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## Peirce's precision as a transcendental method

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# ***Peirce's 'Prescision' as a Transcendental Method***

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## **Abstract**

In this Paper I interpret Charles S. Peirce's method of prescision as a transcendental method. In order to do so, I argue that Peirce's pragmatism can be interpreted in a transcendental light only if we use a non-justificatory understanding of transcendental philosophy. I show how Peirce's prescision is similar to some abstracting procedure that Immanuel Kant used in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Prescision abstracts from experience and thought in general those elements without which such experience and thought would be unaccountable. Similarly, in the Aesthetics, Kant isolated the a priori forms of intuition by showing how they could be abstracted from experience in general, while experience in general cannot be thought without them. However, if Peirce's and Kant's methods are similar in this respect, they reached very different conclusions.

Keywords: Charles S. Peirce, Immanuel Kant, Transcendental Philosophy, Transcendental Arguments, Pragmatism.

## **1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Even if Peirce has often been read against the background of his Kantian legacy, it was Karl Otto Apel who first developed a systematic transcendental interpretation, which considered Peirce's philosophy as both a development and an enhancement of the Kantian project<sup>2</sup>. Since Apel's book was published there has been some debate about the legitimacy of his reading of Peirce. Nowadays, the anti-transcendental interpretation

of Peirce is certainly predominant<sup>3</sup>, even though there have been continuing attempts to develop a renewed transcendental consideration of Peirce's thought<sup>4</sup>.

In this study, I aim to contribute to this discussion. I do not wish to argue for Apel's interpretation, but rather to provide a renewed transcendental consideration of Peirce, offering an account of transcendental philosophy which is explanatory rather than justificatory. First, I will briefly introduce two very different pictures of the transcendental method through two distinct interpretations of Kant. I will call these two interpretations the 'justificatory account' and the 'alternative account' of Kant. I will suggest that it is this latter, 'alternative', account which is closer to Kant's real aim in his critical project.

After this brief clarification, I will show how Peirce's method of prescision can be read in the light of what I have called the alternative account of Kant. Of course, in no way do I want to obscure the novelties which Peirce's pragmatism brought into philosophical discussion. Undoubtedly, Peirce's philosophy is in many respects incompatible with the Kantian project. However, prescision shows important similarities with Kant's procedure of analysis. This means that we can interpret Peirce's philosophy as developing a transcendental method from a quite new perspective. Peirce's method does not need to be justificatory to be interpreted in this way. Finally, I will examine the way in which Peirce's project goes beyond many of the difficulties that we find in Kant's transcendental philosophy.

## 2. Two Ways of Interpreting Kant

‘Transcendental’ is often employed in an unclear manner in the literature, and some of the senses in which the word is understood certainly cannot be attributed to Peirce. I will try to shed light on the way in which I use the word by introducing two possible ways of interpreting Kant<sup>5</sup>.

I will call the first kind of interpretation the justificatory account of Kant. According to this interpretation, Kant was a philosopher who attempted to secure our knowledge against the attacks of any potential skeptics. Thus, Kant’s project would have tried to answer the problems which Descartes introduced to philosophy, and which culminated in Hume’s skepticism. Accordingly, Kant’s aim would have been to vindicate the objectivity of our knowledge. His ‘Copernican revolution’ would have consisted in his claim that objectivity is warranted as far as outer objects are literally products of our minds. Three features characterize this reading. It holds that Kant:

- a) develops a justificatory philosophy which tries to answer the skeptic,
- b) endorses a mentalistic standpoint in which the connection of mental ideas to the outer world needs to be vindicated,
- c) provides a strongly deductive strategy based on indubitable first premises.

Peter Strawson’s interpretation of Kant is a good example of such a reading<sup>6</sup>. Both the analytic argument that Strawson tries to disentangle from the rest of the *Critique* and the faulty metaphysics that he attributed to Kant share these characteristics. It is, however, Kant himself who allows himself to be interpreted like this. For example,

when Kant stresses that Hume awakened him from his dogmatic slumber<sup>7</sup>, he suggests that one of his main purposes was to answer the Scottish philosopher's skepticism on causation. Obviously, an account of transcendental philosophy constructed like this cannot be attributed to Peirce. It would run against Peirce's anti-foundationalism and his fallibilism<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, this is the very account of the transcendental method against which Peirce's own criticisms are directed<sup>9</sup>.

However, Kant also provides the means for interpreting his transcendental philosophy in quite a different manner. My purpose here is not to ascertain definitively which interpretation is better, but to find a way to account for transcendental philosophy which would be compatible with Peirce's philosophy. It is for this reason that my attention now turns to this alternative way of reading Kant. Examples of this interpretation are offered by Henry E. Allison, Graham Bird and Arthur Collins<sup>10</sup>. I will call this second interpretation the alternative account of Kant. According to this alternative account, Kant's first aim was not that of securing human knowledge against the doubts that Descartes and the empiricists set against it<sup>11</sup>. On the contrary, Kant understood questioning the validity of our mathematical and empirical knowledge to be futile, since in these fields inquirers were not facing any problem at all. It was metaphysics that needed a philosophical justification, insofar as it had no instrument to settle its everlasting debates (KrV, B vii-xv). In this respect, Kant's philosophy has an important pragmatic character. Kant, just like Charles Peirce, thought that doubting our knowledge, and thus making a request for justification, was meaningless, unless there was a *reason* to do so (KrV, A 710-1 B 738-9). The only kind of knowledge that Kant questioned was speculative knowledge not grounded in any way on experience.

Moreover, Kant's claim that inner and outer representations have equal validity seems to leave behind exactly that mentalistic framework which required an anti-skeptical justification (KrV, A 38 B 55, A 371). It is true that Kant stressed that both inner and outer objects were representations, but we have to interpret that claim as emphasizing that all objects we can represent possess some features that depend on their being in relation to us. This is not the same as saying that all objects are inside our minds.

