

Peirce's "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" and the Rational Acceptability of Religious Belief

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I. The Common Understanding

- a. *Presented*: Peirce is arguing for the reality of God.
- b. *Criticized*: It does not have the effects Peirce describes; A case of special pleading; Inconsistent with Peirce's own comments
- c. *A Better Reading*: Peirce is arguing for the rational acceptability of belief in God's reality, not its truth.

II. Abduction

- a. *What it is*: An instinctive mode of thought that generates hypotheses. It is not inference as a discernment of the best explanation but "inference" as a guess at the best explanation. Quotation: "The surprising fact, *C*, is observed; But if *A* were true, *C* would be a matter of course. Hence, there is reason to suspect that *A* is true."
- b. *When it is valid*: It is rationally acceptable to adopt a hypothesis if and only if (1) one has no significant countervailing reasons to deny it; (2) it explains some phenomena; (3) it has experimental consequences such that it can be put to the test; and (4) it is natural in the sense that it is the one instinct suggests. Quotation: "What is good abduction? ...Of course, it must explain the facts. But what other conditions ought it to fulfill to be good? The question of the goodness of anything is whether that thing fulfills its end. What, then, is the end of an explanatory hypothesis? Its end is, through subjection to the test of experiment, to lead to the avoidance of all surprise and to the establishment of a habit of positive expectation that shall not be disappointed. Any hypothesis, therefore, may be admissible, in the absence of any special reasons to the contrary, provided it be capable of experimental verification, and only in so far as it is capable of such verification."

III. The Neglected Argument

- a. *Argument and Argumentation*: An argument is a line of thought that (a) tends to produce a definite belief and (b) does so reasonably. Quotation: "An 'Argument' is any process of thought reasonably tending to produce a definite belief. An 'Argumentation' is an Argument proceeding upon definitely formulated premises."
- b. *The Nest of Arguments*
 - i. *Humble Argument*: A description of a specimen of a line of thought that leads to belief in God's reality. Satisfies condition (2) above. Quotations: "From speculations on the homogeneities of each Universe, the Muser will naturally pass

to the consideration of homogeneities and connections between two different Universes, or all three” and “the more [a man] ponders it, the more it will find response in every part of his mind, for its beauty, for its supplying an ideal of life, and for its thoroughly satisfactory explanation of his whole threefold environment [i.e. the entire universe].”

- ii. Neglected Argument: The hypothesis of God’s existence would occur to any normal person. Satisfies condition (4) above. Quotations: “from what I know of the effects of Musement on myself and others, ...any normal man...will come to be stirred to the depths of his nature by the beauty of the idea and by its august practicality...desiring above all things to shape the whole conduct of life and all the springs of action into conformity with that hypothesis...[which is] neither more nor less than the state of mind of called Believing that proposition” and “Animals of all races rise far above the general level of their intelligence in those performances that are their proper function, such as flying and nest-building for ordinary birds; and what is man’s proper function if it be not to embody general ideas in art-creation, in utilities, and, above all, in theoretical cognition? To give the lie to his own consciousness of divining the reasons of phenomena would be as silly in a man, as it would be in a fledgling bird to refuse to trust to its wings and leave the nest, because the poor little thing it had read Babinet and judged aerostation to be impossible on hydrodynamical grounds”
- iii. Scientific Argument: The hypothesis has conceivable practical consequences, viz. the world should be rationally ordered and we should find our highest calling to be participation in that order. Satisfies condition (3) above. Quotation: “the [scientific] man...will see that the hypothesis, irresistible though it be to first intention, yet needs Probation [i.e. inductive testing]; and that though an infinite being is not tied down to any consistency [Peirce’s worry here is that the hypothesis may not have any deducible conceivable consequences], yet man, like any other animal, is gifted with power of understanding sufficient for the conduct of life. This brings him, for testing the hypothesis, to taking his stand upon Pragmaticism [Peirce’s distinct version of pragmatism], which implies faith in common-sense and in instinct, though only as they issue from the cupel-furnace [a furnace used to separate the noble metals like gold from others] of measured criticism. In short, he will say that the N.A. is the First Stage of a scientific inquiry, resulting in a hypothesis of the very highest Plausibility, whose ultimate test must lie in its value in the self-controlled growth of man’s conduct of life”
- iv. But what about condition (1) above?