible aesthetic in Peirce.

Thus, we begin a more advantageous way of viewing this journey by speaking of Firstness as an attention to the qualitative potential which supposedly underlies experience. Peirce states, as quoted by Parret,

Thus, human beings experience objects in an aesthetic way "simply in their *presentation*" (5.36). "The First is the source of all spontaneity, freshness and freedom" (1.418), and this explains the affinity between Firstness and the aesthetic: "Firstness is what is present to the artist's eye" (5.44). ⁽⁸⁾

Focusing, then, on the sense of life itself, it is helpful to refer to the work of Susanne Langer for the basis for Langer's understanding of how we are able to experience life centers on the ability of the individual to organize experience; and to do so in a rhythmic manner. This helps illustrate the aesthetic process by which a Peircean inquiry proceeds because Langer's claim is that rhythm is one of the essential organizing tools of human experience, and necessarily so, because our biological makeup is formed upon rhythmic connections. As a result of this, our experience of the world is rhythmically organized and understood, our mental capacities are rhythmically founded and operative, and our emotive life is rhythmically experienced. This foundation is inescapable. She states, "The most characteristic principle of vital activity is rhythm. All life is rhythmic; under different circumstances, its rhythms may become very complex, but when they are really lost life cannot long endure".⁽⁹⁾

This is helpful in understanding how Firstness can be seen as the underlying basis for the possible cognitive organization of the experience of life. Rhythm, argues Langer, is the necessary footing upon which our understanding of experience is formed. Langer addresses the rhythmic quality of life on two levels. The first level concerns an attempt to understand the manner in which we feel the qualitative immediacy of life. This can be seen as a direct

reference to the presupposed Peircean Firstness: "The first is that of whatever is in the mind in any mode of consciousness there is necessarily an immediate consciousness and consequently a feeling".(10) The second level addressed by Langer pertains to our ability to abstract discernible patterns from direct experience and create an understanding of various form-states as being symbolic of human experience. An understanding of experience itself as being rhythmic leads one to an understanding of the organization of experience as also being rhythmic. This methodologically rhythmic cogitational ability is also how Peirce uses the method of inquiry in the production of beliefs.

Thought is a thread of melody running through the succession of our sensations. . . . But the soul and meaning of thought, abstracted from the other elements which accompany it, though it may be voluntarily thwarted, can never be made to direct itself toward anything but the production of belief. . . . the demi-cadence which closes a musical phrase in the symphony of our musical life.(11)

Rhythm isn't the essence of life, it is the basis for the experience of life. Our ability to create a cognitive understanding of experience is dependent upon the foundation of experience being not only dynamic, but dynamic in such a way as to facilitate our coherent abstractions of experience. Rhythm understood as tension and release fulfills this dual role.

The essence of rhythm is the preparation of a new event by the ending of a previous one. A person who moves rhythmically need not repeat a single motion exactly. His movements, however, must be complete gestures, so that one can sense a beginning, intent, and consummation, and see in the last stage of one the condition and indeed the rise of another.(12)

Interestingly enough, Peirce states that the attainment of a belief is not only a "stopping-place" for thought, but also a "new starting-place".(13) Experience is naturally organized as rhythmic through the mind's ability to locate and arrange aspects of tension and release in experience.

Unfortunately, in a Peircean language, a detailed explanation of this claim is difficult to articulate. "Tension" and "release" are terms constructed by the mental abilities of Thirdness to describe the brute sensations of Secondness. Yet, what is really being described are the potential qualities *underlying* the immediacy of Secondness—the rhythmic potentiality known as Firstness.

An example which supports this presupposition is highlighted by Peirce when considering the notion of doubt in inquiry, where the "irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief".(14) While Peirce doesn't come out and say that inquiry is therefore a "rhythmic struggle," the notions of irritation and satisfaction in the struggle to attain belief are, indeed, rhythmic descriptions of tension and release. For Peirce, then, one of the basic elements which pushes inquiry (the sense of doubt) can be described accurately with terms usually devoted to aesthetics.

One can argue, then, that for Peirce rhythm is somehow an organic and biological notion inherent in the experience of life. For if the natural process by which we come to attain a belief is rhythmic in nature, the underlying conditions of our ability to undergo that process must also incorporate such rhythmic potentiality. For example, rhythmic qualities, such as tension and release, are manifest organically in several ways, and the most obvious, as pointed out by Langer herself, is the experience of breathing. "Breathing is the most perfect exhibit of physiological rhythm: as we release the breath we have taken, we build up a bodily need of oxygen that is the motivation, and therefore the real beginning, of the new breath".(15)

John Dewey also attested to the organically rhythmic potentialities underlying our experience of life.

