

# Peirce as Playful/Play as Pivotal

**Vincent Colapietro**

Pennsylvania State University, USA

University of Rhode Island, USA

## *Abstract*

This paper offers a portrait of C. S. Peirce as a playful thinker but also an account of play as that upon which much turns. He was, after all, a philosopher who in his maturity insisted, “a bit of fun helps thought and tends to keep it pragmatical.” In doing so, however, Peirce showed in his youth how evasions of responsibility might, in their own way, often be instances of engagement at once playful and more deeply responsible than any attempt to meet the formal expectations of external authority. For the account of play as pivotal, the author draws upon Cornelius Castoriadis and, to a far greater extent, John Dewey. Moreover, he explores an apparently stark contrast between the Peircean emphasis upon habit and the Derridean celebration of play, showing that the opposition is not as thoroughgoing as it might appear. Interweaving Dewey’s insights with Peirce’s, the author highlights the power of intense play to melt the rigidity of sedimented habits and, thereby, to generate opportunities for habit-change. This suggests that the capacity to act in an imaginative or creative way both ineluctably draws upon habits but also inevitably modifies, often in a dramatic manner, these habits. If the ultimate logical interpretant of a sign-process is, as Peirce suggests, a habit-change, then play is truly pivotal for seeing one of the most important ways in which such alteration takes place.

*Keywords: Art; Castoriadis, Cornelius; Derrida, Jacques; Dewey, John; freedom; habit; hinge; impulse; pivot; purpose and purposelessness; Schiller, Friedrich; virtue*

“Man plays only when he is in the full sense a man, and is only wholly man when he is playing.” Friedrich Schiller, Letter XV

## 1. Introduction: Playing Hooky/Reading Philosophy

There are various ways of playing hooky, from being physically present but lost in daydreaming to actually being absent and engaged in illicit activities. There is, moreover, the time away from school when conscientious students devote themselves to tasks assigned by their teachers but also the times when seemingly irresponsible ones pursue their own passions, to the expense of their schoolwork. The latter appear, in a sense, to be “cutting out” of classwork. Of course, everything hinges on specifically what such students are casting aside and what they are taking up. They are exercising their “freedom” in following their own course, in truth, their own curriculum, but it can prove to limit them in ways they are unable as youths to imagine. It can however also prove to be a dramatic moment in the delicate task of attaining intellectual and, indeed, personal autonomy. As a mature philosopher, Peirce wrote: “God has created every man *free*, and not ‘bound’ to any kind of conduct but that which he freely selects” (1998, p. 459). He is however quick to point out that the individual “finds he cannot be satisfied with a form and stiff government over his impulses,” but no less quick to stress, this is “a self-government, instituted by himself to suit himself” (1998, p. 459). The institution of such self-governance can do great violence to an individual’s playful impulses, but then it can also be so ineptly executed that these impulses dissipate the individual’s energy and scatter her attention. Of course, there is no necessity to choose between either a harsh, punitive self-tyranny or an indulgent, debilitating anarchy (a self-government too weak to exercise appropriate control over an individual’s stronger impulses, a form of selfhood in which the chaos of impulses undermines the integrity of the self).

Many of the greatest minds were anything but exemplary students in the conventional sense, Einstein being perhaps the exemplar of a youth *not* being exemplary in this regard. But, then, C. S. Peirce compares favorably to Einstein in being judged so unfavorably by his teachers. The extent to which this bears upon play, the focus of this essay, will become quickly evident.

### 1.1 Play as impulse (*Trieb*)

When Peirce, as an undergraduate at Harvard College, became serious about philosophy (MS 310; Brent, 1998, pp. 53-54), he began by reading with Horatio Paine, one of his classmates, Friederich Schiller’s *Aesthetische Briefe*.<sup>1</sup> From this text, they were led back to Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, initially skipping over the later critiques to begin at the beginning,<sup>2</sup> though Kant’s third critique was the one most relevant to the ideas developed by Schiller in his *Briefe*. Peirce would later disclose: “In the early sixties I was a passionate devotee of Kant, at least as regarded the Transcendental Analytic. ... I believed more implicitly in the two tables of the Functions of Judgment and the Categories than if they had been brought down from [Mount] Sinai” (CP: 1958-1966, 4.2). If Kant’s first *Critique* represented in the course of Peirce’s development the institution of the laws by which inquiry ought to be conducted (though he would radically

