

Implicit Agapism in Peirce's "Neglected Argument"*

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Abstract: I argue that the key to understanding Peirce's "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" is found in another of his essays, "Evolutionary Love." I maintain that without the insights of that essay, the Neglected Argument seems rather unimpressive and mysterious. I note that the "three universes of experience" which form the domain of the Neglected Argument, correspond to Peirce's three modes of the development of the universe discussed in "Evolutionary Love." This connection, together with the attitude of "play" from which the Neglected Argument proceeds and its connection to agapism, allows us to make sense of the almost shockingly confident claims Peirce makes for the Neglected Argument, including its assumed universal persuasiveness.

The topic of God is one with which C.S. Peirce was principally and perennially concerned, a fact that is perhaps most vividly demonstrated in his unique and somewhat mysterious essay, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God."¹ Here I argue that the key to understanding Peirce's Neglected Argument is found in another, earlier, essay, "Evolutionary Love."² I maintain that without the insights of that essay, the Neglected Argument seems rather unimpressive and mysterious. To show this, I will provide an overview of the arguments of both essays and offer my own interpretation of the Neglected Argument, utilizing the theoretical context provided by "Evolutionary Love."

Peirce's argument for the reality of God proceeds very differently from the way that most arguments for the existence of God have generally gone.³ In fact, if one familiar with the classical proofs turned to Peirce, she might not realize, but for the title of the essay, that she was reading an argument for God at all. Peirce begins, thankfully, by defining his terms, so that when he gets to his argument, the reader will be able to keep up. One might wish more philosophers would follow this example, but it is even more necessary than usual in this case, given the subject matter. For of course "God" signifies many different concepts to many different people, and philosophers are no exception. In the first sentence of his Neglected Argument, Peirce tells us that the God he is arguing for is the *Ens necessarium*, the necessary being who is responsible for the creation of the "three Universes of Experience."⁴ What exactly these universes are is given remarkably little attention in the essay, but the reader familiar with Peirce will recognize that they map fairly readily onto his three ultimate categories.

¹ C.S. Peirce, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" in *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1958), 358-79.

² C.S. Peirce, "Evolutionary Love" in *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. I, eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 352-71.

³ For more on what Peirce means by "God," as well as why he chooses the word "reality" rather than the more common "existence," see his "The Concept of God" in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 2011).

⁴ Peirce, "Neglected Argument," 358.

Peirce also draws a distinction between the terms “reality” and “existence” as applied to God, and he intentionally restricts the domain of his own argument to the former, even famously saying that “it would be fetichism to say that God ‘exists.’” One might think that this sharply separates Peirce from the classical (or contemporary) natural theologians, but this would, I think, be a mistake. In the preceding portion of the fetichism quotation, Peirce admits that his insistence on the “reality” locution may be “overscrupulosity,” and that it is due to his preference for restricting “exist” to “its strict philosophical sense of ‘react with the other like things in the environment.’” He then continues, “Of course, *in that sense*, it would be fetichism to say that God ‘exists.’”⁵

Kathleen Hull helpfully clarifies this existence/reality distinction:

...existence implies reality, but not vice versa. While only sensory or spatiotemporal objects "exist," reality casts a wider net...God's reality, for Peirce, is related to potentiality and possibility — metaphysical categories that are broader and greater than actuality and ‘mere’ existence.⁶

Commenting on this same distinction, Douglas Anderson says,

Peirce thus is not seeking after a strictly individual entity nor a merely immanent being of a sort that can be ‘verified’ through the methods of crude empiricism.⁷

Such statements are surely correct so far as they go, though one should also be careful here not to assume that Peirce is thereby driving an impenetrable wedge between himself and the theologians. For none of them would think that God “exists” in Peirce’s sense either. The conclusion of the classical proofs is never to a “sensory or spatiotemporal object,” nor to something which “reacts to like things in its environment,” or even *has* any like things in this sense. Such an entity would not be *a se*, and so could have little in common with the God of the classical theologians. Peirce’s choice to define his God as the *ens necessarium* is significant, since someone as familiar with the history of philosophy as he would use such terminology only if he intended to call to mind the scholastic divisions of being, in which necessary being was distinguished from contingent being, and closely paralleled by similar divisions between infinite and finite being, being from itself (*a se*) and being from another, essential and participatory being, uncreated and created being, pure actuality and potentiality, etc. So while Hull is correct to note that “reality” is a broader category than “existence,” the implication that Peirce’s God is more potential than actual is misguided.