There is in nature, even below the level of life, something more than mere flux and change. Form is arrived at whenever a stable, even though moving, equilibrium is reached. Changes interlock and sustain one another. Wherever there is this coherence there is endurance. Order is not imposed from without but is made out of the relations of harmonious interactions that energies bear to one another. (16)

This sense of harmony is also very similar to what Peirce is talking about when he speaks of the satisfaction arising in the acquisition of a habit. He states, "An 'Experience' is a brutally produced conscious effect that contributes to a habit, self-controlled, yet so satisfying, on deliberation, as to be destructible by no positive exercise of internal vigor". (17) Thus, the fundamentally aesthetic potentiality which underlies experience (Firstness) is essential to the harmonic satisfaction which allows one to attain a habit.

When the mind assembles experience into rhythmic organizations, the result is a coherent and knowable articulation of experience. In Peircean terms it is the coherent Third abstracted from the tensions of Seconds which presuppose the aestheticness of Firsts. It is, therefore, through the relations created and understood through Thirdness that one comes to recognize the rhythmic core of sentient life as also being rhythmic.

This depiction appeals to the notion of pattern. Rhythm as pattern complements and supports aesthetic qualities as essential to understanding life and how living life is known. Even though the abstraction of pattern is a mental function, it is derived from the understanding of harmony, and it is an understanding which offers an insight into how Peirce could have conceived the mind to be able to organize the ineffable, presupposed, pure qualities of Firstness into relational conceptions.

Buttressing Peirce with Langer's notion of form offers an understanding or explanation of how the mind uses an awareness of patterns to understand life. For Langer, the reason we *can* conceptualize aesthetically is because life is an awareness of rhythmic elements of experience. Likewise, for Peirce, it is the mental acts of Thirdness, organizing the rhythmic moments and patterns discernible through Secondness, which give us the sense of the aesthetic potentiality laden in Firstness.

What this is revealing is an insight into the way in which the Peircean mind works. We are able to deal with the potentially organizable patterns of experience because we *can* abstract symbolic forms of experience. Further, because this is how we interpret the experience of being alive it will also be a necessary part of understanding how various modes of life (especially the aesthetic) are possible.

The depiction of rhythm given here is, I acknowledge, a broad one and it does appeal to both static and dynamic functions. Abstraction and Thirds imply permanence; patterned, coherent and understandable experience. However, since the tensions of experience are constantly changing, it too must be able to exhibit an implication of growth.

What the abstractions of experience are exhibiting, and making knowable, are the tensions of life. Langer wishes to emphasize that since these tensions themselves grow, imply, and lead to further tensions and resolutions, the abstracted forms which we employ to understand these tensions must also be capable of implicating growth. This is also how Peirce accounted for the growth of inquiry towards truth—especially evident in the "Neglected Argument for the Reality of God." He states, "In growth, too, we find that the three Universes conspire; and a universal feature of it is provision for later stages in earlier ones. This is a specimen of certain lines of reflection which will inevitably suggest the hypothesis of God's Reality." (18)

This static and dynamic description accounts for how the flow of life can be understood. Seconds are moments, bits of experience, tensions, and raw in the purest sense. Yet, from them an awareness of process and anticipation can be attained through the harmonized Thirds. The mental awareness of a network of harmonized thirds implicates and represents the dynamism of the tensions of experience. This conception can be applied to the biological understanding of life, as well as reactions, cogitations, expressions and emotions derived from experience. It is therefore suited to work as a bridge between the dynamic flow of rhythm in experience, and the dynamic flow of rhythmic organizations contained in the awareness of experience. Since experience is a flux of relational, rhythmic tensions, the mind orchestrates a relational, rhythmic set of conceptions which are a more defined version of the flux of experience.

For Peirce, this can be explained in the following manner. The reason we can even presuppose the possibility that there is Firstness is because of the way in which Thirdness works. In other words, in Thirdness we are capable of organizing the tensions encountered as Secondness because the potentiality underlying Secondness (Firstness) is rhythmically akin to Thirdness. The claim here is that there is an inherent aesthetic kinship between Firstness and Thirdness and we are able to posit the necessity of Firstness because of an awareness of how we are able to organize experience. Peirce himself takes us through the categories in this manner. We do not go First, Second, Third. We start with encountering Seconds, understand what's going on through Thirds, and then realize that there must be Firsts; and the reason that we can come to this realization is through the recognition of the inherent rhythmic qualities in Thirdness which must come from that which underlies Secondness, which is Firstness.

Understanding experience as aesthetic requires an understanding of the harmonic relations between the self and its environment. It requires an understanding of rhythm as fundamental, and of experience as relational. An emphasis on the mind's ability to harmonize tensions, and thus organize them as rhythmic, plays an important role in understanding how rhythm can be so pervasive in the process of reasoning.