Following this alternative interpretation, Kant did not even need to provide a strongly deductive argument based on indubitable first premises. On the contrary, Kant actually began his inquiry taking the fact of human knowledge and experience for granted, as they were described both in ordinary practices and the sciences. His aim was that of abstracting from such knowledge and experience the elements without which the former two would be unaccountable. These are the elements that the object possesses only insofar as it is in relation with us. They are features of knowledge and experience that depend on their being representative endeavors. For this reason, transcendental philosophy inquires into our knowledge and experience, and abstracts those elements without which knowledge and experience would be unintelligible as representative activities.

But why would a transcendental project understood in this explanatory way be needed? In Kant's case, his project was a *critical* undertaking, and specifically a critical undertaking directed against the drawbacks of pure philosophy. Accordingly, Kant's first *Critique* is more concerned with ascertaining the validity of the knowledge claimed by dogmatic philosophers than with that claimed by the sciences or common-sense. These latter did not need to be validated in so far as they did not produce any apparently

insoluble controversy. However, before ascertaining the limits of pure philosophy, a task he reserved for the *Dialectic*, Kant had first to scrutinize human knowledge in order to disentangle the a priori structure which functions as a condition of empirical knowledge. It is exactly this step of his transcendental project that can be considered explanatory. In the *Analytic*, he took into consideration empirical and mathematical knowledge, and he disentangled the a priori structure that only a transcendental inquiry could bring to the fore. In fact, Kant considered the main question of his first *Critique to be*: “How are synthetic a priori judgments possible?” (KrV, B 19). That is to say, he never doubted the validity of our mathematical and empirical knowledge. He wanted merely to isolate the a priori source of some elements in that knowledge. If he had wanted to justify knowledge as such, he would have asked *if* synthetic a priori judgments were possible, not *how* they were possible. Only after this explanatory endeavor was completed could Kant criticize the illegitimate use of the categories in metaphysics.

Of course, the kind of explanation that Kant wanted to provide in his first *Critique* is different from the explanations of other sciences such as physics, chemistry, and so forth. What he needs to explain is not a general fact about the world, but our ability to provide explanations in science and everyday life. He thus provides a kind of second-order investigation on the elements that are common in our knowledge. Moreover, Kant did want to inquire into the validity of metaphysical knowledge, and his philosophy resulting from this is indirectly validatory of our mathematical and empirical knowledge. The implications of Kant’s explanations are thus a lot more complex than we might expect, and this can generate misunderstandings. It is important to keep in mind, though, that Kant did not develop his explanations because he considered an

essential task of philosophy that of justifying our knowledge in general. As we have already stressed, Kant considered it superfluous to justify mathematical and empirical knowledge, insofar as they were justified by themselves. On the contrary, he developed his general picture of the characteristics and scope of human knowledge in order to resolve a problem that, for him, was irreparably affecting metaphysics in his times.

This then, according to the alternative view presented here, is why Kant needed such an explanatory step in his system. However, a transcendental philosophy aiming to offer an explanation of this kind is not only useful as a preamble toward a critical stance on metaphysics, it is also an essential means of clarifying the cognitive structures of our knowledge and experience that are not immediately obvious. I think it is this second picture of transcendental philosophy which can be attributed to Peirce. This is what I will attempt to do in the next section.

### **3. Peirce's Transcendental Method**

What I wish to do now is to establish whether Peirce's philosophy has a transcendental character similar to the alternative reading of Kant which I have sketched out above. Of course, in those passages where Peirce directly confronts the issue, he employs his justificatory interpretation of Kant<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, we will need to look at his system in general in order to discover whether some of its elements and procedures of analysis fit our description of the alternative account of Kant and the transcendental method.

Unquestionably, Peirce's pragmatism inaugurated a new approach to philosophy which cannot be reduced or traced back to anybody else in the history of philosophy.



Accordingly, it is not for this purpose that I want to compare Peirce with Kant here. I wish simply to offer a description of transcendental philosophy which can bring new light to some elements of Peirce's thought and methods, without obscuring the novelties of his system and the incompatibilities which separate him from Kant.

Following the alternative account of Kant, the transcendental method has to be considered as an analysis of human experience and knowledge in general in order to abstract the fundamental elements, the conditions, without which such experience and knowledge would not be possible. We saw that in this undertaking, experience in general does not need to be completely neglected in order to preserve the invulnerability and absolute validity of the argument. On the contrary, experience in general is the departing point from which the analysis must start.

It is my view that a procedure of this kind can also be detected in Peirce's philosophy, even if he did not link it directly to Kant or to transcendental enterprises. This procedure is called *prescision* and is used by Peirce to show hierarchical relationships among concepts and ideas. As such, it is able to abstract the more fundamental concepts from the contingent ones. It is the procedure Peirce used to discern his categories already in his early attempts. So, in his 1867 paper 'A New List of Categories', prescision is described like this:

The terms 'prescision' and 'abstraction', which were formerly applied to every kind of separation, are now limited, not merely to mental separation, but to that which arises from attention to one element and neglect of the other. [...] I can prescind red from blue, and space from color [...]; but I cannot prescind color from space, nor red from color. [...] Prescision is

not a reciprocal process. It is frequently the case, that, while A cannot be prescinded from B, B can be prescinded from A (W 2:50-1).

In this manner, precision is able to show hierarchical relationships among concepts. It shows which concept is necessary to think the other, insofar as the former is involved in the latter. For that reason, color can be prescinded from red, but red cannot be prescinded from color. In fact, one cannot think red without thinking it as a kind of color. On the contrary, one can think the concept of color in general without reference to any particular one. It has to be kept in mind that the kind of hierarchical relationships that precision aims to discern are not psychological. Saying that I can prescind color from red is not the same as saying that I cannot have in my mind the idea of red without having also the idea of color. It shows a logical involvement or independence. Accordingly, the concept that is prescindable from the other shows a logical independence which gives it a higher place in the hierarchical order<sup>13</sup>.

However, if precision is adapted for abstracting some concepts from others, thus showing a hierarchical order among them, how could it be useful in a transcendental inquiry? Precision becomes philosophically relevant when it is applied not simply to organizing a set of ordinary concepts, but rather to disentangling the fundamental concepts which account for our experience and thought. In fact, it is for this purpose that Peirce clarified the method of precision. He used it to abstract his three categories and to shed light on the relationships among them. To do this, he applied precision to experience and thought in general, attempting to isolate those elements without which such experience and thought would have been unaccountable. Thus, in reference to experience as a whole, precision can show ‘that the elements

conjoined cannot be supposed without the conception, whereas the conception can generally be supposed without these elements' (W 2:51). That is, in order to discern those elements that are fundamental for explaining our experience, I have to take into consideration experience in general and isolate those elements which can be prescinded from the rest. Thus, if these elements were actually fundamental they could be prescinded from experience, whereas experience could never be prescinded from them<sup>14</sup>.