rethink these heuristic laws in the subsequent phases of his intellectual evolution), Schiller's creative appropriation of pivotal points in Kant's third critique would appear to represent in this development the inaugural moment of unfettered playfulness. These students assigned themselves these texts and (at least in the case of Peirce) immersed himself in them with greater passion than the work assigned by their teachers. They were in effect playing hooky from a curriculum offering too few challenges to their curiosity. In working through these and other philosophical writings, these youths were unquestionably playing at being philosophers. Only by doing so could they actually become what they were playfully yet seriously enacting.<sup>3</sup>

Make-believe is critical at every phase in our intellectual development, for such development entails transformation and, in turn, transformation entails the projection of possibilities itself only possible through energies channeled through the imagination. To take a different example, young poets taking themselves too seriously are doing so arguably because of the inverse relationship between their aspirational identity and their actual achievements. They are engaged in the arduous and exacting task of making themselves into poets. Most people who undertake this task do not make of themselves a poet in any memorable or enduring sense, but the only way to be successful is to insist on being what one is not yet (in a sense, to make believe—to make oneself believe—one is what one hopes to be).

The purpose animating Peirce's youthful engagement in philosophical reading, discussion, and writing might be variously identified, but we ought not to preclude that it was just what it appeared to him to be—a thoroughly immanent purpose, an activity not subordinate to anything outside of itself but one carried on, whatever its frustrations, for its own sake. In this sense, it was a form of play. As is characteristic of countless forms of playful engagement, the frustrations were integral to the experience of the participant.

In the case of Peirce, this is only part of the story. He also identified inquiry as a form of worship. But, in his mind, this might not be as far removed from play as we ordinarily think. This becomes clear in "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" (1908) when Peirce makes *musement* so central to his reflections on divinity. In his mind, *musement* is a form of play. In turn, "Play, we all know, is a lively exercise of one's powers" (1998, p. 436).

It is evident that Peirce conscientiously (!) engaged in *musement*. It is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated that, in celebrating *musement*, he was in effect portraying himself, a self whom we might hardly recognize. In any event, Peirce was far more playful a thinker than we ordinarily appreciate. When he asserted in his lectures on pragmatism (1903), "I ought to apologize for introducing such Buffoonery into serious lectures. I do so because I seriously believe that a bit of fun helps thought and tends to keep it pragmatical" (5.71; see Magada-Ward, 2005). In a letter to William James written in 1898 (see Fisch for the significance of this year), Peirce noted, "But as you know ... my style of 'brilliancy' consists of a mixture of irony and seriousness—the same things said ironically and also seriously" (Perry, 1935, II, p. 420). Playfulness

takes myriad forms, not all of them ironic. Irony is however unquestionably a form of playfulness. It would be more accurate to identify it as an array of such forms. In the most serious contexts (e.g., an operating room, a scientific laboratory, a field expedition, a courtroom, or a formal assembly of elected representatives), distinctive forms of irony are audible. Even eulogies call for a touch of humor, though not necessarily in the form of irony.

Children are never more serious than when they are playing. Adults are never so playful than when they are hard at work in whatever demands the lively exercise of their various powers in a manner that integrates and enhances these powers. Using Peirce himself to illustrate this point, he was never more at play in this sense than when he was passionately engaged in philosophical inquiry. His intellectual life reveals that the hard work of minute<sup>4</sup> thinking can be conjoined to the irrepressible spirit of unfettered playfulness. Do we not see just this in the greatest thinkers, not simply in the case of Peirce?

When the investigation of signs becomes drudgery, is not the investigation thwarted and foreshortened? Is it not the case that the investigation of signs must itself be an instance of the play of signs in order to issue into anything worthwhile and fruitful? Was not Peirce often playing hooky from his assigned tasks, tracing out the trajectory of his intellectual impulses rather than conforming to the demands of conventional expectations?

