Peirce and the Spontaneous Conjectures of Instinctive Reason: A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God

by Bernardo J. Cantens

Abstract: In this paper, I will analyze Charles S. Peirce’s "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God." I want to argue for two conclusions: 1) that Peirce's conception of spontaneous conjectures of instinctive reason allows for a rationally justified belief in the reality of God; and 2) that this belief is not the result of a sound argument or even a complete argument and thus is not a secure belief. This paper is divided into three parts. First, I will explain some Peircean philosophical notions that are essential background information for a genuine understanding of the neglected argument. Second, I will present a sketch of Peirce's three stages of inquiry and explain each stage's relevance to the neglected argument. Finally, I will analyze Peirce's first stage of inquiry, also known as the "ramble argument" for the reality of God, and show how this incomplete argument can provide a rationally justified belief in the reality of God.

Confidence in reason's ability to demonstrate the existence of God has varied throughout the history of philosophy. Two extreme views permeate this history, one overly optimistic and the other excessively pessimistic. Examples of optimistic attitudes can be found in the scholastic arguments for the existence of God, specifically, St. Anselm's ontological argument and St. Thomas Aquinas's five ways. Descartes too, exhibits an inordinate confidence in the demonstrative power of his proofs for the existence of God. On the other hand, confidence in reason's ability to demonstrate the existence of God reached a low point in Kant's philosophy. In this paper, I will analyze an argument for the reality of God that differs from traditional arguments inasmuch as the confidence exhibited in its conclusion is neither too optimistic nor too pessimistic but just right. The argument I have in mind is Charles S. Peirce's "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (henceforth NA). I want to argue for two conclusions: first, that Peirce's conception of spontaneous conjectures of instinctive reason support a rationally justified belief in the reality of God; and second, that this belief is not
the result of a deductive or inductive argument or even a complete inquiry and thus is not a secure belief. 2

This paper is divided into three parts. First, I will explain some Peircean philosophical notions that are essential for a genuine understanding of the NA. Second, I will present a sketch of Peirce's three stages of inquiry and explain each stage's relevance to the NA. Finally, I will analyze Peirce's first stage of inquiry, also known as the humble argument for the reality of God (henceforth HA) and show how this incomplete inquiry can provide a rationally justified belief in the reality of God.

1. Pierce's Epistemology and His Breaking Away from Modernity

In this section I want to present a brief sketch of three aspects of Peirce's theory of knowledge that are relevant for an understanding of the NA: 1) his notion of certainty; 2) his notion of objectivity; and 3) his notion of argument. Peirce's views on these three issues develop as a result of his sharp criticism of Cartesianism and the commonly accepted epistemological maxims of modernity. Peirce says: "In some, or all of these respects, most modern philosophers have been, in effect, Cartesians. Now without wishing to return to scholasticism, it seems to me that modern science and modern logic require us to stand upon a very different platform from this." 3 Part of the new platform that Peirce is alluding to involves a rethinking and a renewing of the notions of certainty, objectivity, and argument.

1.1 Certainty

There are at least two ways to approach Peirce's view of the notion of certainty. One way is through his phenomenological understanding of belief and doubt; another through his notion of fallibility.

The central tenet of Peirce's pragmatism lies in the interconnection between doubt, thought, belief, and action. In analyzing how Peirce envisioned these relationships, two major distinctions between belief and doubt are clarified: 1) their phenomenological difference; and 2) their practical difference. The phenomenological difference refers to the distinct mental sensations caused by the different states of mind corresponding to believing and doubting. Peirce says, "We generally know when we wish to ask a question and when we wish to pronounce a judgment, for there is a dissimilarity between the sensation of doubting and that of believing." 4 The practical difference refers to doubt's and belief's connections to actions. Peirce says, "Most frequently doubts arise from some indecision, however momentary, in our action." 5 With respect to belief he says, "[i]t involves the establishment in our nature of a rule of action, or, say for short, a habit." 6