Similarly, one should be careful not to assume that Peirce’s God is some ultimately mysterious, unexperienceable creative Force. In this vein, Anderson quotes Peirce as saying that he does not “regard the Creator of Men as a Socius, since, if we can be said to have any sort of converse with Him, it is altogether different in kind from any we could have with any equal.”⁸ Such statements ought to be balanced, however, by other places where Peirce speaks more positively of the possibility of a meaningful connection with the divine, such as when

⁵ Peirce, “Answers to Questions Concerning My Belief in God.”

⁶ Kathleen Hull, “The Inner Chambers of His Mind: Peirce’s ‘Neglected Argument for God as Related to Mathematical Experience,” 489.

⁷ Douglas Anderson, *Strands of System*, 142.

⁸ Peirce, MS 339, 329, quoted in *ibid.*

he says, "...some—though wrongly—high in the church say that it is only negatively, as being entirely different from everything else, that we can attach any meaning to the Name [of God]. This is not so; because the discoveries of science, their enabling us to *predict* what will be the course of nature, is proof conclusive that, though we cannot think any thought of God's, we can catch a fragment of His Thought, as it were."⁹ Beyond God's necessity, which he never discusses in detail, and his creative power, Peirce tells us little about the God he is "proving." In the later "Additament" to the "Neglected Argument," he says a bit more:

...the pragmatistic definition of the *Ens necessarium* would require many pages; but some hints toward it may be given. A disembodied spirit, or pure mind, has its being out of time, since all that it is destined to think is fully in its being at any and every previous time...The idea may be caught if it is described as that of which order and uniformity are particular varieties. Pure mind, as creative of thought, must, *so far as it is manifested in time*, appear as having a character related to the habit-taking capacity, just as super-order is related to uniformity.¹⁰

Peirce's God, then, I propose, does not look altogether different from the God of the theologians, with one bold exception—that it has no particular identity.¹¹

Where the argument really *does* differ is in its method. Indeed, Peirce's argument is not an argument at all in the sense of the classical theological proofs. These Peirce would (presumably) label, in the context of his essay, "Argumentations." For he distinguishes between an "Argument," of which the Neglected Argument is an example, and an "Argumentation." The latter, he says, "is an Argument proceeding upon definitely formulated premises."¹² It is, in other words, what most philosophers think of as an "argument" nowadays, or at any rate what we tell our undergraduates it is. An "Argument" for Peirce, however, is something more basic: "any process of thought reasonably tending to produce a definite belief."¹³ Given this intentionally loose definition, we should not be too surprised that the Neglected Argument does not look much like a proof for anything. This is because for Peirce, the Neglected Argument is less like a traditional argument—complete with premises, a conclusion supported by those premises, and the employment of various rules of inference—and more like a basic belief, arrived at through the normal functioning of some cognitive faculty other than reason by inference. It is more akin to perceptual beliefs than to an argument that persuades by the grasping of connections between its premises. Thus, the conclusion of the Neglected Argument is of a different level of persuasion than

⁹ Peirce, "Answers to Questions Concerning My Belief in God."

¹⁰ C.S. Peirce, "Additament" in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. VI, eds. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1965-1966), 336 [6.490]. Italics mine. This passage, particularly the italicized, almost parenthetical remark, should serve to undermine any attempt to view Peirce's God as reducible to or synonymous with a natural, habituating principle.

¹¹ But then neither does the being proved in Aquinas' Five Ways, or in Leibniz's cosmological proof, or any number of others. The conclusion of all of these proofs is always some sort of disembodied, eternal mind or consciousness, responsible for the ordering of all that we see in our universe. Revelation is then typically tacked on at the end to move from this transcendent "God of the philosophers" to something more familiar and personal that the common churchgoer could latch onto. I submit then, that insofar as the object to be proved is concerned, Peirce's argument takes its rightful place in this long and distinguished tradition.

¹² Peirce, "Neglected Argument," 359.

