



Philosophy of Religion

A Neglected Argument

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ABSTRACT: Charles S. Peirce sketches "a nest of three arguments for the Reality of God" in his article "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God." I provide careful analysis and explication of Peirce's argument, along with consideration of some objections. I argue that (1) there are significant differences between Peirce's neglected argument and the traditional arguments for God's existence; (2) Peirce's analysis of the neglected argument into three arguments is misleading; (3) there are two distinct levels of argument that Peirce does not recognize; and (4) it is doubtful whether the argument meets all the criteria set by Peirce himself.

Charles S. Peirce published in the *Hibbert Journal* in 1908 an article titled, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God." The article sketches what Peirce calls, in a later comment, "a nest of three arguments for the Reality of God" (6.486). (1)

I provide an analysis of Peirce's argument and his interpretation of it along with a consideration of some objections. I shall argue:

- (1) that there are significant differences between Peirce's neglected argument and the traditional arguments for God's existence;
- (2) that Peirce's own analysis of the neglected argument into three arguments is misleading;
- (3) that there are two distinct levels of argument that Peirce does not acknowledge, and
- (4) that it is doubtful the argument meets all the criteria Peirce himself establishes.

I trust that your response to what I have to say will not mirror the response Michael Raposa reports he received from a "prominent American philosophical theologian," when he gave a presentation on this topic; that response being that Peirce's neglected argument *ought* to remain neglected. (2)

Some Distinctions

I begin with some distinctions. First, Peirce distinguishes between an argument and argumentation. An argument is "any process of thought reasonably tending to produce a definite belief" while argumentation refers to an argument that proceeds "upon definitely formulated premisses" (6.456). We must note that Peirce's Neglected Argument (hereafter referred to as NA) is an argument, but not argumentation.

Second, we must distinguish between reality and existence. Reality is a broader term that encompasses what exists but is not synonymous with it. (3) For something to be real it must have properties sufficient to identify it whether anyone attributes those properties to it or not. The existent, strictly speaking, is what interacts with things in a spatio-temporal environment (6.454). Since God is not another spatio-temporal object, it amounts to fetishism, Peirce remarks, to say that God exists (6.495). Hence his argument, strictly speaking, is not an argument for God's existence, but for God's reality.

If we compare Peirce's NA with the traditional arguments for God's existence that philosophers know and love to criticize, we are immediately struck with a major difference. Peirce's argument is not argumentation, but the traditional arguments (ontological, cosmological, teleological) are argumentation. Peirce is *not* offering yet another bit of argumentation that concludes with a proposition of metaphysical theology about the existence or reality of some being called God.

The best such argumentation might accomplish is to convince some skeptic to assent to the truth of a proposition previously doubted. Genuine religious faith is much richer than this, and there should be, Peirce believes, some sort of argument that reflects this richness and depth. This reveals yet another difference between the NA and traditional argumentation for God's existence. Peirce self-consciously constructs the NA as a "religious" argument, rather than an exercise in theological, metaphysical speculation. (4)

Peirce's goal is to articulate an argument that should be obvious to all minds, be they highly educated or "humble." This argument should reflect a person's earnest desire to seek the truth about God's reality, and it should be directly applicable to "the conduct of life, and full of nutrition for man's highest growth" (6. 457). These are high and somewhat vague standards. Any evaluation of Peirce's NA must examine whether or not the NA meets them. If it does, Peirce's argument would succeed in overcoming one persistent criticism of traditional argumentation, namely, that it is irrelevant to genuine religious faith. Peirce wants to present a religiously relevant argument. He does not want to display metaphysical dexterity intended to impress the philosophically sophisticated.