## **1.2 Play as pivotal/pivots as significant**

My primary purpose is however not to portray Peirce as playful but to show some important respects in which play is pivotal. A bit of fun—the spirit of playfulness—is vital for thought. It does not merely help thought along; it contributes to the vitality of thought by insuring growth.<sup>5</sup> As a first step in trying to show this, it is instructive to return to the text from which Peirce set out, Schiller’s *Aesthetic Letters*. Here we of course encounter the play-impulse (*Spieltrieb*). It is immensely significant that the function of this impulse is to mediate between two other drives. That is, the play-impulse in Schiller’s text functions as a sign in Peirce’s sense.

But, first, I want to foreground the metaphor of pivot (or hinge). Though Peirce deploys this figure, no more dramatically than in reference to his category of secondness,<sup>6</sup> it is far more central to the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In addition, John Dewey specifically deploys this metaphor in reference to impulses. In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), he writes: “The place of impulse in conduct is a *pivot* of re-adjustment, re-organization, in habits” (*MW* 14, p. 75; emphasis added). “Impulses are,” to quote a parallel passage, “the pivots upon which the re-organization of activities, they are agencies of deviation, for giving new direction to old habits and changing their quality” (p. 67). In characterizing impulses as pivots, Dewey is marking them off from both rigidly fixed habits and inherently amorphous drives (or impulses). On the one side, the place of impulses, precisely as pivots of ongoing activities, “is marked off

from the territory of arrested and encrusted habits.” They are invincibly plastic without being altogether amorphous. On the other side, then, this place “is demarcated from the region in which impulse is a law unto itself” (ibid.). Even a virtue such a courage is not an immutable form, but a historically variable disposition however much its *eidos* is recognizable across epochs and cultures. A fixed set of historically invariant habits contrasts sharply with a limitless array of primordial drives, but neither is adequate for conceiving the ideal of conduct. A moral life involves the ongoing task of acquiring novel dispositions, a task for which impulses are truly pivotal. For impulse is indeed “a source, an indispensable source of liberation, but only as it is employed in giving habits pertinence and freshness does it liberate [rather than restrict or dissipate] power” (ibid.). As it turns out, Peirce concurs with this. “Some undisciplined young persons,” he observes, “may have come to think of acquired human habits chiefly as constraints and undoubtedly they all are in a measure. But good habits [i.e., virtues, strengths of character] are in much higher measure powers than they are limitations” (MS 930, p. 31; quoted in Colapietro, 1989, p. 112). But the ongoing modification of even good habits insures that these dispositions not become unduly limiting. Apart from impulses, facilitating deviations, such habits would become ever deeper ruts from which human conduct could not extricate itself.

Quite apart from granting impulses this role, the figure of a hinge or pivot is an instructive one in this and numerous other contexts. This is nowhere more evident than in the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. To take only one of numerous possible passages, and to do so because it connects so clearly with Dewey’s emphases, consider this one from *The Visible and the Invisible*: “new as our initiatives may be, they come to birth at the heart of being, they are connected onto the time that streams forth in us, supported on the pivots or hinges of our life, their sense is a *direction* ...” (p. 221). As illuminating as it would be, I cannot do anything more here than call attention to this philosopher’s reliance on this metaphor and, in that connection, make a general point. To recall an analogy, a musician plays a piece of music and, in doing so, often *plays with* various aspects of that musical form. Playing with melody, harmony, rhythm, and other qualitative features of a musical composition allows the musician at once to come to know the piece more intimately and (at least, in effect) to become engaged in the re-writing of the piece. Familiar pieces are not only played but also played with. This is an integral part of musical expertise. So, too, philosophers and other theorists discover how more or less unconsciously they are drawn to a turn of phrase or figure of speech and, then, begin to play consciously with this phrase or figure. In effect, but also often by intent, they are exploring the limits of its applicability, in other words, its fecundity or power. Throughout his writings, Merleau-Ponty returns to the metaphor of a hinge<sup>7</sup> and, frequently, appears not so much to be confidently using it as consciously playing with the possibilities it suggests. Much of the thinking of those authors from whom we have learned the most is, at bottom, an instance of playing with possibility. From a Peircean perspective, this characterization is especially apt, since his account of thinking allows contingent

possibility to restrict the role and importance of a priori necessity. Thought itself might be in its higher forms a manifestation of the *Spieltrieb*. I am strongly disposed to say, in the case of Peirce, it *is* just that.

