

## Being “Beyond Action and Cognition”

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In his article “Beyond Action and Cognition: The Role of Awareness and Emotion in Experiential Learning,” John E. Henning rightly observes that experiential learning is under conceptualized. Paradoxically, he wants to address such things as awareness, feeling, and emotion that are beyond action and cognition. The paradox is how does one conceptualize experiences that are beyond cognition. Henning employs Charles Sanders Peirce’s nuanced categories of “firstness,” “secondness,” and “thirdness” to make important differentiations that allow him to effectively point toward, and delineate, phenomena beyond the bounds of language. Although I have worked with Peirce off and on for many years, I want to say up front I am no expert. Peirce is perhaps largely ignored by educators because of his extraordinarily subtle, albeit crucial, distinctions.

For instance, Henning astutely follows Peirce in separating “feelings” from “emotions.” He recognizes that emotions have cognitive content, or what Peirce calls thirdness, lacking in mere feelings. Even pathological emotions are guided by meanings, which helps explain the intelligence one may find even in emotionally driven pathological actions and ideas. Cognitive objects provide a purpose, and perhaps a method, to one’s madness. Nonetheless, action misguided by inappropriate cognition is unlikely to effectively coordinate action. That is one reason Henning’s thoughtful suggestions about emotional development are so useful.

I am especially impressed by Henning’s analysis of awareness. Here he gains access to anoetic qualities, feelings, and potentialities. However, I think awareness has felt temporal and spatial quality. Still, I am confident that those who are judiciously aware are better able to perceive potentialities and possibilities.

Henning is absolutely right to emphasize the importance of attention to the world, one’s self, and the relation of self, the world, and others within it. Peirce also emphasizes selective attention, or what he calls empirical prescission, and contrasts it with cognitive abstraction.<sup>1</sup> Peirce states that unlike abstraction, “prescission” arises “from *attention to one element and neglect of the other.*”<sup>2</sup> One only thinks about and reacts toward that to which one attends. Poor attention

leads to poor thought and action. That is why it is so often the case that those who can gain a good “feel” for a situation can respond well with only a tincture of discursive thought.

Connecting Peirce to Heidegger’s metaphysical Being, which we may trace to Aristotle’s being qua being, is extraordinarily interesting. It also provides a fine example of Peirce’s ability to make exceedingly subtle distinctions. Consider this passage from Henning’s paper:

I refer to recent work by John Quay, who employed Peirce’s categories to reconceptualize experiential learning as a relationship between Heidegger’s existential conception of Being (firstness) with Dewey’s conception of experience as action (secondness) followed by reflection (thirdness). Critical to this endeavor was showing that Heidegger’s conception of being is equivalent to firstness when “expressed in Peirce’s terms.” Being is a unitary, indivisible part of experience that “must be seen as a whole. Like firstness, being resides in potential that is ontologically prior to either doing or thinking and serves as their context or ground. In fact, Peirce stated that “universal Firstness is the mode of being itself.”

The forgoing statement is largely correct and I will expand on it below. In doing so, it is useful to mention that Dewey also places a great deal of emphasis on the anoetic consciousness of pure, immediate, qualitative experience as the potential for action and thought. He may well have derived this insight from Peirce.

Peirce is extremely subtle—perhaps as subtle as one of his major influences, Duns Scotus who the Scholastics called “the Subtle Doctor.” For instance, Peirce’s categories feature firstness, firstness of secondness, and firstness of thirdness, and secondness of thirdness. Henning is working with the fundamental firstness. Let us distinguish it from the firstness of secondness.

Firstness is metaphysical potential that might not even exist: “Possibility, the mode of being of Firstness, is the embryo of being. It is not nothing. It is not existence.”<sup>3</sup> It is not logical possibility, which is thirdness. Of itself, firstness has the “being of a monadic quality” and “is a mere potentiality, without existence.”<sup>4</sup> Peirce proclaims, that “genuine secondness consists in one thing

acting upon another,— brute action.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, “existence ... depends on inter-action, or *secundarity*.”<sup>6</sup> Secondness, existence, involves inter-*action* actualizing the potential of firstness.