¹³ *Ibid.*

other arguments (or argumentations): Peirce assumes that once grasped, the Neglected Argument will convince every rational, honest person. Though Peirce does not use this terminology, the truth he is pointing us to (i.e., the reality of God) is a bit like an analytic truth, in that it is enough to understand it to see that it is so.

So how exactly does one come to understand it? Not, as we have seen, by stringing together premises and analyzing them to see what follows. Peirce's Neglected Argument proceeds in three stages. As he explains in his "Additament," the first is simply the casual reflection upon some aspect of one of the three universes, by which one is led to assent to the hypothesis that God is real. Peirce here calls this the "humble argument" (HA). The second stage, as Peirce puts it, consists "in showing that the humble argument is the natural fruit of free meditation, since every heart will be ravished by the beauty and adorability of the Idea, when it is so pursued."¹⁴ And the third stage is a study of the method of the first two stages, and the drawing of an analogy between the Neglected Argument and scientific inquiry, concluding that, some differences notwithstanding, the two proceed very much the same way, which of course in turn lends further credibility to the Neglected Argument. Peirce occasionally collectively refers to the group of three as the "Neglected Argument."

I am here less concerned with the third stage of the Neglected Argument than with the first two. In particular, I am most concerned with what gives the HA its persuasive force, and with what allows that force to be universalized in the second stage. As Peirce presents the argument, the whole process begins with, of all things, a time of play. A few minutes set aside each day, he says, is enough to convince anyone of the truth of his argument. One need only reflect on any aspect of any of the three universes that one likes. There are no rules, no constraints (other than time)—the only thing to be avoided is too much seriousness. For if the game ever goes on too long or becomes too serious, then it can quickly become something more like science or work, and the force of the HA may be lost. Peirce calls this activity "Musement." It is, literally, playing around with ideas or features of one's experience in order to get better acquainted with some nook of the universes.

One may wonder here what Peirce means by "the three universes of experience." On this he says:

Of the three Universes of Experience familiar to us all, the first comprises all mere Ideas, those airy nothings to which the mind of poet, pure mathematician, or another *might* give local habitation and a name within that mind...The second Universe is that of the Brute Actuality of things and facts...their Being consists in reactions against Brute forces...The third Universe comprises everything whose being consists in active power to establish connections between different objects, especially between objects in different Universes...Such...is a living consciousness, and such the life, the power of growth, of a plant. Such is a living constitution...¹⁵

Thus, Peirce has in mind three universes that correspond to his three categories: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. And these in turn, as we will see, correspond to the three modes of development or growth or evolution in the universe: tychism (chance), anancism (necessity), and agapism (creative will or love). In all of these, the trend is that the first two

¹⁴ Peirce, "Additament," 333 [6.487].

¹⁵ Peirce, "Neglected Argument," 359.

exist in some sort of natural opposition, while the third involves the work of mind to make connections and sort out that opposition. Reflection on any of these three universes (though perhaps especially on the third), Peirce thinks, will draw one inexorably to the assurance of the reality of God.

In his earlier essay “Evolutionary Love,” Peirce tackles the concept of evolution as a means of development in the universe, and proposes a novel motivating force for that development: love. Peirce sees in the scientific history since Darwin two broad conceptions of the mechanisms driving evolution that are at war with one another. The first he calls “tychism,” or fortuitous variation. This is the mechanism of chance, of sport, of sheer dumb luck. In conflict with this is “anancism,” or mechanical necessity. This is the mechanism of order to the point of determinism. Each of these conceptions attempts to account for the progress of development in the universe, the first by brute statistics, the second by the necessary outworking of some internal principle. In contrast to both of these mechanisms, Peirce proposes “agapism,” or the method of creative love. This overcomes the difficulties of the other two conceptions while accounting in a much more satisfying way for the growth that we see in the universe. Indeed, without the doctrine of creative love, this growth could not be understood. Anancism fails to account for the element of chaotic chance that we see at the core of every facet of the universe that we look into. And yet sheer tychism is insufficient as well, for as Peirce says, “In genuine agapasm...advance takes place by virtue of a positive sympathy among the created springing from continuity of mind. This is the idea which tyochasticism knows not how to manage.”¹⁶

