

Anti-Kantism as necessary characteristic of pragmatism

Pragmatists' anti-Cartesianism had already been defined in the first appearance of pragmatism, in Peirce's cognition series written for the "Journal of Speculative Philosophy" (1867–68). As is well known, the brilliant young scientist stigmatized the Cartesian doubt as a "paper doubt," by opposing it to the scientists' true "living doubt" (*EP1*, 115). Sometimes readers do not realize the powerful novelty that this opposition implies. According to Peirce, research does not move from the skeptical doubt, which falls under the heading of "paper doubt." More similarly to Augustine, Peirce describes a situation in which you can doubt because you have a previous certainty. Therefore, research moves from one certainty to another certainty, and the abandonment of a first certainty is only due to the occurrence of a real surprising phenomenon that alters one of the pillars on which it stands. Peirce never abandoned this position, even when he corrected the psychologism of his first approach – which paired certainty with satisfaction – toward a realistic direction; he even translated it into a logical pattern when he inserted the "surprising phenomenon" into an actual internal step of the logic of abduction (hypothesis). In these founding papers, intuitionism and introspectivism also ended up in the enemies list with the "paper doubt." In opposition to Descartes, Peirce refused any form of intellectualism and all pragmatism moves in this vein.

However, this argument is still insufficient. Empiricists, existentialists, and hermeneuticians were also anti-Cartesians. Pragmatism clarifies the attack on Descartes with the one on Kant. This second feature has always been overshadowed, primarily because of Peirce. In fact, the founder of pragmatism referred to the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the tables "brought down from Sinai" (*CP* 4.2). He gave a name taken from the German thinker to his doctrine (*CP* 5.412), insisting that the Kantian problem of unity of the manifold was the true issue of epistemology (*EP1*, 1). However, over the years, Peirce emphasized his criticisms more and more, particularly in light of the deepening of his idea of "continuity," the true keystone of his philosophy. He changed his mind on this topic, gradually passing from his original Kantian setting into a Cantorian version. Afterward, thanks to the discovery of Georg Cantor's theorem and paradox (made independently of the German mathematician), he preferred a unique view that places real continuity beyond any logical or metric calculation.

The concept of continuity, and Kant's misconception of it, allowed Peirce to understand why in Kant's thought there is always a "gap" between knowledge and the reality to be known, between the "thing-in-itself" and the "phenomenon." The distinction had troubled him since his early philosophical studies (*w1*, 37–44). During the last twenty years of his life, Peirce considered the permanence of this schism to be the epiphenomenon of an entire intellectual attitude: nominalism, understood here in a very different way from a mere belief in the existence of universals. It can be believed that universals are real, yet one is still nominalist if he/she thinks that universals are hopelessly beyond the inferential capacities of humankind. Nominalism affirms an unbridgeable gap between reality and reason. In this view realism maintains that reason belongs to reality and in the long run of inquiry, it will know reality.

Peirce adds a second criticism to the one against nominalism; we find it only in a few fragments, but it aligns quite easily with his general approach. In a 1909 manuscript, Peirce writes:

There is a celebrated passage in the second edition of the *Critick der Reinen Vernunft* and a very notable one, in which Kant says that the “I think” – Das Ich Denke – must be able to accompany all his ideas, “since otherwise they would not thoroughly belong to me.” A man less given to discoursing might remark on reading this: “For my part, I don’t hold my ideas as my own; I had rather they were Nature’s and belonged to Nature’s author.” However, that would be to misinterpret Kant. In his first edition, he does not call the act “the I think” but “the object=x.” That which that act has to effect is the consecution of ideas; now, the need of consecution of ideas is a logical need and is due not, as Kant thinks, to their taking the form of the Urtheil, the assertion, but to their making an argument; and this is not “I think” that that always virtually accompanies an argument, but it is: “Don’t you think so?” (MS 636, 1910, 24–6).

In this passage Peirce does not become a defender of the “thing-in-itself” but of the transcendental unity of the object, which if recognized would have led Kant to a realist basis. This is the possibility that Peirce recognizes when he accepts that his doctrine implies objective idealism (CP 6.163), although he does not agree with the intellectualism of Hegelian dialectic; Hegel misses what Peirce calls Firstness and Secondness, that is to say the spontaneity of events and their brute occurrence (EP2, 177). But at least Hegel understood that the relationship between reality and the human mind must be a profound continuity.

In the same manuscript we find the third criticism: the “I think” does not guarantee the unity of the object because of the aforementioned lack of continuity between cognitive processes and reality. On the contrary, in presuming to unify a scattered reality, it paradoxically becomes presumptuously omnipotent. The “I think” pretends to reunite knowledge with its object and therefore it assumes an ability that is not its responsibility. Peirce, who considered the “I” as a semiotic effect more than a cause (De Tienne 2005, 98), cannot be but ironic about such a hypertrophic view.

Summing up, there are three attacks: nominalism in the specified meaning above, the weakness of the “I think,” and the assumptions of this view of the Self that serves as a prelude to the solipsism of certain idealism. These three arguments against Kant’s philosophy bear the unmistakable label of pragmatism. A fourth one is often added: the unity of knowledge. Aesthetics and ethics are not separated from the theorizing of logic; on the contrary, in Peirce’s classification of sciences they offer the principles on which logic moves forward (EP2, 258–62).

All classic pragmatists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean share Peirce’s criticisms.