In this paper I am interested in analyzing the phenomenological facet of belief and doubt. Peirce viewed doubt as a state of irritation. According to Peirce, doubt is a state in which a former belief is disrupted. He dismissed Descartes's idea of methodological doubt, that by simply putting a statement in the interrogative form one can create doubt. Instead, Peirce thought that doubt is a state of mind that is uncomfortable and involuntary. 7 Thought or inquiry is motivated by doubt, insofar as it arises to satisfy the irritable and uncomfortable state of doubt. As a consequence, thinking, according to Peirce, has one, and only one, function: the production of belief. Peirce says, "We have here found that the action of thought is excited by the irritation of doubt, and ceases when belief is attained: so that the production of belief is the sole function of thought." 8 Belief, on the other hand, is a state of mind that is satisfying.

If certainty can be described as the sensation of knowing our beliefs to be true, then what is the phenomenological difference between being certain and believing? Is there a sensation over and above that of belief that refers to an assurance of the truth of the belief? Peirce raises this possibility:

We may fancy that this [belief] is not enough for us, and that we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion. But put this fancy to the test, and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief is true or false. And it is clear that nothing else than the truth can be our object, for nothing which does not affect the mind can be the motive for mental effort. The most that can be maintained is, that we seek for a belief that we shall think to be true. But we think all our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so. 9

According to Peirce, therefore, there is no qualitatively distinct sensation corresponding to certainty (i.e., true opinion) other than the sensation of firm belief. Peirce argues that this misunderstanding stems from a misconception of proof that can be traced to the Cartesian Meditations. Descartes conceived of a demonstration as a proof that rests on indubitable premises or premises that are impossible to doubt. Contrary to this, Peirce argues that a demonstration only requires a proof with premises that are not doubted in actuality. Peirce says:

It is a very common idea that a demonstration must rest on some ultimate and absolutely indubitable propositions. These, according to one school, are first principles of a general nature; according to another, are first sensations. But, in point of fact, an inquiry, to have that completely satisfactory result called demonstration, has only to start with propositions perfectly free from all actual doubt. If the premises are not in fact doubted at all, they cannot be more satisfactory than they are. 10

In conclusion, according to Peirce, to ask whether one is certain about what one believes free of doubt is simply redundant.
A second way of coming to understand Peirce's view of certainty is through his doctrine of fallibilism.19 Fallibilism is the view that even though a proposition may seem certain at a given moment in time, it may still be false. Our supposed knowledge, therefore, is liable to error, and thus the idea of certainty must be approached with prudence. Fallibilism is embedded in a metaphysical view of human finitude and limitation. At the age of twenty-four, Peirce says in an address to his old high school: "Human learning must fail somewhere."14 Another example of this view is expressed in the following statement: "we are, doubtless, in the main logical animals, but we are not perfectly so."15

According to Peirce, fallibilism is an essential element of the method of science and thus must be understood along side of Peirce's conception of the scientific method. Peirce believed that science requires neither truth nor method but only an attitude or "spirit." Science is the spirit that tirelessly seeks truth and is relentless in that search. He says:

That which constitutes science, then, is not so much correct conclusions, as it is a correct method. But the method of science is itself a scientific result. It did not spring out of the brain of a beginner: it was a historic attainment and a scientific achievement. So that not even this method ought to be regarded as essential to the beginning of science. That which is essential, however, is the scientific spirit, which is determined not to rest satisfied with existing opinions, but to press on to the real truth of nature.16

Adopting the fallibilistic attitude facilitates and nurtures the scientific spirit, since it calls for taking scientific conclusions as provisional. Even though fallibilism acknowledges certain limitations in our ability to know, Peirce was not a pessimist concerning human intellectual capacity; on the contrary, he was very much an optimist. He believed, given sufficient time, human knowledge would unlock many of the so-called mysteries of life, such as the question of immortality. The main point I want to emphasize in this paper is that Peirce's fallibilism is an essential part of his conception of the scientific spirit and keeps our conception of certainty in check.