This impulse or drive is conceivably that upon which everything turns. Without the movements it makes possible, thought would be utterly arrested. With these movements, thought can be, without exaggeration, infinitely developed. The image of that upon which something turns is for our purpose unsurpassed in importance. It invites a characterization of signs rarely considered. Signs are hinges. They are that upon which things turn, though the possibilities of direction are themselves not fixed, but contextually variable and indefinitely revisable (vertical axis can be made into a horizontal one, spatial differences into temporal markers, or allegedly immutable structures into historically contingent ones).

As Ludwig Wittgenstein arrestingly suggests, the possibility of going on (or getting out) might be secured by simply turning around. Norman Malcolm recalls his teacher making this “striking observation about philosophy”:

A person caught in a philosophical confusion is like a man in a room who wants to get out but doesn't know how. He tries the window but it is too high. He tries the chimney but it is too narrow. And if he would only *turn around*, he would see that the door has been open all the time! (Malcolm, 1972, p. 51)

Certain states work against the impulse simply to turn around, while others work strongly to do just that. How many routes of escape are available to us if only we face in a direction other than the wall blocking our movement or seemingly enclosing us?!?

Doors open and close, they get stuck and are left ajar, become unhinged and get rehung. They mark thresholds and not infrequently constitute impasses. Janus presides over them. It is perhaps not altogether incidental that this two-faced deity *is* two-faced in a double sense. Janus stands at the threshold, looking outward and inward, but Judas betrays Jesus with a sign of affection.

What enables doors to do so are the hinges on which they hang and swing. These are often, perhaps most frequently, not seen. What makes manifest a motion is itself not evident. Signs are themselves an example of this.

## **2. The Derridean Celebration of Play/The Peircean Insistence upon Habit**

There must be play in the arrangement. Otherwise, the mechanism either does not work or breaks down too quickly. The image of the hinge might tyrannically control thought so that we can only imagine two alternatives. The door swings open *or* it swings shut. This defines the only possibilities there allegedly are. Openness to the other is set in stark contrasts to being sequestered in the refuge of one's origin. Is not this discernible in what Jacques Derrida declares are at bottom the two (and only two) “interpretations of



interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play” (1978, p. 292)—hence, of the play of signs? Let us recall how he identifies these exclusive alternatives.

The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes the play and order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of a being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. (ibid.)

These “two interpretations of interpretation ... are,” Derrida stresses, “absolutely irreconcilable, even if we live them simultaneously and reconcile them in an obscure economy” (1978, p. 293). But are there only two interpretations of interpretation? Moreover, is the name of *man* so univocal that it carries only or even mostly the meaning Derrida ties to affix so immutably to this word?

In some contexts, the forms of mediation made possible by signs enable us to discover where we have mislaid our keys or the place to which the origin of our species might be traced. They allow us to trace our steps from the present to the past but also to identify a point in the past and to move from it toward the “future” (subsequent phases in an ongoing process).

There are innumerable ways of interpreting the activity of interpretation or the play of signs. For certain purposes, identifying mutually exclusive alternatives might be justifiable. For example, the purpose of a critique of the view that intuition is the ideal and interpretation is a form of exile might be effectively realized by drawing just the distinction Derrida draws. But the purposes are neither antecedently fixed, once and for all, nor always determinately identifiable. We might agree with Derrida that nothing (even our most assured forms of interpretive activity) escape the play of signs, that all discoveries are partial and provisional, while appreciating what cannot be gainsaid as a success or accomplishment (e.g., actually finding one’s keys or locating the site where the traces of remote biological ancestors carry implications for the site of an origin). While Derrida’s celebration of the play of signs helps us see how inescapably we are caught up in this play, Peirce’s stress on the formation of habits invites us to appreciate how the structures so integral to this play are not simply linguistic, discursive, or rhetorical, but are salient features of human corporeality and, hence, of our distinctive animality. It is very instructive to recall a passage in one of Peirce’s late manuscripts, a passage in which he returns to a notion encountered in his earliest engagement with a philosophical text. It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of this text, since here Peirce, after decades of exploring the nature of semiosis, returns to the most fundamental question a pragmatist can pose regarding this process—“What are signs for, anyway?” (1998, p. 388). He immediately responds by providing a correct but superficial answer to his question: “They are to communicate ideas, are they not?” (1998, p. 388). But