Before we turn to the argument proper, one further bit of clarification is required. Peirce speaks of the three "Universes of Experience" (6.455). The first universe is our experience of what is possible. The second is our experience of the actual or, as Peirce puts it, "Brute Actuality of things and facts" (6.455). The third universe refers to our experience of general laws that establish connections among the objects in the different universes. Those who know something of Peirce's general philosophy will recognize these distinctions among the possible, the actual, and the connected or mediated as yet another application of the universal categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

Peirce's Neglected Argument

Peirce uses the term "neglected argument" in two senses: a broad sense and a narrow sense. In the broad sense it involves the practice of a mental exercise called musement that eventuates in the hypothesis of God's reality. In order to understand musement, we must begin with the notion of pure play. Play is "the lively exercise of one's powers" and pure play is play governed by no rules or laws "except the law of liberty" (6.458). In mental play we allow our mind freely to play with ideas. For example, mental play might take the form of aesthetic contemplation, distant castle-building, or consideration of some wonder in one of the three universes of experience. It might take the form of playing with possible connections between two of the three universes with some speculation concerning the cause of the universes and their connections. When it takes this latter form, Peirce calls it Musement and, he maintains that

in the Pure Play of Musement the idea of God's reality will be sooner or later to be found an attractive fancy, which the Muser will develop in various ways. The more he ponders it, the more it will find response in every part of his mind, for its beauty, for its supplying an ideal of life, and for its thoroughly satisfactory explanation of his whole threefold environment. (6.465)

Since Musement is a kind of play with no rules but the rule of freedom, one cannot predict the exact form it will take on every occasion and with every person. But Peirce offers an example of musing in order to give us a better idea of what he has in mind.

The Muser might, at some point, think about the "unspeakable variety" of each Universe. Musing on such variety can lead to consideration of the "homogeneities of connectedness" that can be found in the midst of this vast variety of possibilities and actualities we daily experience. Musing on the similarities and regularities within one or two universes, can lead to thinking about the connections and similarities between universes. "All the universes," the Muser might think, "exhibit some form of growth and a universal feature of growth is the preparation in earlier stages for latter stages." Once musing has taken the Muser this far in his or her reflection, Peirce thinks that the hypothesis of God's reality will inevitably suggest itself. Of course the Muser might account for growth in the three universes by positing some concept like chance. But if the Muser continues the musing, it will soon be apparent that chance itself requires some explanation.

So there we have the NA in the broad sense. If one engages in the activity of freely playing with ideas from time to time (Peirce recommends "five to six per cent of one's waking time, perhaps during a stroll") one will sooner or latter engage in musing about features of one's experiences that will prove puzzling enough to impel one down a path ending in the positing the God's reality.

This doesn't seem to be much of an argument, and one wonders why someone with the brilliance of Peirce should be so impressed by it. Peirce himself appears to fear that the subtlety of the argument might escape most readers and so, in an "Additament" he offers his own analysis. He analyzes the NA into a nest of three arguments. The first he calls the Humble Argument, the Second the Neglected Argument proper (this is the narrow sense of the term I referred to above) and, while he gives no name to the third, I shall call it the Abductive Argument.

These, I contend, are not really three distinct arguments, but three different interpretations of a single argument that bring out different features of it and thereby strengthen it. However, each of these features could be developed into a different line of argumentation as we shall soon see. The single argument is the NA in the broad sense as I sketched it above. In order to avoid confusion I will call this the Musement Argument. The Humble argument is an interpretation of the Musement Argument that highlights the fact that the process of thought called musement is available to everyone ranging from the metaphysician "to the clodhopper" (6.483). Thus, unlike traditional argumentation for God's existence, Peirce's argument is, so to speak, available to the masses. Where the ontological argument, for example, loses most people not logically trained, Peirce's argument is available to anyone who can muse.

One should note, however, that simplified forms of both the design and cosmological arguments appear quite easily understood by those who are not philosophically or theologically educated. While the accessibility of musement to most people is an important feature of the argument, we should not conclude that this virtue attaches to the NA alone.

