

Another Guess at the Riddle: More Ado About Nothing

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The title of this paper is a play upon C.S. Peirce's seminal paper, "A Guess at the Riddle." Peirce's title may seem innocent enough, but I want to suggest that the *riddle* being addressed here lies at the very heart of speculative philosophy. I will begin with an exploration of "the riddle" as addressed by Peirce, highlighting what is at issue within Peirce's riddle and why it so fundamental to speculative philosophy. I will then undertake an examination of the relation between Peirce's riddle and some of the radical claims made by James Bradley about the nature of speculative philosophy. I will follow this with a brief outline of Peirce's own "Guess at the Riddle," as well as some of the suggestions offered by Bradley as to how the 'riddle' might best be addressed. I will end by offering my own guess at the riddle as a piece of speculative cosmogony that goes beyond Peirce and Bradley in suggesting a much more radical account of Nothing as the fundamental ground of being.

1. *The Riddle*

Peirce's title is telling for a number of reasons. First, it is telling insofar as it does not speak of *a* riddle in the indefinite sense, but *the* riddle as if there was only one such riddle and this is it. That Peirce would use the definite article in this way is likely no accident, especially given his almost obsessive penchant for the careful use of words.¹ The significance of the riddle is also implied in the importance Peirce attributed to his own efforts to address it, referring to his guess as "a philosophical edifice that shall outlast the vicissitudes of time."² So what exactly is *the riddle*? In *A Guess at the Riddle* Peirce identifies the riddle with the important but deceptively simple question of "how the laws of nature came about."³ I want to suggest that the issues underlying this seemingly simple

¹ For more on Peirce's view on the importance of terminology see his "The Ethics of Terminology," *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, ed. The Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 263-266.

² C.S. Peirce, "A Guess at the Riddle," in *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, eds. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 245-279, at 246.

³ *Ibid.*, 277.

question speak to the very heart of speculative philosophy, and may even point to the very ground and essence of thought as such.

In the discussion leading up his guess at the riddle Peirce takes us through a rather interesting preamble regarding what he rather tellingly refers to as the *call for explanation*, noting that “every fact of a general or orderly nature calls for an explanation.”⁴ There are at least two things to note here: 1) There are facts of a general or orderly nature; and 2) The very existence of these general or orderly facts calls for an explanation. Now generality and order, as Peirce understands them, are characteristics of phenomena that are regular, repeatable, predictable, and so on. It follows, conversely, that phenomena that are not regular, repeatable, predictable, and so on, are not of a general or orderly nature and hence do not call for an explanation. Peirce says as much when he notes that there appear to be some “facts not calling for and not capable of explanation.” Key examples of phenomena that don’t call for explanation are the “hereness and nowness” or *haecceity* of things, as well as the facts of “indeterminacy” and “multiplicity.” We will return to this later.

The second key point to be addressed here is Peirce’s claim that general or orderly phenomena *call* for an explanation. As I hope to show this call for explanation is itself a function of the essential character of the symbolic mode of existence that is characteristic of logical or thoughtful existence. Such a call speaks not only to the phenomena in question, but to the very nature or essence of thought or mind properly understood. I want to suggest that such a call is no mere idle curiosity or psychological fancy, but is more akin to a *calling*, something that is part and parcel of the symbolic character of a thoughtful, logical mode of being. Peirce’s reference to this call as *logical* in nature suggests as much.

But every fact of a general or orderly nature calls for an explanation; and logic forbids us to assume in regard to any given fact of that sort that it is of its own nature absolutely inexplicable. This is what Kant calls a regulative principle, that is to say, an intellectual hope. The sole immediate purpose of thinking is to render things intelligible; and to think and yet in that very act to think a thing unintelligible is a self-stultification.⁵

Peirce’s appeal to logic is fundamental here, for he thinks that we are “in the main logical animals.”⁶ To be a logical animal in Peirce’s sense is to stand in a thoughtful, inquisitive, questioning relation to world where the call to explain stands as a constitutive condition of that mode of being. To better appreciate the full force of Peirce’s point we will take a short sojourn through his account of logic and of philosophy in general.

⁴ Ibid., 275.