Elsewhere in the essay he discusses the tendency of creative love to give itself completely for the other—indeed, for its very opposite—as the principle which drives real growth. Without this principle, we have only change or stagnation, but never growth. Indeed, it is this aspect of the principle of growth that presumably leads Peirce to identify it with love, for that concept—especially in its Christian expression—is perhaps the purest exemplar of self-giving, even to the point of giving oneself for one’s enemy. It is here that Peirce locates the key to progress in the universe, thus reifying in the natural realm what the apostle John identified with the divine essence. And so, in one of his more beautiful passages, Peirce says,

The philosophy we draw from John’s gospel is that this is the way mind develops; and as for the cosmos, only so far as it yet is mind, and so has life, is it capable of further evolution. Love, recognizing germs of loveliness in the hateful, gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely.¹⁷

How this insight informs his Neglected Argument is yet to be seen, but already we can see a hint of what Peirce may have in mind. The universe grows through love, and so our reflection on it—especially when undertaken in a spirit akin to love—will naturally drive us to contemplation of its deepest features, which turn out upon examination to be very much like *mind*, and hence very familiar.

With this background in mind, let us return to the Neglected Argument. In particular, we can now examine how the “humble argument” can be universalized and from whence

¹⁶ Peirce, “Evolutionary Love,” 362.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 354.

comes its persuasive force, and in the pursuit of this we can spell out more exactly the connection between the Neglected Argument and Peirce's thoughts on agapism from "Evolutionary Love." At first blush, nothing about Peirce's Neglected Argument seems particularly compelling. Even speaking as a theist, I have no trouble at all in looking into almost any aspect of the universe—perhaps especially those describable in terms of the physical sciences—as closely as I wish, without ever being tempted toward the contemplation of the divine, much less compelled toward assent to its reality. I imagine the situation is even more pronounced for the nontheist. But of course if I cannot see how this "humble argument" is supposed to work, even for one person, then I cannot see how it will ever be universalized as a persuasive argument for the masses. Thus, I find myself in agreement with Dennis Rohatyn when he writes:

[The humble argument] gives us some high-minded but shallow rhetoric concerning the need to persevere in the face of adversity. It alludes (6.479) to "the secret design of God," which we help to perfect even though we are necessarily kept ignorant of what it is. It gives us about as much faith in God as the traditional replies to the problem of evil do: none. The second argument, which Peirce hides as long as possible, is really a variation on the theme of instinct, and consequently, no better than the first one: it claims that "... a latent tendency toward belief in God is a fundamental ingredient of the soul" (6.487). Presumably, this thesis is supported by some remarks concerning the "three Universes of Experience" (6.455)... But nothing Peirce says about the second argument is convincing, even though he speaks of it as the central one in his "nest" of three. It is difficult to see why I must even meditate about God, let alone find Him the "natural precipitate of meditation" (6.487) on the Peircean categorial structure.¹⁸

Overlooking the dismissive tone, I agree that there is nothing intuitively compelling about the Neglected Argument as Peirce formulates it, without recourse to any of his prior thought. Perhaps, then, the argument has been "neglected" for good reason.

But what if we do look at his prior thought, and attempt to understand the Neglected Argument in light of that? How, in particular, might the argument go when understood in light of Peirce's thought on agapism? In that case, both the immediate force of the humble argument (the first stage) and the universal applicability of the neglected argument (the second stage) take on new meaning. For when one undertakes to "play" with the universe in Musement, she is engaged in an inherently positive and congenial activity that lends itself naturally to the disposition of love. Moreover, the closer one looks into any corner of any of the three universes of experience, the more clearly one will begin to see the motivating force of the universe—how its connections are made and what drives its changes. In particular, an absolutely inescapable observation will be that the universe, no matter at which part of it one

¹⁸ Dennis Rohatyn, "Resurrecting Peirce's 'Neglected Argument' for God" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 18, no. 1 (1982), 67. In fact, these sorts of considerations lead Rohatyn to develop an essentially distinct version of the Neglected Argument from peripheral comments of Peirce on his original essay. As this argument is long and rather technical, I will not go into it here, but Rohatyn's reaction to the original argument as Peirce formulates it is instructive, as it illustrates what I take to be the average layperson's reaction to Peirce's argument—and probably the reaction of the average philosopher who is uninformed about Peirce's background assumptions.

looks, is undergoing continual growth. And from here, the path is not long to God. For as we have seen, growth and love are inseparable for Peirce, and God just is love. As he says,