quickly he suggests more adequate, because deeper, replies, by underscoring that signs are instruments of thought, but simply means of communication, also by all too swiftly drawing a crucial distinction:

Even the imaginary signs called thoughts convey ideas from the mind of yesterday to the mind of tomorrow in which yesterday's has grown. Of course, then, these 'ideas' are not themselves 'thoughts,' or imaginary signs. They are some potentiality, some form, which may be embodied in external or internal [i.e., imaginary] signs. But why should this idea-potentiality [the very possibility of thought rather than any thought] be so poured from one vessel into another unceasingly? Is it a mere exercise of the World-Spirit's *Spiel-trieb*,—mere amusement? Ideas do, no doubt, grow in this process [of *Spiel*]. It is a part, perhaps the chief part, of the Process of the Creation of the World. If it has no ulterior motive, it might be likened to the performance of a symphony. (1998, p. 388)<sup>8</sup>

But the pragmaticist, at least the pragmaticist Peirce, “insists that this is not all, and offers to back his assertion by proof” (1998, p. 388). The ceaseless process of signs giving rise to other signs must be understood in terms not only of this process but also of what it secures in its course.

Nothing Derrida asserts precludes interpreting structure so inclusively that habit and habituation fall within its scope. But, then, nothing he has written invites us to take this term in this way. Whatever the play of signs signifies, it is a structured and simultaneously *destructuring*<sup>9</sup> movement in which a flexible and fluid logic, but a logic nonetheless, is relentlessly operative. An utterly amorphous flux and an immutably fixed system are certainly not the only two alternatives with which we are confronted.

Peirce no less than Derrida insists upon the inescapability of mediation.<sup>10</sup> We do not inhabit the domain of signs as exiles, but we are ineluctably exiled from one territory or another, time and again (Polanyi, 1962; Taylor, 2007). We cannot elude the play-impulse so easily as Peirce seems to suggest in the passage quoted above, just as we cannot so readily divest ourselves from structures, in the form of habits, as Derrida might be implying. Irrepressible impulse and recalcitrant habits do not preclude each other. Their dynamic conjunction is an integral part of semiotic play.

While habits cry out for interpretation (How did this rigid tendency become so deeply rooted in this individual? How did this subtle, nuanced habit get inscribed in this psyche?), they do so at least in part because the generation of our habits can be illuminated by a genealogy of the signs by which the human animal was initiated into a practice or that animal transformed itself as a participant in some undertaking or discipline.

In itself the formation of habits does not offer evidence against the *Speiltrieb*. But, then, in itself the play of signs results in more than the activity of play. Habits are generated and, in the course of being integrated, characters—selves—are formed. While the formation of habits is itself part of the play of signs, that play is generative of structures not highlighted or even identified by theorists such as Derrida. The play of



signs itself provides traces of the omnipresence of habits and of processes of habituation. These processes are significant in various sense of that Protean word.

I have no interest in allowing these reflections to become what all too often happens to play when it falls into the merciless clutches of philosophical authors. It becomes an increasingly dull topic of a labored discourse. Moreover, I am certainly not unaware of the fact that my opening move was a recollection of an imagined origin. But stories about origins are never the first or the last word. They are constructed *in medias res*. They allow us to turn *from* a finite episode carrying a determinate referent and (more or less) definite meaning *to* an open future, though a future having the weight to draw into itself what is presently inchoate and incipient. The recollection of an imagined origin can be an occasion for an as yet unimaginable future. It marks not a return to one's origins (or the nostalgia for such a return), but a turn toward the future, equipped with habits that both make improvisation possible and routine all too hard to escape. Finally, the play-impulse can by the advent of virtually anything whatsoever—a stranger's smile, an ocean's mist, the angle of light in late afternoon or the absence of light in a room—erupt.