So, Peirce used precision to isolate his categories from the rest of experience and thought because it was able to detect a conceptual relationship that was not reciprocal. When applied to experience and thought in general this kind of logical analysis can isolate those elements that were necessary to account for such experience and thought. If we come back to Kant, and in particular to his argument for the a priori nature of time, we discover a similar line of reasoning.

In regard to appearances in general one cannot remove time, though one can very well take the appearances away from time (KrV, A 31 B 46)<sup>15</sup>.

Kant is suggesting that if we take into consideration our experience in general, we can consider time regardless of particular phenomena, while experience in general cannot be thought of without time<sup>16</sup>. A similar position is reserved for the unity of apperception. Without the unity of apperception, it would not be possible to think of any unity in experience<sup>17</sup>. Thus, experience in general cannot prescind from that original unity, while we can consider the unity of apperception prescinding from particular experience. With this kind of argumentative procedure, Kant is providing an analysis of

human experience and knowledge in line with what we have called the alternative account<sup>18</sup>. He did not begin by seeking indubitable premises for facing skeptical challenges: no absolutely certain starting point was at issue. The object that Kant had to account for was human knowledge in general, without questioning its validity at any moment. To elucidate this object, Kant undertook an abstracting procedure that was quite similar to Peirce's method of precision. He tried to isolate those elements without which human experience would have been inexplicable, and, to achieve this, he isolated those elements which could be thought of without a reference to particular experience, but without which particular experience could not remain as it is<sup>19</sup>.

Kant's method of abstraction and Peirce's precision thus share strong similarities. Of course it remains the case that Kant's and Peirce's purposes were really different when they tried to disentangle the fundamental categories of thought from the rest of our knowledge. Kant wanted to offer a general picture of human knowledge able to recognize its a priori elements. Moreover, he wanted to lay down the precise limits of a priori reasoning. On the contrary, Peirce, with his categories, wanted to clarify the elements that partake in the ongoing development of human thought and knowledge. Peirce did this to provide tools which can enhance our ability as inquirers. For Peirce philosophy was not an armchair endeavor, but was the task of inquirers who had their own distinct contribution to make to the development of the sciences. As a consequence, Peirce's categories remain vague and are always evolving according to the historical situation in which they are determined.

These differences notwithstanding, Kant's method of abstracting the categories and Peirce's precision share important similarities. If this is true, it means that Peirce's precision, when applied to thought and experience in general, can legitimately be

considered a piece of transcendental inquiry. As Kant did in his first *Critique*, Peirce took into consideration human knowledge and experience in general without any justificatory antiskeptical aim<sup>20</sup>. Peirce praised Kant's doctrine of immediate perception, just in so far as it did not ask for any justification of our concepts of objects<sup>21</sup>. It considered our representations of outer objects not to be inferred from inner sensation, but to be immediately external. Peirce thought that this doctrine was actually in contrast to the ideas Kant pursued in his transcendental project. However, following the alternative account of Kant's philosophy which we have developed, this is not so. To the extent that, without that objective assumption, Kant could not begin his abstractive inquiry on human knowledge, this doctrine was completely in accordance with his transcendental method. Following exactly this account of human experience and knowledge, in which no priority is reserved for inner sensations and ideas<sup>22</sup>, Peirce could undertake his prescise analysis of human thought. Human knowledge and thought, with their claims of objectivity, could be coherently taken as a starting point for Peirce's prescise enterprise.

These were Peirce's objects and methods of study in his 1867 paper 'A New List of Categories'. It could be argued that Peirce later abandoned the viewpoint of this paper and moved toward a totally new line of reasoning<sup>23</sup>. However, even if Peirce certainly did renounce the attempt to explain how we 'reduce the manifold of sensuous impressions to unity' (W 2:49), it is beyond question that precision remained a fundamental method of arguing even after the development of his phenomenology and phaneroscopy. Moreover, in line with his 1867 paper, his phenomenology had to take on the complexity of human thought as it was manifested in human ordinary experience and in the sciences, and try to abstract by precision the fundamental elements necessary

to account for that object of study. In 1905, regarding his phenomenology he stressed that ‘all that we need is to get an idea of what the general structure of the indecomposable elements of thought is’ (MS 284: p. 34<sup>24</sup>), and, in the same paper, he still recognized precision as an essential tool in order to bring forward the separation of those indecomposable elements (MS 284: pp. 72-3, 76-7). By indecomposable elements he meant those features of our thought that could not be reduced to simpler concepts without losing their proper meaning. As such, they are just the kind of fundamental elements that a precise analysis must abstract. Accordingly, probably just one year earlier he claimed:

The work of discovery of the phenomenologist [...] consists in disentangling, or drawing out, from human thought, certain threads that run through it, and in showing what marks each has that distinguish it from every other (NEM 4:196).

In point of fact, the precise analysis that Peirce inaugurated in his 1867 paper ‘A New List of Categories’ plays a central role even in the phenomenology he developed after 1902. In accordance with our account of the transcendental method, Peirce’s phenomenology aimed exactly at isolating those elements which had an essential role in our experience and thought. In addition, there is a further point of continuity with Kant’s abstractive procedure. Both Kant and Peirce, in order to separate and isolate what they thought to be essential elements of thought and knowledge, focused on the form<sup>25</sup>, not on the matter, of representations. Peirce, accordingly, argued:

Matter is that by virtue of which an object gains Existence, a fact known only by an Index, which is connected with the object only by brute force; while Form, being that by which the object is such as it is, is comprehensible. It follows that, assuming that there are any indecomposable constituents of the Phaneron, since each of these, has a definite Valency, [...] this is the only Form, or, at any rate, the only intelligible Form, the Elements of the Phaneron can have, the Classification of elements of the Phaneron must, in the first place, be classified according to Valency (NEM 4:322).