Everybody can see that the statement of St. John [that God is love] is the formula of an evolutionary philosophy, which teaches that growth comes only from love, from—I will not say self-*sacrifice*, but from the ardent impulse to fulfil another's highest impulse.¹⁹

Here, then, is the key to the argument. It is this impulse to fulfill the impulse of another that drives growth, and this is inherently and necessarily the work of mind. So the more intimate and minute our analysis of the universe becomes, the closer we find ourselves to the mind at the base of all things. Thus, the persuasiveness of the humble argument consists in this: the universe is presented to me as growing towards order, and this is necessarily the work of a loving, creative mind. Left as this, the humble argument is not so very distinct from typical design arguments. But this alone is not the force of Peirce's humble argument, for this first stage is inseparable from the second stage, the neglected argument itself, which seeks to establish the universal applicability of the whole.²⁰ And the way this is done is crucial to understanding the whole argument, for it is not by analogical inference, as with most design arguments. Rather, it is by a transcendental turn of sorts—we do not *just* see order in the universe and abduct from this to a mind. As soon as we do this (so soon that the two are not really separable in experience), we also see that we are the sort of thing that gives this order. Thus, the persuasiveness of the argument is a function of both the necessity of love for growth and the simultaneous recognition that we are the sort of beings who love. So when we see growth in the universe, there is an immediate and deep connection with our very being, because we recognize the product of our creativity in the way a parent would recognize (and immediately be compelled toward) its child. Thus Peirce says,

I may just mention that it could have been shown that the hypothesis of God's Reality is logically not so isolated a conclusion as it may seem. On the contrary, it is connected so with a theory of the nature of thinking *that if this be proved so is that*.²¹

But without an understanding of love as the center of both the physical universe and the nature of mind, this connection would never be seen. And consequently the compulsion to

¹⁹ Peirce, "Evolutionary Love," 354.

²⁰ My reading differs here from Bowman Clarke's, in his "Peirce's Neglected Argument" (*Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 13, no. 4 (1977): 277-87). There, he claims that the humble argument is itself simply a restatement of the classic design argument for God's existence, as it proceeds by abduction (or "retroduction") from the observance of order in the universe to the belief in God. This, he says, has not been a neglected argument at all, and so one must look to the second stage for the crux of the Neglected Argument. I, however, maintain that that the first and second stages of the Neglected Argument are to be considered in conjunction—that, while they are separable in thought for purposes of examination, in experience they are parts of the same event. Thus, even when analyzed, their intimate connection should be kept in mind, so that one is not tempted to elevate the importance or force of one over the other. Such, I think, is Clarke's mistake. The humble argument does not reduce to a simple design argument by analogy, for to read it so would be to divorce it from the second stage of the argument and ignore the motivations which urge Peirce to attribute universal applicability to the argument.

²¹ Peirce, "Additament," 337 [6.491]. Emphasis mine.

God would never be felt. Thus, the key to understanding—and charitably interpreting—Peirce’s Neglected Argument lies in his agapistic understanding of the cosmos.

In closing, I’d like to leave you with a rather lovely quote from Peirce’s “Answers to Questions Concerning My Belief in God,” which I think nicely sums up the spirit of the Neglected Argument, and lends further credibility to its intimate connection with love:

...the question whether there really *is* such a being [as God] is the question whether all physical science is merely the figment—the arbitrary figment—of the students of nature, and further whether the *one* lesson the Gautama Boodha, Confucius, Socrates, and all who from any point of view have had their ways of conduct determined by meditation upon the physico-psychical universe, be only their arbitrary notion or be the Truth behind the appearances which the frivolous man does not think of; and whether the superhuman courage which such contemplation has conferred upon priests who go to pass their lives with lepers and refuse all offers of rescue is mere silly fanaticism, the passion of a baby, or whether it is strength derived from the power of the truth. Now the only guide to the answer to this question lies in the power of the passion of love which more or less overmasters every agnostic scientist and everybody who seriously and deeply considers the universe. But whatever there may be of *argument* in all this is as nothing, the merest nothing, in comparison to its force as an appeal to one’s own instinct, which is to argument what substance is to shadow, what bed-rock is to the built foundations of a cathedral.