As Henning recognizes, firstness indicates potentiality, quality, and feeling. The firstness of secondness would be the quality of an action while the firstness of thirdness would be the quality of cognition. Peirce asks, “What, then, is *quality*?”:

It is not anything which is dependent, in its being, upon mind, whether in the form of sense or thought. Nor is it dependent, in its *being*, upon the fact that some material things possess it. That quality is dependent upon sense is the great error of the conceptualists. That it is dependent upon the subject in which it is realized is the great error of all the nominalistic schools. A quality is a mere abstract *potentiality*, and the error of these schools lies in holding that the potential, or possible, is nothing but what the actual makes it to be.<sup>7</sup>

Firstness has its own mode of *possible* being as potentiality apart from actuality (secondness) whether in material things, the mind, thought, subject, or senses.<sup>8</sup> Peirce’s “being” in italics above corresponds rather nicely to Heidegger’s Being with a capital “B;” while the firstness of secondness (that is, action, inter-action) is ontic corresponding to Heidegger’s being with a lower case “b.” In Dewey’s terms one may have an experience of pure anoetic quality,” while “objects are the objectives of inquiry.”<sup>9</sup> It is in these senses that firstness is not (ontic) existence, but it is not nothing (it is Being). For Peirce, Dewey, and Heidegger, ontic being (that is, ontology) is derived from purely qualitative noncognitive experience; that is, firstness.

By now I suspect you are convinced Peirce’s distinctions are indeed subtle yet significant. That is why I wish to suggest a simpler place to engage Peirce than his semiotics. Above, I have been engaging firstness, secondness, and thirdness in terms of Peirce’s phenomenological categories. I am going to suggest that for the purposes of analyzing experience, Henning might wish to consider working with Peirce’s phenomenal and closely allied, albeit distinct, psychological, categories.

Technically, as Peirce states, “Genuine mediation is the character of a *Sign*.”<sup>10</sup> Henning says nothing about Peirce’s semiotic firstness (i.e., icons), secondness (i.e., indices), or thirdness (i.e., symbols). He also makes no reference to Peirce’s iterative three-term semiotics, which Peirce depicts this way: “A *Sign* is anything which is related to a Second thing, its *Object*, in respect to a Quality, in such a way as to bring a Third thing, its *Interpretant*, into relation to the same Object, and that in such a way as to bring a Fourth into relation to that Object in the same form, *ad infinitum*.”<sup>11</sup> It is worth adding that an interpretant need not be an interpreter. It may, perhaps, be a feeling, action, habit, or idea.

Houser states that in phenomenology “the categories appear as fundamental categories of experience (or consciousness).”<sup>12</sup> Technically, phenomenology treats of firsts. It seems to me this is the domain best suited for Henning’s purposes. Phenomenological firstness is a quality while psychological firstness is a feeling. This allows one to distinguish a phenomenological quality from the psychological *feeling* of a quality. Similarly, a phenomenological second is interaction, or action-reaction, while a psychological second is effort-resistance. Peirce himself often runs these together. It does no harm unless one wants to make exceedingly fine-grained distinctions.

Finally, Peirce writes, “The genuine synthetic consciousness, or the sense of the process of learning, which is the preeminent ingredient and quintessence of the reason, has its physiological basis quite evidently in the most characteristic property of the nervous system, the power of taking habits.”<sup>13</sup> Habits are instances of cognitive thirdness. Habits we cannot control, control us. Because they are thirds, habits transform mere feelings into emotions because they are coordinated with stimulus objects, perhaps only imagined. Emotional education involves learning good habits. While anything can serve as a sign, for now I suspect the next best step is distinguishing and exploring Peirce’s phenomenological and psychological categories in tandem.

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## REFERENCES

1 See Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), CP 5: 449. In subsequent Charles Peirce references, the volume number is followed by the paragraph number.

2 CP 1: 549.

3 Charles Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 269.

4 CP 1: 328.

5 CP 8: 330.

6 CP 1: 351.

7 CP 1: 422. Peirce rejects Aristotelian latent potential.

8 "Firstness is the mode of being which consists in its subject's being positively such as it is regardless of aught else. That can only be a possibility. For as long as things do not act upon one another there is no sense or meaning in saying that they have any being." (CP 1: 25)

9 John Dewey, "Logic: The Theory of Inquiry," in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1938/1986), 122.

10 CP 1: 92.

11 CP 1: 92.

12 Nation Houser, "Introduction," *The Essential Peirce*, vol.1 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), xviii-xli: xxxi.

13 CP 1: 390.