The "Neglected Argument Proper" or the NA in the narrow sense is the kind of argument theologians ought to have developed, but did not. That is why Peirce calls it "neglected," and this feature of the argument is significant enough for Peirce that he gives the entire

argument this name. What the theologians have neglected is the fact that the activity of musement that leads to the God-hypothesis shows that there is a "latent tendency toward belief in God" in every soul (6.487). In other words, there is a "natural tendency of the human mind" while musing on experience to posit the hypothesis of God's reality as the cause of the three universes of experience. This natural tendency has the status of an instinct and is not unlike the instinctive commonsense beliefs that guide and support scientific inquiry.

This reference to scientific inquiry leads us to the third interpretation of the Musement Argument, what I have dubbed the Abductive Argument. Again I would remind you that this is not so much a third distinct argument, as it is an interpretation that highlights yet another subtle feature of the Musement Argument. This interpretation draws an analogy between musing and what Peirce calls abductive or retroductive inference. According to Peirce, the logic of scientific inquiry involves three types of inference: Abduction or retroduction in which some hypothesis is formulated to explain some problem, deduction in which the hypothesis is rendered precise and predictions are deduced, and induction in which the hypothesis is tested by experience. Peirce sees in the activity of musement a process very similar to the first stage of scientific inquiry, abduction or hypothesis creation. This strengthens the Musement Argument because it shows that the same type of thinking operative in scientific reasoning is operative in religious thinking.

There is, I think, greater ambiguity in Peirce's Musement Argument than he realized. Not only does it conceal three different interpretations the name of the second being used as the name of the whole, but it refers to two different sorts of things . First there is the *activity* of musing resulting in the hypothesis of God's reality. Then there is Peirce's *claim* that musement will *inevitably* result in this hypothesis. It may well be that the activity of musing will result in the belief that God is real. However, it does not follow that musing will *inevitably* (always? necessarily?) lead to the God hypothesis.

Assessment

Many objections can and have been made to the Musement Argument (NA in broad sense). Suppose it is true that musing leads someone to posit the reality of God as a hypothesis. So what? We certainly cannot conclude from this that God is real. Suppose that it is true that musing *inevitably* leads people to posit the reality of God as a hypothesis. So what? Maybe we are all inclined to make the same mistake. (5)

What can we make of this God-hypothesis that presumably results from musing? Is it really a hypothesis in the scientific sense? Observation and experience can test genuine scientific hypotheses. Can this one be so tested? And who is this God? The term is decidedly vague. Even if the NA succeeds, would the divine reality that we come to believe in have any religious relevance or meaning? Can this God save us? Can it love us? Can it forgive us? Peirce's NA appears to satisfy neither the scientific nor the religious community. As C.F. Delaney puts it:

From the perspective of the scientific community the disanalogies between the hypothesis of God and more paradigmatic scientific hypotheses would be noted, and from the perspective of the various religious traditions the vagueness and metaphysical indeterminateness of this concept of god would be seen to fall considerably short of the theological details that usually attend credal belief. (6)

It may be helpful to consider some of these questions in the context of the standards that Peirce himself set. Has Peirce met his own standards? Has he provided us with an argument that (1) "should be obvious to all minds"; (2) reflects the desire of a person to "earnestly strive to find the truth of the matter"; and (3) "present[s] its conclusion . . . in a form directly

applicable to the conduct of life." If he has succeed in this endeavor, then he has presented us with further evidence of the reality of God because if God is really the creator of the universes of our experience, then we would expect to find, sooner or later, just such an argument.

Is the Musement Argument truly humble? Can minds, "high and low" alike, follow it? In the early 1890's Peirce had concluded that without religious experience, a person cannot properly use or understand religious language. (7) The elitism of this conclusion bothered Peirce. True to the democratic and egalitarian spirit that his pragmatic philosophy expresses, Peirce cast about for a way to overcome this elitism. His discovery of the NA suggested to him that the required experience is available to anyone willing to spend some time each day in musement. Since musement does not require the ability to follow prescribed logical steps, nor the ability to master technical language, anyone who is willing to play with ideas can arrive at the God-hypothesis.