1.2 Objectivity

It is important not to misrepresent Peirce's view as a relativism of some sort. Instead, Peirce viewed epistemology as the process of arriving at beliefs that are true. Moreover, Peirce's embracing of scholastic realism leaves no room for doubt on these matters.17 Nevertheless, Peirce's epistemological realism varies significantly from that of modern philosophy. More specifically, his major point of disagreement consisted in his rejection of some neutral, absolutely objective, epistemological starting point. Pierce thought we must begin the knowledge process from what we already know (or what we think we know), including all kinds of beliefs we already have, and thus possibly many false beliefs and biases. Peirce says: "The object of reasoning is to find out from the consideration of what we already know, something else which we do not know."18 In response to Descartes, he says: "We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned."19 Peirce drives home this idea by saying:

Philosophers of very diverse stripes propose that philosophy shall take its start from one or another state of mind in which no man, least of all a beginner in philosophy, actually is. One proposes that you shall begin by doubting everything, and says that there is only one thing that you cannot doubt, as if doubting were "as easy as lying." Another proposes that we should begin by observing "the first impression of sense," forgetting that our very precepts are the results of cognitive elaboration. But in truth, there is but one state of mind from which you can "set out," namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do "set out," a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divert yourself if you would; and who knows whether, if you could, you would not have made all knowledge impossible to yourself.20

Peirce believed that the scientific method was self-correcting and thus that no matter how many false beliefs one begins with, if one applies the scientific method correctly one will eventually shed the false beliefs and reinforce the true ones. This aspect of Peirce's understanding of knowledge gathering is important for advancing the view that one should not remain at the first stage of inquiry or at the stage of the HA.

1.3 Argument

Finally, Peirce rejects Descartes's narrow conception of reasoning as deductive argumentation. Peirce says of philosophical and scientific reasoning: "Its reasoning should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected."21 Peirce distinguishes between arguments and argumentation. An argument is wide and includes "any process of thought reasonably tending to produce a definite belief,"22 Argumentation, on the other hand, "is an argument proceeding upon definitely formulated premises."23 This distinction is important because the conclusion of the HA, namely, that God is real is a result of argument and not argumentation. Retroduction or abduction is a form of argument and not argumentation. Moreover, as I shall argue below, Peirce attributes a kind of validity to
2. Three Stages of Inquiry

According to Peirce, a thorough and complete scientific inquiry has three parts: 1) the positon of a hypothesis (reduction); 2) the explication of the hypothesis and of its deductive consequences (deduction); and 3) the comparison of the consequences of the hypothesis with experience (induction) and the determination of the hypothesis's truth. I will present a succinct description of each of these stages. This will provide the context of Peirce's HA.

Every inquiry, Peirce believes, arises from some object of surprise or wonder, an experience not expected. The circumstances will lead to possible explanations and subsequently to the choosing of the most plausible one. This first stage of inquiry and the establishment of the hypothesis, according to Peirce, is a form of argument and not argumentation. It is characterized by reasoning from the consequent to the antecedent. Peirce's description captures the essence of this first stage. He says:

The whole series of mental performances between the notice of the wonderful phenomenon and the acceptance of the hypothesis, during which the usually docile understanding seems to hold the bit between its teeth and to have us at its mercy, the search for pertinent circumstances and the laying hold of them, sometimes without our cognizance, the security of them, the dark laboring, the bursting out of the startling conjecture, the remarking of its smooth fitting to the anomaly, as it is turned back and forth like a key in a lock, and the final estimation of its plausibility, I reckon as composing the First Stage of the Inquiry.24

According to Peirce, all three stages must be considered together and as parts of one inquiry. While it may be tempting to end one's inquiry at the end of the first stage, and in fact many people do, Peirce emphasizes that doing so undermines the search for truth. Peirce says: "Reduction does not afford security. The hypothesis must be tested."25 How do these three stages of inquiry relate to Peirce's HA?