### **3. Conclusion: Life, Play, and Freedom**

While Peirce was often playful, play is always pivotal. It is hardly adequate to say that much turns on play. It would be more accurate to insist almost everything does. This makes of the universe not a symphony, but an *ongoing* improvisation in which the exemplary performances of historical figures are not to be transcribed and copied,<sup>11</sup> but to be taken up and turned about (twisted this way and that). For the task of going on, improvisation is crucial. And for improvisation habit-change, precisely habit-change as the result of sign-processes, is indispensable. Playing changes on the past is the only way the past can be available to us as something vital. Retroactive resignification is itself an inevitable result of any living tradition. John Coltrane permits and often demands us to hear his predecessors differently, as does, say, James Joyce in literature or Stanley Cavell in philosophy. If anything, the latter illuminates the earlier more crucially than the earlier "explains" the latter (indeed, to suppose the earlier truly "explains" the latter is in effect to deny the reality of time, this reality being one with the emergence—the eruption—of novelty (Castoriadis, 1997). The transcendence of time is an achievement *in* time, that of history an accomplishment *in* history. But history is as much the banks as it is the flux of the river, the densely sedimented earth through which it carves its course as the ceaselessly changing course itself. In other words, it is the cluster of habits facilitating, frustrating, and in other ways bearing upon the play of signs no less than this play itself. To conceive this play in abstraction from the sedimentation of habits is to make the play of signs a far more ethereal and mysterious affair than it actually is. But, then, to conceive habits in abstraction from this play is to make habits far more immutable and external to our agency that *they* actually are. It

might be possible to mediate between the Peircean emphasis on the logical function of habit-change and the Derridean celebration of the irrepressible play of signs. Peirce's account drives us toward recognizing the spontaneous and aleatory dimensions of sign-processes, just as Derrida's thrusts us toward appreciating the structures without which such processes would be a mere flux incapable of carrying even the most unstable or precarious meanings. Sign and play are inextricably bound up with structures of some form, just as structures in the form of habits are so bound up with signs and play. Nothing in the first part of this statement precludes the second, nothing in the second part precludes the first.

The fire of play might return the most lithic structures to magma (Castoriadis, 1997), allowing them to be reshaped, just as the banks of the river might prove unable to channel the course of fiercely charging waters. But if the fire of play does not rise to a certain pitch it proves unable to transfigure stone into magma; so, too, if the waters do not rise to a certain level and force the banks to overflow, but prove able to channel the flux of the river, then that flux is not dramatically altered. Such turns of events carry both indications of eventualities unfolding in the immediate present *and* intimations of a far-flung future. They are themselves hinges on which history turns and they in their movements disclose the presence of innumerable, mostly undetected hinges. Here as virtually everywhere else in the sphere of signs, the most commonplace phenomena can carry the weightiest significance.<sup>12</sup> Play, Pivot, Door, Fire, Flux (to name but five such phenomena).

The reversals and turnabouts of play are only limited<sup>13</sup> but often pivotal, truly critical,<sup>14</sup> instances of signs in their function as hinges. The work of the theorist might be enlivened and itself turned in novel directions by sustained attention to the irrepressible play observable virtually everywhere in a universe perfused with signs. The life of signs is always to some extent an exemplification of *un être pour soi*, as much as it is bound up with otherness. That is, the purposes of life are to be discovered in its own developments. They are to be found in the interstices and ramifications of form-giving,<sup>15</sup> not in immutable or even stable forms. Signs are alive in use (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 432). Life is itself significant in its purposelessness, its being for itself, not simply or primarily in being subservient to a force other than itself. While the rose for example evolved as part of an economy, its *raison d'être* is ultimately to be sought in itself. *It* is its reason for being. In this, life is a refiguration of freedom in its more radical forms (Castoriadis, 1997) and, moreover, is itself truly an instance of freedom.