By analyzing thought and experience as they are manifest in human practices, phenomenology, or phaneroscopy, aims to abstract that structure of concepts that is necessary to account for those human practices. In order to do that, it focuses on that formal relational structure without which human thought would not be what it is.

If I am right, then Peirce's method of prescision, when applied to thought and experience in general, can be considered as a kind of transcendental inquiry in line with the alternative picture of the transcendental method. Accordingly, in order for it to be considered in a transcendental manner, it is not required that prescision should doubt the validity of our knowledge until it is founded upon a solid argument, which argument must be based on a self-sustaining proposition. On the contrary, prescision can start its analysis from human knowledge as it is developed either in human everyday practices or in the sciences. With this object to account for, it has to abstract those formal elements which find a peculiar place in thought, that is, those elements that thought itself cannot prescind from. Having found in Peirce a line of thought that is comparable to Kant's transcendental project (if the latter is understood following the alternative account), we have now to analyze the peculiar way in which he developed those ideas.

In fact, the purposes that guided the development of Peirce's pragmatism are really different from those of Kant. This resulted in a renewed set of problems and solutions. Thus, if we can consider Peirce's precision in a transcendental light, we must also consider how Peirce developed this transcendental kind of argumentation in a totally new way according to his pragmatism.

### 3.1. Peirce's Transcendental Elements

As I have suggested, Peirce's own idea of a transcendental project was in accordance with the justificatory account of Kant. Accordingly, Peirce thought that in order to develop a transcendental demonstration of his categories he had to use the only kind of a priori reasoning that he permitted, that is: mathematical demonstration. Thus, Peirce believed he needed to obtain positive philosophical truths about our experience and thought, from a pure mathematical deduction based on previously established self-sustaining propositions. In his classification, this would have meant directly deriving philosophical knowledge from a mathematical course of reasoning<sup>26</sup>. That would have been quite close to a Cartesian line of reasoning, where a supposedly pure a priori argument, developed through a series of valid deductive steps, guarantees some truths about our experience of an external world.

However, following the alternative account of Kant, Kant's starting point was not an indubitable proposition, but consisted of human experience and knowledge found in ordinary life and the sciences. Consequently, in order to uncover a transcendental approach in Peirce's system, we do not need to find an argument that directly derives truths about experience from mathematical reasoning. Peirce did not need to derive



truths in phenomenology and logic directly from mathematics. On the contrary, he just needed to show that some elements of experience and thought, which a philosophical consideration brings to attention, can be prescindable from such experience and thought in general, while the opposite operation is not possible. If a mathematical consideration is capable of teaching something important about those fundamental elements (in fact, it is by means of the logic of relatives that Peirce argues for his categories), it only means that the purely relational form which mathematics describes is more fundamental with respect to the particular determination it gains phenomenologically. This is completely different from requiring that phenomenological determinations have to be directly derived from the pure mathematical forms. For example, the purely mathematical representation of a triadic relation in a diagram is surely prescindable from the determination that that form gains in a sign. However, this need not imply that the determination of thirdness in sign use must be directly derived from diagrammatic reasoning. Again, prescindion is just what we need in order to consider thought in general, bracketing what is not fundamental and focusing on its essential constituents. In this passage, where Peirce is explaining to Victoria Lady Welby the purpose and method of his phenomenology, a science he will later call phaneroscopy, but that is here referred to as ideoscopy, it is clear how the method of this science is that of considering human experience in general and trying to put into brackets what is not of interest for it.

*Ideoscopy* consists in describing and classifying the ideas that belong to ordinary experience or that naturally arise in connection with ordinary life, without regard to their being valid or invalid or to their psychology (SS, 24).

Here phenomenology well exemplifies what the transcendental procedure of Peirce is like. It considers experience as it is normally conceived and tries to abstract those elements more relevant for its analysis. Thus, phenomenology can be considered from a transcendental perspective even if it cannot be directly derived from mathematics. This is not to say that Peirce's prescision is merely a duplication of Kant's transcendental approach. On the contrary, Peirce reinvents transcendental philosophy in a pragmatic context. As we shall see, Peirce is able to abstract some fundamental features of our thinking, without imposing any fixed structure on our knowledge. This is possible because Peirce's transcendental elements are indeterminate and thus are capable of evolution, according to the different historical situations in which they are determined.

If non-justificatory transcendental enterprises stand out for beginning their analyses from experience as it is generally conceived, we have to establish how Peirce's philosophy undertook this general survey. We saw that Kant's first object of study was human knowledge as it was developed in ordinary and scientific representations. For Peirce, the immediate object for philosophical analysis was human thought and the semiotic processes to which it normally gives rise. Thus, in its study of experience and thought, philosophy tries first of all to abstract their semiotic structure<sup>27</sup>. Human semiosis constitutes exactly that immediately objective domain of knowledge and experiences that Peirce's transcendental enterprise needs to account for. The normative sciences and phenomenology, by means of succeeding prescisive steps, abstract from that semiotic whole the fundamental elements a transcendental analysis is intended to bring to the surface.

Within philosophy, it is phenomenology which indicates those elements that can be prescinded from any other. Accordingly, it presents the elements that are the most fundamental in order to account for the semiotic structure philosophy has to disentangle. Thus, with the help of the logic of relatives, phenomenology analyzes that complex of semiotic processes which human thought consists of, and attempts to isolate the most fundamental and necessary elements within such thought, that is, Peirce's three categories.

It can further be said in advance, not, indeed, purely *a priori* but with the degree of apriority that is proper to logic, namely, as a necessary deduction from the fact that there are signs, that there must be an elementary triad (CP 1.292).

Evidently, for Peirce, a purely *a priori* deduction would have been one of the kind justificatory accounts ask for, that is, one developed from a certainly valid premise. But, according to our picture of the transcendental method, Peirce's categories can indeed be considered *a priori*, since experience would be unaccountable without them, while they can be prescinded from particular experience. They can be considered *a priori* even if our first object of study needs to be semiotic processes as they are manifest in human practices<sup>28</sup>.