A sense of disharmony is an obvious clue to the validity of this point of view. That is, when the normal or typical course of a sequence of events is altered, expectation and anticipation increase as the individual searches for the regularity and consistency desired. Peirce alludes to this in "How To Make Our Ideas Clear," when he talks of belief. "As it appeases the irritation of doubt, which is the motive for thinking, thought relaxes, and comes to rest for a moment when belief is reached".⁽¹⁹⁾ This continuity is organized and understood by the mind through abstraction, but it is based on the sensation of patterned experience. Mental states are symbolic reflections of these basic patterned experiences, and when the experience itself is disrupted, one's mental abilities heighten in such a way so as to work harder at harmonizing the rhythmic qualities of the experience. This is an understanding of rhythm as harmonic and relational. It is a relationship which involves a potentially organizable sense of life and the ability of the human mind to organize it as rhythmic.

Harmony, therefore, exemplifies, probably moreso than any other description, the rhythmic idea of relation which Peirce is employing in his depiction of the categories. It is an understanding of how ideas "fit together" in a relational coherence or dissonance concerning the aspects of what it is to be alive—of what it is to be capable of having an experience. Harmony is the crux of what it means to attain a belief.

The insight from this conclusion is that aesthetics, or aesthetic notions, drive inquiry itself. As Hausman states, "If logic as well as ethics presupposes aesthetics, then aesthetic value is the condition that determines truth in the long run".⁽²⁰⁾ The "aesthetic ideal" is the satisfied state of harmony which is achieved in the attainment of a belief; the ideal is an aesthetic sense of life, not of judgment.

Late in *Feeling and Form*, Langer makes an interesting (and rather Peircean) statement: "The exhilaration of a direct aesthetic experience indicates the depth of human mentality to which that experience goes".(21) The "depth" referred to here is not some mystical notion of "being", but the depth of the rhythmically related experience of sentient life. The aesthetic, because it is based on rhythm and harmonic relations, actually "shapes our imagination of external reality according to the rhythmic forms of life and sentience, and so impregnates the world with aesthetic value."(22)

For Peirce, though we can only know of Firstness through the mediation of Secondness by Thirdness, we do nevertheless have a sense that there is a potential realm of pure quality which underlies experience. It is this intuitive, or perhaps, instinctive sense that fills our inquiry with an aesthetic motivation and goal.

Thus, being "rooted in Firstness" is not a damnation of aesthetic understanding for Peirceans. Instead it is an acute depiction of value which contributes to the intricacies of Peirce's philosophy and the insights contained in his work. For Peirce, intelligibility would be meaningless without an inherently value-laden (aesthetic) base.

Notes

(1) "The first thing to note about Peirce's semiotic aesthetics is that Peirce himself had very little to say about it." (E.F. Kaelin).

"Charles S. Peirce admitted, quite ruefully at times, that he had never done justice to aesthetics." (C.M. Smith).

"There is a sense in which it might be said that Charles Peirce had no aesthetics." (Max Oliver Hocutt).

"Peirce did not have an explicit theory of the aesthetic function..." (Irene Portis-Winner).

"I am not well acquainted with this science." (CP 1.191).

(2) CP 5.132.

(3) Anderson, Douglas. *Strands of System. The Philosophy of Charles Peirce*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1995. 42

(4) Parret, Herman. "Peircean Fragments on the Aesthetic Experience." *Peirce and Value Theory: On Peircean Ethics and Aesthetics*. Ed. Herman Parret. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1994: 179.

(5) Kent, Beverly. *Charles S. Peirce: Logic and the Classification of Science*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987. 153-4. Further, this idea is perhaps most present in the "Neglected Argument," where the idea of the God Hypothesis is both the ideal satisfaction of inquiry and the immediate satisfaction felt in the contemplation of the hypothesis as a possible explanation for the three universes.

(6) Smith, C.M. "The Aesthetics of Charles S. Peirce" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (Fall, 1972): 122.

(7) Salabert, Pere. "Aesthetic Experience in Charles S. Peirce. The Threshold." *Peirce and Value Theory: On Peircean Ethics and Aesthetics*. Ed. Herman Parret. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co., 1994: 197.

(8) Parret, 183-4.

(9) Langer, 126.

(10) Buchler, Justus. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. New York: Dover. 1955: 83.

(11) *Ibid.*, 28.

(12) Langer, 126-7.

(13) Buchler, 29.

(14) *Ibid.*, 10.

(15) Langer, 127.

(16) Dewey, John. *Art As Experience*. New York: Perigree. 1980: 14.

(17) Wiener, 358.

(18) *Ibid.*, 364.

(19) Buchler, 28.

(20) Hausman, 211.

(21) Langer, 397.

(22) *Ibid.*, 399.