Review of Tullio VIOLA, *Peirce and the Uses of History*

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On History as an Object, Subject and Method of Inquiry

- 1 Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) is mostly known today as the founder of American pragmatism, as a logician and as a scientist. Viola's book contributes to these existing threads in Peirce's scholarship while at the same time shaping a new domain of Peirce's studies: Peirce as historian, philologist, and philosopher of science. Indeed, it is impossible to understand Peirce's philosophy of science without engaging with history; and this is true not just in the sense that our present inquiry into Peirce's philosophy of science needs to be contextualised, but also in the sense that Peirce uses history to define what science is and to speculate on what it may become.
- 2 Peirce's philosophy is notoriously complex and replete with tensions between different meanings of the same concept. The notion of "history" is no exception, which justifies the plural form of the title *Peirce and the Uses of History*. Viola is careful to distinguish between Peirce's "uses" without having to always reconcile opposite stances. Such reconciliation, if at all possible, happens case-by-case, through a careful and synoptic reading of Peirce's corpus, rather than through abstract philosophical argumentation. Nonetheless, there is one underlying philosophical point that is crucial in unifying

many of Peirce's uses of history: namely, the idea that historical knowledge and scientific knowledge are comparable and that they share an inferential structure.

- 3 Peirce focused in particular on the history of science, where he saw “analogies between the process of inference, as investigated by the logician, and the history of science, as investigated by the historian” (Viola 2020: 183). His most important contributions here are his projected edition of Petrus Peregrinus de Maricourt's 1269 *Epistula de Magnete* [Letter on the magnet] (1893) and his 1901 “On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Testimonies” (HP: 705-800). According to Viola, Peirce's work “shows us quite unambiguously that Peirce's primary concern was to articulate a conception of history as relying on the *same inferential machinery* and on the *same realistic presuppositions* as all other empirical sciences” (Viola 2020: 193; emphasis added). However, if this is the case – if history and the other empirical sciences equally rest on inferences and on realism – what is the difference between history and any of the many sciences that Peirce practiced in his life? Is historical knowledge simply reduced to a particular branch of science?
- 4 The connection between history of science, logic of science, and inferentialism can best be appreciated in the broader context of Peirce's philosophy. From this perspective, history is not just a by-product of the scientific method, rather it emerges from Peirce's “processual ontology that is shared by signs, habits, and laws of nature” (Viola 2020: 71). Both history and the scientific method are the product of a process in time; both are historical. A first consequence of his processual ontology is that, since the 1869 “Cognition” essays, Peirce saw “the distinction between memory of the past and consciousness of the present [...] [as] only a matter of degree” (*ibid.*: 76). This means that present knowledge is not conceived as different in kind from past knowledge, rather it is the same kind of knowledge seen – as it were – from a distance. Indeed, for Peirce the past “resists” us and forces itself upon us in the same way in which the objects presently occupying my field of vision do; in Peircean terms, both the past and the present exhibit significant aspects of “Secondness,” the category of the “outward clash” between I and not-I. As Viola puts it, the past “represents what is most actual because it is unchangeable” (*ibid.*: 98).
- 5 A second consequence of processual ontology is the notion of consciousness as a stream, which would later be made famous by William James (1842-1910). According to this notion, consciousness (or thought) is a process in which “all that we can distinctly trace is the flow; and we cannot put our finger on the points at which the new matter emerges” (Peirce 1872, W3: 34; quoted in Viola 2020: 75). In the notion of thought as a stream, which characterizes also Peirce's later philosophy, Viola believes that it is possible to reconcile an attention for the past and its influences on the future with the tension towards the future that characterizes pragmatism. This is, for Viola, “the kernel of [...] the historicity of Peirce's philosophy” (Viola 2020: 81).
- 6 Processual ontology however also brings some difficulties to our understanding of history. For one, the meanings of “historical” and “processual” seem to overlap; Viola does not discuss by which steps (if at all) we go from individual memory to historical memory, or in which sense individual memory, both as private recollection and as habits of action, comes to count as history. This is because, within the broader context of Peirce's philosophy, neither the formation of memory nor the creation of habits can be accomplished in utter isolation. History is an essential part of science in so far as science is the product of a community at work, not only across spaces but also across