Peirce calls his categories firstness, secondness and thirdness. As these terms suggest, it is not really easy to grasp or exemplify what Peirce means by them. They are so general that they should account for every possible relation in thought, knowledge, objective reality, and so forth. To put it in simple terms, firstness refers to the mere presentation of a quality, or, alternatively, to the nature of a subject regardless of any

relation with something else; secondness refers to direct and dynamic relations between two subjects, as for example in cause-effect relations; to finish, thirdness refers to a kind of relations in which the mediation of a third term is necessary, as for example in meaning and sign use. Peirce considers these three categories to be able to account for every kind of relation we might find in our thinking and knowledge, as well as in the objective world.

In order to bring out this a priori relational structure of experience and thought, phenomenology has to look into the semiotic whole of our representative practices, prescinding from the particular way in which meaning is conveyed and developed. Thus, phenomenology takes into consideration semiotic processes and tries to consider them on a more abstract level, prescinding even from the special features that render a sign a sign. Phenomenology thus sheds light on the necessary relational basis on which even signification rests. The question on what is peculiar in the triadic relation of signification is not a matter for phenomenology, even if, focusing on human representations, its first objects of study are inevitably semiotic processes of thought. Prescinding from the determinations that triadic, dyadic and monadic relations gain in sign processes, phenomenology also abstracts from the question of the validity of signs. That is, it does not take into consideration whether the representations are dreams, illusions, or truthful knowledge<sup>29</sup>. It simply looks into the complex of human semiotic processes and tries to abstract their fundamental relational structure, described by the categories. Thus, the categories, in order to be considered in a transcendental fashion, need not function as a mathematical starting point from which phenomenological and semiotic determination are directly derived. On the contrary, they just need to be

prescinded from the semiotic whole that characterizes human practices, while showing that that semiotic whole cannot prescind from them<sup>30</sup>.

Peirce's phenomenological categories are thus the most fundamental elements of thought and shed light on its essential relational structure. They can thus be considered in a transcendental light, following our non-justificatory reconstruction of the transcendental method. As transcendental elements, they offer a basis for explaining the way in which that fundamental relational structure is determined in other branches of philosophy, namely, the normative sciences and metaphysics<sup>31</sup>.

However, I think there are some other elements in Peirce's philosophy that can also be considered transcendental, even if their relational structure can be accounted for only by means of the categories. These elements are the esthetic ideal and the regulative hopes. I think they need to be considered as being transcendental principles because they take a particular perspective on sign processes, a perspective that is typical of Peirce's methodetic. This perspective is not limited to a general outline of the fundamental elements of experience and thought, but attempts to isolate those elements that are necessary actually to bring forward sign processes<sup>32</sup>. The esthetic ideal and the regulative hopes thus identify those principles that are necessary for engagement in actual courses of inference and investigation in order to reach the purpose in view. In this respect, the esthetic ideal, which is identified by Peirce's esthetics, accounts for the normativity of our feeling, acting and thinking. We judge our feeling to be beautiful, our actions to be right, our inferences to be sound, in reference to an ideal, and we seek to be consistent and coherent in these judgments. The esthetic ideal accounts also for the systematicity we seek in our inquiries. On the other hand, the regulative hopes, which are identified by Peirce's methodetic, suggest the hypothesis that we must endorse

when engaged in a process of thinking, that is, the hypothesis that the problem at hand does allow for a solution. Peirce thought that it was impossible for us to obtain a warrant that we would eventually get to know what we are inquiring into. However, we could not even engage in a process of inquiry if we did not endorse a regulative hope in the possibility of our success. By applying precision even to these principles, they can be considered transcendental because they can be prescind from the actual courses of investigation that they aim to account for, while those courses of investigation cannot be prescind from them, that is, they would be unaccountable without these principles<sup>33</sup>.

Using a Kantian distinction to analyze Peirce's categories (firstness, secondness and thirdness), esthetic ideal and regulative hopes, we could say that the categories lie in the middle between constitutive and regulative principles. They can be considered to be constitutive in so far as they are present in every phenomenon; they can be considered to be regulative, in so far as they cannot teach anything determinate on experience before they gain a particular a posteriori determination. As a priori categories, they just offer a vague picture of what experience is like, but it is only particular experience and particular sign processes that determine them. On the contrary, the esthetic ideal and the regulative hopes are surely regulative principles, in as much as they offer only a guide for the development of signs, without furnishing any guarantee that these principles will bring a fruitful result. Nonetheless, they are necessary principles in order to account for that process of development.

These then are the transcendental elements that we can obtain from our transcendental consideration of Peirce's philosophy. We saw that to consider those elements a priori we do not need totally to neglect experience and a posteriori knowledge providing a purely deductive and derivative argument. On the contrary, the

total of human semiotic processes is the first object we need to account for, abstracting those elements these processes cannot prescind from.

One might ask what we gain in considering Peirce's categories, esthetic ideal and regulative hopes in this transcendental light. First of all, we are able to distinguish the prescisive method Peirce uses to abstract these elements from other kind of abstractions. Thus, we can account for the hierarchization of elements in our thinking that Peirce brought forward in his philosophy. As we have seen, the purpose of this hierarchization need not be justificatory in order to be considered transcendental. It must be kept in mind, though, that in Peirce's pragmatic philosophy this hierarchization is not a purpose in itself, but is an irreplaceable means to improve our capacity to reason, and to facilitate the way in which we gain new knowledge. In this respect, Peirce developed transcendental philosophy in a totally new perspective, in accordance with his pragmatism. We could also ask how a transcendental inquiry could enhance our reasoning. It is exactly the clarification of the fundamental elements that partake in the development of our knowledge which shows its pragmatic usefulness in Peirce's philosophical edifice. In fact, by isolating what is fundamental for the development of our thought we can better identify what is not so essential and could block the road of inquiry.

Now we must consider what distinguishes Peirce's transcendental project, and renders it a more satisfying and successful account than Kant's.