If we focus on the actual process of musing, Peirce is right. No special training in philosophy or theology is required for musing. In fact, it might work against it. If, however, we focus on Peirce's claims that musing inevitably ends in the God-hypothesis, and his analysis of musing into three types of argument, another picture emerges. Anyone who has tried to read Peirce's article knows that it is not an easy matter. Musing is one thing, following Peirce's explication of musing is quite another.

What about the second requirement that there should be an earnest attempt to find out the truth about God? What counts as an earnest attempt? What counts, according to Peirce is the spirit in which the inquiry is made. This spirit should be like the spirit that motivates scientific abduction.

If Musers begin with the goal of convincing themselves of the truth of religion, the Musers are not inquiring in the scientific spirit. "But let religious meditation be allowed to grow up spontaneously out of Pure Play without any breach of continuity, and the Muser will retain the perfect candour proper to Musement" (6. 458). While Peirce here refers to musement as "religious meditation," he reported that he borrowed the idea of musement from Schiller's notion of *Spieltrieb*. (8) Schiller used this idea of a "play impulse" in conjunction with his aesthetic theory, and it reflects a strong dose of German Romanticism. Perhaps musing is less free, uninhibited and spontaneous than Peirce imagines. Maybe all musing is shaped by culture, experience, and tradition (including religious traditions) in such a way that musers in theistic traditions end up with God-hypotheses and musers in non-theistic traditions end up with emptiness-hypotheses (as some Buddhists do) or Big Bang-hypotheses (as some cosmologists do).

Culture and tradition may play a greater role in shaping musement that Peirce recognized, but still, with John Smith we might argue that

What is novel in his [Peirce's] view is the finding of a point of contact between the movement of the mind in religious meditation and the creative ingenuity of human thought in the domain of science. (9)

The NA proper (narrow sense) suggests that the guess-work that characterizes musement and constitutes the first stage of scientific inquiry is somehow instinctive to humans. Peirce was attracted to this idea because he found it amazing that, out of the infinite number of hypotheses available to explain some event, human beings had developed an astonishingly successful record of narrowing the list to a few, one of which turned out to be true. Of course it often took a very long time to get the right one, but eventually human science does manage to get it right. He compares this ability of "guessing right" to the instinct birds have for flying and nest building. If we knew that our musing instincts were truly

analogous to the instincts of birds, we would, of course, be foolish not to give musing free rein. But we have no magical faculty for getting it right the first time out of the nest and maybe not even the second time. The history of human thought is littered with aborted flights of thought. While recognizing this, Peirce remains optimistic because, as he notes, "the well-prepared mind has wonderfully soon guessed each secret of nature" (6.476).

Peirce thinks this abductive knack that humans have is, like the instinct in other animals, a product of evolutionary history. It has adaptive value. So musers have some reason to trust the results of their musing, even before deduction and induction explicate and test the God-hypothesis. In fact, Peirce thinks, this hypothesis, once arrived at, will seem so plausible that there is a danger that the investigation will "stop at this first stage owing to the indifference of the Muser to any further proof of it" (6.488).

However, maybe the human power to guess right relates to only a certain class of hypotheses directly tied to survival. Maybe there are other classes of hypotheses, hypotheses far more remote from the immediate needs of organic survival, that humans have little if any instinctive power to guess right by musing. Peirce recognizes this objection and notes that:

Metaphysics, however, cannot adapt the human race to maintaining itself, and therefore the presumption is that man has no such genius for discoveries about God, Freedom and Immortality, as he has for physical and psychical science. (6.491)

Is it possible to extend the idea of adaptive value beyond the biological sphere? If not, is there a sense in which the God-hypothesis contributes to our biological survival? Peirce provides no answer to these questions, but hints at a kind of Aristotelian solution. He notes that animals of all races appear to rise above their general level of intelligence when they perform activities that reflect their proper function. So birds seem much brighter when nest-building than they ordinarily appear. If the proper function of humans is "to embody general ideas in art-creations, in utilities, and above all in theoretical cognition" (6.476) then maybe when they muse about God they are much brighter than they ordinarily appear to be.