Peirce argues that there is "a nest of three arguments for the Reality of God." The first is the HA. Peirce intends the HA to be simply the termination of the first stage of inquiry, and thus it represents an argument for the hypothesis of the reality of God.26 The second argument is a defense of the HA. This second argument is the NA. There is still a third and final argument, namely, the testing of the hypothesis of the reality of God, which "constists in a study of the logical methodic."27 We now have a better understanding of how to interpret Peirce's HA. For one thing, it is evident that the HA does not represent a complete argument since it does not come at the end of the three stages of inquiry. But if the HA does not afford a secure belief in the reality of God, how can it offer a rationally justified belief in the reality of God?

3. Peirce's HA and His Conception of Spontaneous Conjectures of Instinctive Reason

We need to take a closer look at the first stage of inquiry, which makes up the HA. In doing so, I want to focus on two concerns: 1) the human faculty at work at this stage of the argument and its contribution to the knowledge process; and 2) the validity attributable to the conclusion derived from this stage of the inquiry.

3.1 The Humble Argument for the Reality of God

To understand Peirce's HA, we have to take into account a major presupposition that Peirce considers. Peirce says:

If God Really be, and be benign, then, in view of the generally conceded truth that religion, were it but proved, would be a good outweighing all others, we should naturally expect that there would be some Argument for His Reality that should be obvious to all minds, high and low alike, that should earnestly try to find the truth of the matter, and further, that this argument should present its conclusion, not as a proposition of metaphysical theology, but in a form directly applicable to the conduct of life, and full of nutrition for man's highest growth.28

Peirce argues, therefore, that if there is a God, then our belief in God is to be expected from some natural and simple reflection.

Peirce describes an activity of mind that he calls "Pure Play." One is in pure play when one's thoughts are not devoted to any serious matter or purpose. Peirce says: "it involves no purpose save that of casting aside all serious purpose."29 It may occur, he suggests, when one takes a stroll. The essential part of pure play is freedom; "it has no rules, except this very law of liberty. It bloweth where it listeth."30 Peirce claims that this pure play will exert a great amount of mental activity that may take four distinct forms: 1) aesthetic contemplation; 2) distant castle building; 3) consideration of some wonder of the universe; or 4) some combination of two of the three, with speculation concerning its cause. Peirce argues that it is the latter (4) that he calls "Musement" because, he argues, with sufficient time it will flower into the NA. It is important to notice and emphasize that Peirce envisions Musement as having no preconceived religious intentions. If one begins pure play with the hope of being convinced of the reality of
God, then it is no longer pure play. Instead Peirce argues: "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 cadence proper to Musement." Peirce concludes:

[1] In the Pure Play of Musement the idea of God’s Reality will be sure 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.

This is Peirce’s HA and it is the first stage of inquiry. Thus it is the process that is responsible for deriving the hypothesis of the reality of God. Peirce argues that the hypothesis of God is posited by the spontaneous conjectures of instinctive reason. The faculty that Peirce refers to as instinctive reason should not be underemphasized, since it is the faculty responsible for introducing all new forms of knowledge. It is the recruiter, the source from where thought and science derive their theories and discoveries. Peirce says: "Observe that neither Deduction nor Induction contributes the smallest positive item to the final conclusion of the inquiry. . . . Yet every plank of its [science’s] advance is first laid by Retroduction alone, that is to say, by the spontaneous conjectures of instinctive reason and neither Deduction nor Induction contributes a single new concept to the structure."

But is it not paradoxical to view this faculty belonging to instinct as rational? Is not "instinctive reason" an oxymoron? In fact, according to Peirce, it is precisely because this faculty is purely instinctive that he believes we should include it within our conception of the rational. Even though, as Peirce realizes, there is no other option since it is the sole provider of hypotheses. Peirce says:

Yes; it must be confessed that if we knew that the impulse to prefer one hypothesis to another really were analogous to the instincts of birds and wasps [flying], it would be foolish not to give it play, within the bounds of reason; especially since we must entertain some hypothesis, or else forego all further knowledge than that which we have already gained by that very means.

I have argued that, according to Peirce, Retroduction is an argument that deserves to be taken seriously, and, moreover, that for science and epistemology it is indispensable. In addition, I have argued that, according to Peirce, the reality of God is a conclusion of Retroduction when one begins in Musement. Nevertheless, I have also argued that the conclusions of Retroduction are not necessarily true nor are they the product of a complete process of inquiry. Therefore, how are we to evaluate the validity of belief in the reality of God?