### 3.2. The Novelties and Advantages of Peirce's Project

Nowadays, Peirce scholarship often insists on the differences between Peirce's pragmatism and Kant's transcendental philosophy. This is justifiable because by interpreting Peirce in the light of Kant one risks failing to grasp what is genuinely original in the thought of the father of pragmatism. When considering our knowledge, Peirce does not only seek to provide a general account of our ways of understanding and explaining things, he also seeks to offer tools to develop our knowledge further. It is for this reason that his philosophy is genuinely methodological, putting an important emphasis on development and growth<sup>34</sup>. Accordingly, Peirce's categories do not themselves teach anything determinate on experience, but rather leave open the possibility of endless development. In an epoch in which the historicity of scientific discoveries in general demands attention, a philosophical account which does not need to anticipate something determinate about experience is surely of benefit. Thus, even if necessary, Peirce's categories provide only a very general and vague description of the features of experience and thought, that have no specific connotation unless they are determined in a particular way by the context. It was not so in Kant's project, which wished to teach something determinate about the general structure of experience<sup>35</sup>. No particular law, as for example the law of causality, is imposed upon nature by Peirce's categories. They just offer a general, really vague, outline of the structural necessities pertaining to our representations. Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness are the kind of relations meaningful representations cannot prescind from. Thus, Peirce scholars such as Short<sup>36</sup> and Midtgarden<sup>37</sup> are surely right in emphasizing this important distinction between Peirce and Kant's thought. Peirce's pragmatism possesses a relevance for the ongoing development of human practices that is unknown in Kant's philosophy.



However, I think that what we brought out concerning precision does enable us to grasp that these novelties of Peirce's thought are not totally in contrast to Kant, but are a way to develop transcendental philosophy in a more pragmatic and productive manner. In fact, concerning Peirce's categories, even if no determinate anticipation of experience is possible by means of them, precision shows nonetheless that they are essential features of our experience and thought<sup>38</sup>.

Even if this is an important perspective on Peirce's philosophy in relation to Kant, and even if in other respects Peirce advances our understanding significantly beyond Kant, there is a further advantage that his approach to the categories offers, which can make an important new contribution to contemporary philosophy: transcendental philosophy can be understood in a compelling new way if it is developed in a pragmatic context. One of the most questionable features of Kant's system is the separation, if not the opposition, between the domains of theory and practice, between the determinism of the natural world and the freedom of human agency. Thus, if according to the categories and the forms of intuition, nature, as a phenomenon, is absolutely determined by Newtonian laws, then human behavior is subject to freedom, finding its ground in the noumenal self.

It is just this opposition between theory and practice, between an absolutely determined phenomenal nature and a free noumenal self that Peirce allows us to avoid. So many scholars have correctly insisted on this feature of Peirce's thought to emphasize his distance from a Kantian perspective<sup>39</sup>. According to his pragmatism, practical features are intrinsically part of our theoretical endeavors<sup>40</sup>, and theoretical characters take part in the self-corrective considerations by which we direct our behavior<sup>41</sup>. In Peirce's system, the categories through which we must think our

experience leave room for freedom even in our representation of nature. Accordingly, the picture of nature Peirce developed in his metaphysics is intended to show how chance variations, indeterminacy, and purposeful development are characters that are not only applicable to human behavior, but also to nature itself. Peirce's metaphysics tries to demonstrate that the categories which are necessary to account for our representation of objects are also categories of being – considered in the latter's independence of thought<sup>42</sup>. What is important here is that the picture of nature that the categories of thought require is a representation not restricted to deterministic laws. In this way, following Peirce's suggestion, human purposeful behavior is explicable by means of the same categories as nature is.

The insight that human beings and nature are thinkable along the same path opens up a completely fresh trajectory in Peirce's system. Metaphysics is intended to show that nature, in its independency from thought, is also triadic and purposive. As far as human beings are part of that nature, they can be seen as determined by the laws and tendencies proper to it. Thus, two lines of dependency can be simultaneously thought within Peirce's system. The former is the dependency of our representation of nature on the categorical structure of our thinking; the latter is the dependence of human beings on the nature they are part of. Peirce's perspective is thus able to think nature and human beings as being in continuity. This is impossible to do along the lines of Kant's philosophy. The rules that govern human practical behavior are totally different from the rules of nature. In this respect, Peirce is totally beyond Kant's standpoint and nobody would dispute that.

However, what needs to be emphasized is that when Peirce is concerned with the dependency of our representation of nature on the categorical structure of our thinking

he can still be considered as proposing a kind of transcendental inquiry, in so far as it attempts to isolate those elements that are necessary for our representation of objects. On the contrary, the dependency of human beings, and of their ways of thinking, on the nature they are part of clearly surpasses the limits of this transcendental speculation, trying to go beyond our representative thinking<sup>43</sup>. The picture of human beings and nature that we obtain following this illustration has numerous advantages. We can coherently think of a reciprocal determination between human subjects and nature, in which human subjects determine their representation of nature thanks to the categorical structure of their thinking. However, if nature possesses the same categorical structure of thought, that could mean that our thinking in this way depends on our being part of nature itself. Peirce's principle of continuity is thus preserved. Human beings and nature are part of the same whole and are not discontinuously governed by different laws<sup>44</sup>. There is not any sharp separation between the causally determinate laws of nature and the indeterminate freedom of human beings. Having said that, it must be borne in mind that Peirce's transcendental analysis of the fundamental elements of our representational thinking must come before any hypothesis on nature in its independency.

The possibility of thinking of this reciprocal dependency within the conceptual framework of Peirce's system renders it a fruitful viewpoint even with respect to contemporary philosophy<sup>45</sup>. Moreover, it shows that in perspectives that recognize the continuity of human beings with the rest of nature there can be still room for transcendental reflection<sup>46</sup>.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper I have described two different ways of interpreting Kant and, accordingly, two different accounts of the aims and methods of transcendental philosophy. I have stressed that Peirce cannot be interpreted in a transcendental fashion if the transcendental method is understood in line with what I have called the justificatory account of Kant. We can interpret Peirce transcendentially only if we use a picture of transcendental philosophy along the lines of the alternative interpretation of Kant here presented. Accordingly, Peirce, in order to be considered in a transcendental way, does not need to claim a justification of our knowledge or a definitive anti-skeptical outcome for his doctrines. Neither does Peirce need to provide a strong deductive argument based on self-sustaining indubitable propositions, an argument able to prove the validity of our knowledge of outer object, departing from a mentalistic perspective on our inner ideas.