There may be very good reasons to suppose humans guess right when musing. However, if we sincerely wish to pursue the truth of the matter of the God-hypothesis in a scientific spirit, then, abductive musement is no substitute for deduction and induction. The God-hypothesis needs to be clarified and tested in experience.

This leads us directly to Peirce's third standard, the requirement that the conclusion should be directly applicable to the conduct of life. Peirce begins his article by saying that "God" is a proper name signifying "*Ens necessarium*". If musement ends with a God-hypothesis and if the word "God" in such an hypothesis is a proper name signifying a necessary being, what sort of direct applicability to the conduct of life might such an abstract metaphysical being have? According to the pragmatic maxim, the meaning of any conception consists in the practical effects it would have upon our future conduct (5.402). What effects might positing the reality of an *ens necessarium* have on our conduct? How might I, believing in such a reality, conduct my affairs differently than I would not believing?

Peirce admits that the God-hypothesis is a "peculiar one" (6.466). Not only is the proper name "God" vague, it signifies a reality that is infinitely incomprehensible. Deductive reasoning seeks to remove the vagueness of a hypothesis initially abducted. In God's case precision seems to escape us. All signs are vague to some extent. They can be rendered more definite through the process of careful definition that often involves identifying necessary and sufficient characteristics that distinguishes one member of a class from another member. However, can this "deductive" procedure work with a God who is in a

class by itself? Peirce recognizes this problem of precision with respect to the characteristic of growth when he says, rather obscurely, that the

hypothesis, being thus itself inevitably subject to the law of growth, appears in its vagueness to represent God as so, albeit this is directly contradicted in the hypothesis from its very first phase. But this apparent attribution of growth to God, since it is not eradicable from the hypothesis, cannot, according to the hypothesis, be flatly false. (6.466)

As the *ens necessarium* God cannot change, grow or have a purpose. Yet God is discovered in musement to be the creator of change, growth and purpose. What are we to make of this situation? Peirce advises that the "implications concerning the Universes" be maintained in the hypothesis while its "implications concerning God be partly disavowed" by holding them "less false than their denial would be" (6.466). Peirce appears to be saying that it is "less false" to attribute change to God than to deny it. Yet the *ens necessarium* as been typically understood to be unchanging. Here Peirce stumbles into the same problem about the relationship between a changing world and an unchanging Creator that classical theology did. Starting with the abductive phase of musement has not given him enough leverage to get past the deductive phase of precise definition.

In spite of this vagueness, Peirce is convinced that the God-hypothesis is one of great beauty and can shape our moral lives. Even more, God can be experienced and this possibility is something that is vital to the inductive phase. However, by experience he does not mean sense experience. He means the "entire mental product" (6.492). To those who would object by pointing out that hallucinations, delusions and superstitious imaginations are also mental products, Peirce replies that indeed they are. They are experiences, but experiences misunderstood. So why, we might ask, is not the experience of God, experience misunderstood? Does not it, like all experience, need to be tested?

The test to which the hypothesis must be put lies "in its value in the self-controlled growth of man's conduct of life" (6.480). Peirce is confident that it will pass this pragmatic test. His confidence is based, in part, on an argument by elimination with which he closes his essay. "Where," he asks, "would such an idea, say as that of God, come from, if not from direct experience?" (6. 493). If you respond by saying "reason," you overlook the fact that reasoning can supply our minds with nothing more than "an estimate of the value of a statistical ratio" (6. 493). If you adopt the skeptical attitude of those "nominalists" who think that the whole of experience amounts to sense experience, then "the fundamental principle of scientific method" condemns you for obstructing inquiry by treating a deliverance of experience as if it were a deliverance of reason about which we can argue.