3.2 Confidence Attributable to the Spontaneous Conjectures of Instinctive Reason

Since the argument for the reality of God is simply the positing of a hypothesis of God, a question arises as to the justification of the conclusion. The validity of a hypothesis will dictate the confidence that Peirce believes one can have in the truth of the hypothesis. What kind of validity can be attributed to the hypothesis of the reality of God? Or, as Peirce puts it: "What sort of validity can be attributed to the First Stage of inquiry?"

There is no reason to deviate from a standard definition of justification as having evidence for the truth of a proposition. So a person, p, is justified in belief b if and only if p has evidence for the truth of b. Moreover, a proposition, x, is a source of justification for the truth of another proposition y if and only if the truth of x increases the probability of the truth of y. If this is so, then how can the simple positing of a hypothesis be justification for the truth of the hypothesis?

Peirce argues, following Galileo, that progress in science has shown that the simplicity of the hypothesis is a positive evidential property, inasmuch as the simpler the hypothesis the more likely it is to be true. This observation resembles Ockham’s razor and does not seem too novel. Indeed, if the meaning of the principle of simplicity were interpreted as being Ockham’s razor, it may be argued that simplicity would have a negative evidential affect on the hypothesis of a creator God, since it is not the logically simplest hypothesis.

Peirce, however, argues for a very different interpretation of the principle of simplicity. He argues, instead, that simplicity should be understood as that which seems to us to be most congenial and agreeable. Peirce argues that human nature is in tune with the natural world and this harmony explains why humans have been able to unlock the hidden secrets of nature. Peirce says:

Modern science has been built after the model of Galileo, who founded it, on il lume naturale. That truly inspired prophet has said that, of two hypotheses, the simpler is the preferred; but I was formerly one of those who, in our dull self-conceit fancying ourselves more sly than he, twisted the maxim to mean the logically simpler, the one that adds the least to what has been observed; . . . It was not until long experience forced me to realize that subsequent discoveries were every time showing I had been wrong, while those who understood the maxim as Galileo had done, early unlocked the secret, that the scales fell from my eyes and my mind awoke to the broad and flaming daylight that it is the simpler Hypothesis in the sense of the more facile and natural, the one that instinct suggests, that must be preferred; for the reason that, unless man have a natural bent in
accordance with nature, he has no chance of understanding nature at all.\textsuperscript{36}

Peirce goes one to say: "I don't mean that logical simplicity is a consideration of no value at all, but only that its value is badly secondary to that of simplicity in the other sense."\textsuperscript{37} We can describe how Peirce's theory of simplicity serves as evidence or justification as follows: The fact that a subject is inclined to believe a hypothesis to be true is itself a reason for the subject to believe that it is true. Moreover, the greater the strength with which one believes the hypothesis to be true the greater the justification that it is true. Peirce believed that there was a spectrum of plausibility one could have towards an initial hypothesis. Thus one's initial response to a hypothesis may range from "a mere expression of it in the interrogative mood, as a question meriting attention and reply, up through all appraisals of Plausibility, to uncontrollable inclination to believe."\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, if from the HA that the plausibility of the reality of God arises with a high degree of strength, and belief is uncontrollable, it follows that the strong inclination towards one's believing the hypothesis serves as justification for the truth of the belief.\textsuperscript{39}

When describing the difference between the stage of retrodiction in the HA and other scientific inquiries, Peirce says:

In the first place the Plausibility of the hypothesis reaches an almost unparalleled height among deliberately formed hypotheses. So hard it is to doubt God's Reality, when the Idea has sprung from Musements, that there is great danger that the investigation will stop at this first stage, owing to the indifference of the Muser to any further proof of it. At the same time, this very Plausibility is undoubtedly an argument of no small weight in favor of the truth of the hypothesis.\textsuperscript{40}

Why shouldn't we stop at this first stage? If Peirce seems to agree that one is justified in believing in the reality of God, why does he insist that this belief is not secure? What is the difference between a secure belief and a justified belief?