On the contrary, a transcendental inquiry in the alternative sense here presented needs only to consider experience and knowledge as they are normally determined in our ordinary and scientific practices. This ‘datum’ needs not to be vindicated or founded, but is the departing point from which a transcendental inquiry has to abstract those elements without which such experience and knowledge would not be understandable. Of course, these elements have to depend on our representative standpoint on the objects.

Peirce’s *prescision*, when applied to experience and thought in general, shows strong similarities to this way of accounting for the transcendental method. It considers experience and thought, and abstracts those elements without which experience and thought would not be intelligible. It also shows that, conversely, we can refer to those

elements without needing to consider particular experience and thought. Moreover, those elements are immediately related to the necessity of representing objects by means of signs. Thus, it is through precision that Peirce can be interpreted in a transcendental fashion.

Finally, this paper emphasized how this transcendental interpretation of Peirce's philosophy does not prevent the recognition of important novelties and advantages in his thought. First of all, Peirce's system of transcendental elements shows methodological purports that are unknown to Kant's critical project. Moreover, Peirce is able to avoid Kant's sharp division between nature and freedom. In fact, Peirce's categories do not require that nature and freedom are thought of as two opposite realms. Peirce's categories allow the concept of freedom to be given room in our conception of nature, and thus, also, allow us to think of nature and the self as being in continuity.

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<sup>2</sup> (Apel, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> See for example: (Oehler, 1987; 1995), (Misak, 1994), (Hookway, 2000: chap. 7), (Short, 2000a; 2000b), (Midtgarden, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: (Christensen, 1994), (Abrams, 2004), (Pihlström, 2003: chap. 3), (Cooke, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> See: (Gava, forthcoming a) for a more detailed analysis of these alternative interpretations of Kant in relation to Peirce's own criticisms against transcendental philosophy.

<sup>6</sup> (Strawson, 1966). See also: (Stroud, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> See: (Kant, 1997: p. 10).

<sup>8</sup> In (Gava, forthcoming b) I consider whether the two accounts of transcendental philosophy here presented can endorse fallibilism.

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<sup>9</sup> For Peirce's criticism of the transcendental method see: (W 1:72), (CP 2.31, 113, 5.382n). In (Gava, forthcoming a) I consider whether Peirce's own criticisms against Kant and transcendental philosophy are exhaustive or not.

<sup>10</sup> (Allison, 1983), (Bird, 2006), (Collins, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> 'No critique of reason in empirical use was needed, since its principles were subjected to a continuous examination on the touchstone of experience; it was likewise unnecessary in mathematics, whose concepts must immediately be exhibited *in concreto* in pure intuition, through which anything unfounded and arbitrary instantly becomes obvious' (KrV, A 710-1 B 738-9). Of course Kant did provide a refutation of skepticism, both in its Cartesian and Humean forms. However, his refutations were not the problems on which he built his system. Moreover, he did not answer generally the skeptic, but only the skepticisms produced by specific philosophical standpoints. He constructed his answers by showing that the standpoints were faulty. Thus, his refutations are primarily answers to those standpoints.

<sup>12</sup> See: note 9.

<sup>13</sup> Peirce distinguished *prescission* from *discrimination* and *dissociation* ( W 2:50-1).

<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, Peirce writes: 'Hence, the impressions (or more immediate conceptions) cannot be definitely conceived or attended to, to the neglect of an elementary conception which reduces them to unity. On the other hand, when such a conception has once been obtained, there is, in general, no reason why the premises which have occasioned it should not be neglected, and therefore the explaining conception may frequently be prescinded from the more immediate ones and from the impressions' (W 2:51). Here Peirce uses 'may frequently' because he refers in general to the case in which a concept introduces an explaining conception in experience. If the object of consideration had been the categories he would probably have said 'can always'.

<sup>15</sup> The corresponding proposition about space runs as follows: 'one can never represent that there is no space, though one can very well think that there are no objects to be encountered in it' (KrV, A 24 B 38).

<sup>16</sup> This line of reasoning is not directly applicable to space or the categories. In fact, inner representations are prescindable from space, and the categories are not present in every phenomenon. However, any one of these elements shows its fundamentality with respect to a domain of representations: space with respect to outer representations and any one of the categories to a very broad set of representations. If considered



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as a whole, the categories and the a priori forms of intuitions are not prescindable with respect to experience in general. Thus, if the purpose is that of accounting for the whole of experience, the cognitive structure provided by the categories and the form of intuitions is entirely needed, even if some particular experience can be thought of without the use of some of the elements under consideration. In Peirce, this problem does not arise, since the categories are present in any one of our experiences and thoughts.

<sup>17</sup> ‘The synthetic unity of consciousness is therefore an objective condition of all cognition, not merely something I myself need in order to cognize an object but rather something under which every intuition must stand *in order to become an object for me*, since in any other way, and without this synthesis, the manifold would *not* be united in one consciousness’ (KrV, B 138).

<sup>18</sup> This ‘analysis’ is so quite different from the usual methods of analysis of Kant’s times. It aims to abstract those elements that depend on our subjective constitution in representation of objects. With this focus on objectivity, it is not only a formal account of the relations among conceptions as general logic is, but also a study of how this formal relations affect our representations of objects. It is for this reason that Kant calls his method transcendental logic and claims a synthetic a priori value for its concepts.

<sup>19</sup> This abstractive procedure was common to Peirce and Kant. However, Peirce did not provide what can be considered an equivalent of Kant’s transcendental deduction. In this section of his first *Critique*, Kant tried to establish how the a priori concepts could refer to objects. Peirce did not undertake such a step for two reasons. First, his categories, being vague and indeterminate, cannot anticipate anything determinate on experience. Thus, they cannot anticipate how they will function objectively. Second, he rejected Kant’s distinction between concepts and intuitions. We cannot follow Apel when he speaks of a transcendental deduction in Peirce (Apel, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> It is true that for Peirce the analysis of thought was meant to ascertain laws that were valid not only for human beings. However, human thought was surely his starting point.