Conclusion

In some respects the NA is an improvement over traditional argumentation for God's existence. Those who find the traditional arguments religiously irrelevant, might find the NA more to their liking because it ends in religious experience. Those who are scientifically inclined might find the scientific spirit in which the NA is offered attractive. Peirce writes:

I know of the effects of Musement on myself and others, that any normal man who considers the three Universes in the light of the hypothesis of God's Reality, and pursues that line of reflection in scientific singleness of heart, will come to be stirred to the depths of his nature by the beauty of the idea and by its august practicality, even to the point of earnestly loving and adoring his strictly hypothetical God, and to that of desiring above all things to shape the whole conduct of life and all the springs of action into conformity with that hypothesis. Now to be deliberately and thoroughly prepared to shape one's conduct into conformity with a proposition is neither more nor less than the state of mind called Believing that proposition, however long the conscious classification of it under that head be postponed. (6.467)

However, as I noted above, these very advantages might also be defects from the point of view of true believers who are suspicious of hypothetical gods, however adored, and tough-minded scientists who have difficulty understanding how a metaphysical hypothesis can be genuinely scientific.

Peirce, as I have tried to show, did not entirely meet his own standards. It is true that nearly everyone can muse if they take the time, although not everyone can follow Peirce's analysis of musement. There is an affinity between musing and scientific creativity. However, just because scientists have gotten it right when guessing about physical phenomena does not mean people in general will get it right when guessing about metaphysical realities. Peirce may be right, doubters may only become convinced by shaping the conduct of their lives in accord with the God-hypothesis and seeing what happens. Pascal for one would certainly find this advice attractive. Peirce closes his essay on the NA with a passage reminiscent of Pascal.

as to God, open your eyes--and your heart, which is also a perceptive organ--and you see him. But you may ask, Don't you admit there are any delusions? Yes: I may think a thing is black, and on close examination it may turn out to be bottle-green. But I cannot think a thing is black if there is no such thing to be seen as black. (6.493)

Is it the case that our musing cannot muse God, if there be no such thing as God? Or perhaps what we muse as God turns out on close examination to be Buddhist emptiness, or the Vedantan Brahman, or Laozu's Dao, or Plotinus' One, or a Big Bang.

Notes

(1) I will follow the conventional method of citation for Peirce's works. Unless otherwise indicated, the references are to the volume and paragraph number found in the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935). I would like to thank Norman Prigge for helpful comments and those in the audience at the American Academy of Religion and the World Congress of Philosophy who responded to two briefer versions of this paper. The problems that remain are my responsibility.

(2) Michael L. Raposa, *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989) p. vii.

(3) See John E. Smith's discussion in "The Tension Between Direct Experience and Argument in Religion," *Religious Studies*. Vol. 17 (1983) 491 and Vincent G. Potter, *Peirce's Philosophical Perspectives*. edited by Vincent M. Colapietro (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), pp. 171-72.

(4) My claim that the NA is different from the traditional arguments is not meant as a rejection of any and all similarities. Some have found similarities with the cosmological argument (God as the cause of the three universes), the design argument (God as the coordinator of orderly growth and change), and the ontological argument (the instinctiveness of the idea of God). See, for example, Robert S. Corrington's *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce: Philosopher, Semiotician, and Ecstatic Naturalist* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1993), p. 72 and Donna M. Orange's *Conception of God: A Developmental Study*. (Lubbock, Texas: Institute for Studies in Pragmatism, 1984), pp. 77-78. Also, if we follow Karl Barth's interpretation of Anselm's ontological argument, then the prayerful context in which Anselm offers his argument gives it a more religious cast. However, whatever similarities may exist I think it vital to

recognize the differences otherwise one will expect to find yet another bit of metaphysical argumentation about God and be disappointed at not finding it.

(5) It must, however, be admitted that if everyone who mused reached the same conclusion, this rather impressive fact would cry out for some explanation.

(6) C.F. Delany, "Peirce on the Hypothesis of God," *op. cit.*, p. 735.

(7) Donna Orange, *Peirce's Conception of God*. *op. cit.*, p. 86.

(8) Michael L. Raposa, *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion*. *op. cit.*, p. 128.

(9) John E. Smith, "The Tension Between Direct Experience and Argument in Religion." *op. cit.*, p. 497.