## Notes

- 1 Paine's uncle wrote to the President of Harvard College after his nephew declined to take his elder's advice and dissociate himself from Peirce (writing to President Walker, the two youths "only administer temptations to each other"). As Joseph Brent notes in his biography, Horatio Paine was the dearest friend of Charles's young manhood and the one with whom he studied Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* (p. 53).

- 2 Of course, the beginning is always provisional and variable. Peirce would work himself back from Kant to earlier thinkers, including medieval and classical authors. He would end up closer to Aristotle and Hegel (Fisch, 1986) than either Schiller or Kant, proving that origin is not destiny.
- 3 Henry James described the Metaphysical Club, formed a decade or so after Peirce's intellectual companionship to Horatio Paine, as an assemblage including his brother William, Peirce, Chauncey Wright, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and "various other long-head youths" who "wrangle grimly and stick to the question." *Letters of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), Volume 1, p. 273.
- 4 It is worth noting, if only in a note, that Peirce was so committed to minute analysis that he even entitled one of his books on logic *Minute Logic*.
- 5 "Thought requires," Peirce claims, "achievement for its own development, and without this development it is nothing. Thought must live and grow in incessant new and higher translations, or it proves itself not to be genuine thought" (1958-1966, 5.549).
- 6 This category is the one "which the rough and tumble of life renders most familiarly prominent. We are continually bumping up against hard fact" (1958-1966, 1.324). And brute facticity is at least part of what Peircean secondness designates. This "notion, of being such as other things make us, is such a prominent part of our life that we conceive other things also [not just ourselves] to exist by virtue of their reactions to each other" (ibid.). Ontologically interpreted, secondness is a mode of being, the being of anything actual or existent. More broadly, it as a category is the "idea of other, of *not*"; as such, it "becomes a very pivot of thought" (ibid.). It is, in other words, that around which thought turns. Things might *not* be what we take them to be and in our experience of discovering this we are compelled to modify our thinking. This makes clear why the experience, even more than the conception, of secondness increasingly becomes a "pivot of thought."
- 7 I am deeply indebted to my colleague Galen Johnson for helping me to identify some of the most important passages in Merleau-Ponty's writings to be found and for offering illuminating and suggestive comments on this metaphor in these writings (far more than I have been able to incorporate in this essay).
- 8 Thinking, Peirce insists, "always proceeds in the form of a dialogue—a dialogue between different phases of the *ego* so that, being *dialogical*, it is essentially composed of signs, as its matter, in the sense in which a game of chess has the chessmen for its matter. Not that the particular signs employed *are* themselves the thought! Oh, no; no whit more than the skins of an onion are the onion. (About as much so, however.) One selfsame thought may be carried upon the vehicle of English, German, Greek, or Gaelic; in diagrams, or in equations, or in graphs; all these are but so many skins of the onion, its inessential accidents. Yet that the thought should have *some* possible expression for some possible interpreter, is the very being of its being" (1998, p. 46). For our purpose, what is crucial is the germinal possibility underlying any actually employed sign.
- 9 It is perhaps still helpful to recall the passage in Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* from which the term deconstruction appears to have been derived. I strongly contend the better

translation of Heidegger is destructurement.

- 10 Derrida in fact appears to have been influenced by Peirce on this point.
- 11 This is a dig at Wynton Marsalis, specifically, his antiquarian manner of trying to safeguard *the* tradition of jazz. There is of course not one tradition, but various lineages. Of greater import, the way to honor this tradition is to renew its vitality, not by painstakingly reconstructing the exemplary performances of canonical figures (e.g., Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, or Miles Davis) but by innovation, improvisation, and going beyond what has yet been done.
- 12 “The function of art,” Dewey suggests, “has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things, a flower, a gleam of moonlight, the song of a bird, not things rare and remote, are means by which the deeper levels of life are touched as they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art” (*LW* 2, p. 249). That is, whatever fulfills this function *is* art, at least in Dewey’s sense
- 13 They are limited in the sense of being only a small part of an expansive or indefinite range of such phenomena, not necessarily limited in their significance or power to foster change.
- 14 Not all reversals are playful, perhaps not all instances of play involve reversals or turnabouts. Even so, so many instances of play involve reversals that it is appropriate to highlight this feature.
- 15 Here I am drawing upon Paul Klee’s notebooks, most specifically his claim, “Form-giving is life.” See also Tim Ingold, 2011, pp. 210-211. “*Phusis* is,” Cornelius Castoriadis suggests in “*Phusis* and Autonomy,” “the irresistible push of a being ... that tends to give itself a form in order *to be*, a law in order to be *determinate*, that tends to give itself, perhaps, a ‘thinkability.’ *Phusis* would tend to *form itself*” (p. 334).