<sup>21</sup> ‘That, of course, is the doctrine of Immediate Perception which is upheld by Reid, Kant, and all dualists who understand the true nature of dualism, and the denial of which led Cartesians to the utterly absurd theory of divine assistance upon which the preestablished harmony of Leibniz is but a slight improvement. Every philosopher who denies the doctrine of Immediate Perception, – including idealists of every stripe, – by that denial cuts off all possibility of ever cognizing a *relation*. Nor he better his

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position by declaring that all relations are illusive appearances, since it is not merely true knowledge of them that he has cut off but every mode of cognitive representation of them' (EP 2:155).

<sup>22</sup> In accordance with this idea, Peirce attacked Descartes for his attempt to set a universal doubt on human knowledge as a departing point in his philosophy (W 2:212). For Peirce, that doubt was a 'paper doubt', since it could not be a real doubt. This is a consequence of the immediate objective validity of our perception and knowledge. It is just experience that could generate a genuine doubt on such perception and knowledge; surely, it cannot be Descartes' purely speculative doubt.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Short advances this reading. He stresses that Peirce abandoned the deductive strategy of the new list for the inductive investigation of his phenomenology (Short, 2007: p. 31).

<sup>24</sup> MS refers to Peirce's manuscripts. I indicate manuscript number (according to: Robin, 1967) and page number (I follow, when possible, Peirce's own paging).

<sup>25</sup> William Rosensohn stresses that Peirce's phenomenology does not provide this priority to form (Rosensohn, 1974: pp. 24-5).

<sup>26</sup> In MS 908 Peirce attempts an a priori derivation of the categories. However, he stresses that this derivation cannot be considered transcendental, because we cannot directly derive truths about objects from mathematical a priori reasoning based on a self-sustaining proposition. See: (EP 2:363-6). This idea of a transcendental deduction is very close to the one we have attributed to justificatory accounts of Kant.

<sup>27</sup> In this picture, metaphysics, the third department of Peirce's philosophy has to come later, trying to demonstrate that the semiotic structure of thought is doubled in reality, this latter considered in its independency from thought. This account of metaphysics could recall a typical philosophical problem of idealistic positions which characterizes even the justificatory account of the transcendental method, that is the problem of proving that our inner ideas really match reality. However, this is not Peirce's problem. He did not need to guarantee that our representations correspond to reality. As we saw, according to the doctrine of immediate perception, for Peirce representations have a direct objective validity, their representational character notwithstanding.

<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Kant stresses that all of our knowledge begins with experience. However, that does not mean that it totally depends on particular experience (KrV, B 1).

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<sup>29</sup> This fact distinguishes Peirce's project from Kant's. Kant was engaged in the problem of determining how his categories could have objective validity.

<sup>30</sup> Vincent Colapietro notes how the phenomenological categories cannot but be derived from our semiotic practices (Colapietro, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> In metaphysics we need to go beyond signs and representations. However, the categorical structure discovered in the study of representational thinking is the basis even for Peirce's metaphysical hypothesis.

<sup>32</sup> It is important to bear in mind that methodetic is not only an explanation of the principles working in our inquiries, but also a science that want to enhance our inferential capacities. However, this does not contrast with what I am stressing here, since methodetic is able to help the advancement of our inquiries by clarifying principles already at work in our unreflected methods of thinking.

<sup>33</sup> See (Gava, 2008) for a transcendental reading of Peirce's esthetic ideal and regulative hopes.

<sup>34</sup> Even if Kant did provide important reflections on methodological principles, especially in the last part of the first *Critique* and in the third *Critique*, he never considered as a task of philosophy that of offering elements to actually carry on inquiry.

<sup>35</sup> It could be stressed that Kant's categories are also indeterminate and vague before their schematization. However, they can be schematized *a priori* and thus gain determination.

<sup>36</sup> (Short, 2007: pp.31-2, 64-6).

<sup>37</sup> (Midtgarden, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> The fact that no determinate connotation of the categories is required by Peirce is intimately connected to the fact that Peirce does not provide a transcendental deduction.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example: (Colapietro, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> In fact the pragmatic maxim insists on this: '*In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception*' (CP 5.9).

<sup>41</sup> 'Each habit of an individual is a law; but these laws are modified so easily by the operation of self-control, that it is one of the most patent of facts that ideals and thought generally have a very great influence on human conduct' (CP 1.348). On Peirce's opposition to Kant with respect to the practical self

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see: (Colapietro, 2006). Colapietro stresses that Peirce abandoned the formal account of practical identity advanced by Kant. Accordingly, for Peirce, the consideration of the historical context in which the self exists is essential in order to account for its practical identity. This would render Peirce more Hegelian than Kantian, as far as autonomy can develop only through heteronomy.

<sup>42</sup> This metaphysical step is totally in contrast to Kant's project and not part of what we stressed is Peirce's transcendental philosophy.

<sup>43</sup> Two points have to be noted here. First: Peirce did not need this step toward an explanation of nature in its independency for guaranteeing the objectivity of our representation. As we saw, Peirce did not doubt this objectivity and considered our perception directly valid. Our knowledge cannot but be in signs and it is in this framework that we have to stress objectivity. He needed this metaphysical step just to explain how our thought is pragmatically valid to account for nature. Second: he was aware of the fact that every hypothesis on nature in its independency could not but be developed within our semiotic framework. However, the particular way in which natural phenomena are arranged in our knowledge can allow a hypothesis, just a hypothesis, on what they need to have in common with our representative practices.

<sup>44</sup> Karl Otto Apel also addresses this continuity between mind and nature (Apel, 1995). However, he does not recognize that it is just because Peirce's categories allow room for freedom that this continuity is possible.

<sup>45</sup> Peirce's viewpoint is able to accomplish what John McDowell asks for when he states: 'If we can rethink our conception of nature so as to make room for spontaneity, even though we deny that spontaneity is capturable by the resources of bald naturalism, we shall by the same token be rethinking our conception of what it takes for a position to deserve to be called 'naturalism'' (McDowell, 1996: p. 77).

<sup>46</sup> In this sense Peirce's position can also be considered a naturalistic project. An attempt to develop a naturalistic version of transcendental philosophy along the lines of pragmatism is provided by Sami Pihlström (2003).