It will be difficult to understand Peirce's thought concerning the difference between a secure belief and a justified belief if one remains within the framework of the modern epistemological maxim that the strength of one's belief is, and should be, proportional to the evidence available. As Hume put it: "A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence."\textsuperscript{41} We need to consider once again Peirce's understanding of certainty. If you recall, for Peirce, if person $P$ firmly believes $x$, then to ask if $P$ is certain of $x$, is redundant. On the other hand, it is quite possible that $P$ firmly believes $x$ at $T_1$, be rationally justified in doing so, and yet at $T_2$ have more evidence for the truth of $x$ without an increase in the strength with which $P$ believes $x$. Nevertheless, it would be correct to say that $x$ is more secure belief at $T_2$ than at $T_1$ because of the new evidence discovered. So, for Peirce more evidence for the truth of a belief may increase the belief's security but not the strength of one's belief. On the other hand, Peirce realized that although one's belief may be firm and rationally justified, this is not sufficient for its being a secure belief (i.e., for it not being a true belief) and thus the search for truth is not satisfied and must continue.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that, according to Peirce, one can have a rationally justified belief in the reality of God in the absence of any of the traditional deductive and inductive arguments for the existence of God. In effect, the HA is a defense of the HA, which is the argument the ordinary person (those not trained in the sciences or philosophy) has for the reality of God. I have argued that it is consistent to view such a belief in the reality of God as being a rationally justified unsecure belief. The security of the belief in the reality of God can only come about by the further logical development of the last two stages of inquiry.

Barry University

Notes

I would like to thank Professor James Swindal, Professor Susan Haack, Professor Ramon Lemos, and Professor Cornelis De Waal for their critical comments. I would also like to thank Professor Nicholas Rescher for his helpful suggestions.


3. CP [5.265].

4. I use Peirce's word "Pragmaticism" to emphasize the notions of pragmatism that I am relying on in this paper are strictly Peircean. Peirce says, "So then, the writer, finding his bandaging 'pragmatism' as promoted, feels that it is time to kiss his child goodbye and relinquish it to its higher destiny; while to serve the precise purpose of expressing the original definition, he begs to announce the birth of the word 'pragmatism,' which is ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers," CP [5.414].


6. CP [5.370].
7. CP [5.394].
8. CP [5.397].

9. Peirce says, concerning fake doubts: Some philosophers have imagined that to state an inquiry it was only necessary to utter a question whether really or by setting it down on paper, and have even recommended us to begin our studies by questioning everything! [Referencing Descartes] But the mere putting of a proposition into the interrogative form does not stimulate the mind to any struggle after belief. There must be a real and living doubt, and without this all discussion is idle CP [5.376].

10. CP [5.394].
11. CP [5.379].
12. CP [5.376].
15. CP [5.366].
18. CP [5.365].
19. CP [5.265].
20. CP [5.416].
21. CP [5.265].
22. CP [5.456].
23. CP [5.456].
24. CP [5.469].
25. CP [5.470].
27. CP [6.488].
28. CP [6.457].
29. CP [6.458].
30. CP [6.458].
31. CP [6.458].
32. CP [6.465].
33. CP [6.475].
34. CP [6.476].
35. CP [6.475].
36. CP [6.477].
37. CP [6.477].
38. CP [6.469].
39. Peirce's view on the strength of abductive reasoning is intimately connected with his metaphysical doctrine of synecchism, which is a synthesis of Tychism and Pragmatism. Peirce says: "We have here a point at which novel considerations about the constitution of knowledge and therefore of the creation of nature burst in upon the mind with cataclysmal multitude and resistlessness. It is that synthesis of tychism and of pragmatism for which I long ago proposed the name, Synecchism..." [4.584]; Elsewhere Peirce says: "The tendency to regard continuity, in the sense in which I shall define it, as an idea of prime importance in philosophy may conveniently be termed synecchism" [6.103].
40. CP [6.488].