## References

- Bateson, G. (1972). A theory of play and fantasy. In *Steps to an ecology of mind: A revolutionary approach to man’s understanding of himself* (pp. 177-193). New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Brent, J. (1998). *Charles S. Peirce: A life*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Castoriadis, C. (1997). *Worlds in fragments: Writings on politics, society, psychoanalysis, and the imagination* (D. A. Curtis, Trans. & Ed.). Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Colapietro, V. (2004). Signs and their vicissitudes: Meanings in excess of consciousness and functionality. *Semiotica*, (148), 229-243.
- Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and difference* (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Dewey, J. (1922). *Human nature and conduct. The middle works of John Dewey, Volume 14* (J. A. Boydston, Ed.). Carbondale, IL: SIU Press. Cited as *MW* 14.
- Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems. The later works of John Dewey, Volume 2* (J. A. Boydston, Ed.). Carbondale, IL: SIU Press. Cited as *LW* 2.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think*. Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co.
- Eco, U. (1992). *Interpretation and overinterpretation* (S. Collini, Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eco, U. (1994). *The limits of interpretation*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

- Emerson, R. W. (1982). *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected essays* (L. Ziff, Ed.). New York, NY: Penguin.
- Fisch, M. H. (1986). *Peirce, semeiotic, and pragmatism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Ingold, T. (2011). *Being alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- James, H. (1974). *Letters of Henry James, Volume 1* (L. Edel, Ed.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kant, I. (1929). *Critique of pure reason* (N. K. Smith, Trans.). New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Klee, P. (1973). *Notebooks, Volume 2: The nature of nature* (J. Spiller, Ed.; H. Norden, Trans.). London: Lund Humphries.
- Kuhn, T. (1996). *The structure of scientific revolution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Magada-Ward, M. (2005). Helping thought and keeping it pragmatic, or, why experience plays practical jokes. *Contemporary Pragmatism*, 2(2), 63-71.
- Malcolm, N. (1972). *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A memoir*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible* (C. Lefort, Ed.; A. Lingis, Trans.). Evanston, IL: Northwestern Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1958-1966). *The collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce, Volumes 1-6* (C. Hartshorne & P. Weiss, Eds.), *Volumes 7 & 8* (A. W. Burks, Ed). Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1998). A neglected argument for the reality of God. In The Peirce Edition Project (Eds.). *The essential Peirce, selected philosophical writings, Volume 2 [1893-1913]* (pp. 434-450). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Perry, R. B. (1935). *The thought & character of William James* (Vols. 1-2). Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.
- Polanyi, M. (1962). *Personal knowledge: Toward a post-critical philosophy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Schiller, F. (1967). *On the aesthetic education of man, in a series of letters* (E. M. Wilkinson, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Short, T. L. (2009). *Peirce's theory of signs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical investigations*. NY: Macmillan.

### **About the author**

Vincent Colapietro (colapietrovm@gmail.com) is Liberal Arts Research Professor Emeritus at Pennsylvania State University and currently affiliated to the University of Rhode Island through the Center for the Humanities. He has served as President of the Metaphysical Society of America, the Semiotic Society of America (SSA), and the Charles S. Peirce Society. The SSA has recently named him a Thomas Sebeok Fellow. He writes on a wide range of topics, from music and cinema to psychoanalysis and phenomenology, but the principal focus of his historical research is American pragmatism. This systematic

concern is with a handful of intersecting questions (those concerning agency, subjectivity, mind, signification, and normativity). His books include *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, *A Glossary of Semiotics*, and *Fateful Shapes of Human Freedom*. He is in process of completing a book on Peirce, also another on pragmatism and psychoanalysis.