ages. Science is, Peirce states, “essentially a mode of life that seeks cooperation” (CP 7.55; Viola 2020: 140), and in which past failures are the backbone of any present scientific “success.” The divide between private and public history is less sharp in Peirce’s philosophy than a modern reader would expect; in fact, it is the private dimension which comes after the communal one, emerging, as in the case of Michelangelo’s sculptures, by subtraction. However, if the border between human history (be it a history of ideas or of practices) and natural history is blurred, it is important for Peirce to be always able to distinguish between the logical structure of a process and the process as it happens in time. In this sense, Peirce’s violent reaction to John Dewey’s presentation of logic as a “natural history of thought” (in *Studies in Logical Theory*, 1903) manifests both the need to maintain a normative aspect in logic and a fully historical (rather than purely classificatory) perspective on its practical development (Viola 2020: 129). Along these lines, “unduly absolutizing a contingent, empirical fact” is deeply anti-historical, and can be understood as a “variation of the psychologistic fallacy” (*ibid.*: 122) which tries to explain logic from contingent and empirical facts of human perception.

- 7 One could ask what Peirce had in mind when he talked about historical knowledge, and how his peculiar notion of what is historical contributes to his philosophy of science. As Viola illustrates, “historical knowledge” could simply mean knowledge of things past, as when we ask whether Napoleon really existed (Peirce’s example); it could mean knowledge which has formed over time, and in this case also sense perception would be, in some respects, “historical”; and it could mean knowledge *from* things of the past, such as documents and monuments. Peirce is a realist about history, and Viola nicely points out to a neglected work of Richard Whately (*Historic Doubts Relative to Napoleone Bonaparte*, 1819) as the very proximate source of Peirce’s example of Napoleon (Viola 2020: 204; Fisch 1986: 349). We already saw the overlapping between “processual” and “historical” in Peirce’s metaphysics; what remains to be broached is how Peirce went about in extracting knowledge from things past.
- 8 As mentioned before, Peirce believed that historical knowledge was a kind of empirical knowledge, sharing with the latter its inferential structure. In his 1901 “On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Testimonies” (mentioned above), Peirce set out to elaborate on how historical knowledge is produced. The “facts” of history are its “ancient testimonies”: these could for Peirce (and for much of the nineteenth century debate) be divided in “documents” and “monuments.” At firsts, what Peirce seems to be doing is to pit texts and archaeological findings against each other; however, what he really is trying to do – at least most of the time – is to contrast historical findings (the “monuments”) with their interpretations (the “documents”). As Viola reports, Peirce believed that all testimonies, including written testimonies, were “an important species of monuments” (Peirce 1910, HP: 997; quoted in Viola 2020: 206).
- 9 A consequence of this close relationship between the structure of scientific and historical inquiry is that the criteria for historical explanation overlap with those for scientific explanation: “a valid historical explanation is a hypothesis whose consequences can be confirmed independently by evidence” (Viola 2020: 205). This notion of historical method brings Peirce to engage first-hand and in-depth with selected evidence from the past (mostly texts, in his case) as well as to launch himself in broad narratives and extremely speculative hypotheses, which he was confident his method would ultimately be able to test. Ultimately, Peirce’s aim was to build a

philosophy of science which is mindful of history, in the same spirit in which scientific research is for Peirce a genuinely cooperative enterprise across time and spaces.

- 10 Unfortunately, there is at times some distance between Peirce's theory of the uses of history and his actual engagement with it, and Viola does not try to hide it. Moreover, even some of Peirce's most promising concepts, like the idea of a community of inquirers, have to be approached critically: Peirce's community may transcend epochs, but does not transcend gender, race, nor class; further, it does not care about the cleavage between "men of science" and lay men. Another issue is the fact that Peirce's equation of history with process and (at times) evolution leads to a very optimistic and progressive history of science; as Walter B. Gallie (1956) and Viola (2019) recognised, we may need to accept the existence of "essentially contested concepts" (Viola 2020: 147-8), which would make the development of knowledge something different from a purely cumulative process. Lastly, Peirce's broad and speculative use of history leaves his readers – old and new – perplexed. Viola's rich and insightful text does not aim to be the final word on the topic; rather, it is to be read as an invitation to further research. Indeed, one is left with the feeling that many more chapters could be written by pursuing the different paths of Peirce's engagement with history.
- 11 In conclusion, this book will be useful not only for Peirce scholars, but also for scholars working on the philosophy of history or on the integration of historical and philosophical methods. I am thinking in particular of two twentieth-century schools: the French "épistémologie historique" [historical epistemology] and the Anglo-Saxon integrated history and philosophy of science (IHPS). The Peircean perspectives described by Viola are not, and should not be taken as, straight-forward solutions to contemporary problems; rather, they are suggestive insights that further point to the historical nature of every methodological discussion. As Viola points out, for Peirce "history is not a mere wonder book: it is a necessary implement in every scientist's toolkit" (Viola 2020: 49).

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