⁵ Ibid., 275.

⁶ C.S. Peirce, “The Fixation of Belief,” in *Essential Peirce 1*, 109-123, at 112.

1.1 Philosophy, the Normative Sciences, and the Orientation Towards the Ideal

Peirce classifies Philosophy as a “Positive Science, or Science of Fact, which does not busy itself with gathering facts, but merely with learning what can be learned from that experience which presses in upon every one of us daily and hourly.”⁷ As a science of positive fact, Philosophy stands as a “Science of Discovery” alongside Mathematics and the Special Sciences (which Peirce calls Idioscopy).⁸ Where mathematics is concerned with “what is and is not logically possible, without making itself responsible for its actual existence,”⁹ and the special sciences such as physics, chemistry, and so on, are concerned with discovering and explaining “new facts” or “new phenomena,” philosophy is concerned with broadly shared or “*common experience*” which nobody doubts or can doubt, and which nobody ever even *pretended* to doubt except as a consequence of a belief in that experience so entire and perfect that it failed to be conscious of itself, just as an American who has never been abroad fails to perceive the characteristics of Americans; just as a writer is unaware of the peculiarities of his own style; just as none of us can see himself as others see him.”¹⁰ Thus, where the special sciences are concerned with novel facts of experience in a specialized and partial sense, Philosophy is concerned with those aspects of experience that are so much a part of our ordinary, everyday experience, so close-at-hand, as it were, that we have a difficult time even raising them to the level of a question.¹¹

Now Philosophy, for Peirce, is itself comprised of “three grand divisions,” namely, 1) “Phenomenology, which simply contemplates the Universal Phenomenon, and discerns its ubiquitous elements”; 2) “Normative Science, which investigates the universal and necessary laws of the relation of Phenomena to *Ends*”; and 3) “Metaphysics, which endeavors to comprehend the Reality of Phenomena.”¹² Of the Normative Sciences there are once again three:

1) Esthetics, 2) Ethics, and 3) Logic. The primary feature of a normative science is that it “distinguishes what ought to be from what ought not to be.” Thus, 1) Esthetics is concerned with what ought to be “objectively admirable without any ulterior reason”; 2) Ethics is concerned with “right and wrong” as a guide to “self-controlled, or deliberate, conduct”; and 3) Logic is concerned with the true and the false as a guide to “self-controlled, or deliberate, thought.”¹³

⁷ C.S. Peirce, “The Three Normative Sciences,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 196-207, at 196.

⁸ C.S. Peirce, “An Outer Classification of the Sciences,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 258-62, at 259.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Peirce, “Three Normative Sciences,” 196-8.

¹¹ C.S. Peirce, “Philosophy and the Conduct of Life,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 27-41, at 35-6.

¹² Peirce, “Three Normative Sciences,” 196-7.

¹³ Peirce, “Outer Classification of the Sciences,” 260. In a particularly salient moment in the opening lines of “On Science and Natural Classes,” Peirce makes the following observation: “When the best method of doing a thing is in doubt, one of the best aids toward getting set upon the right path is to consider what need of doing it there is. This is axiomatic.” *Essential Peirce 2*, at 115. Determining the best method of doing a thing is, for Peirce, the ultimate, most vital task of

A definitive concern of the normative sciences, as outlined by Peirce, is the relation of feeling, action, and thought to some *ideal* limit or end. The ideal of feeling is traditionally referred to as Beauty, the ideal of action or ethics is the Right (or the Good), and the ideal of thought is Truth. Each ideal serves as a limit against which the three domains of feeling, action, and thought are to be measured and towards which they are to be aimed. Thus, Esthetics might be characterized as the study of what is beautiful or admirable as the proper end of aesthetic enjoyment, Ethics as the study of what is right or good as the proper end of action, and Logic as the study of what is true or *reasonable* as the proper end of thought. The ultimate aim of life is to make the ideal real, or at least as real as is possible within any given concrete condition.¹⁴ Thus, on this account, the ideal is both immanent and transcendent. It is immanent insofar as it is involved in the finite conditions of life as both measure and lure, and it is transcendent insofar as it is never reducible to its concrete instances, no matter how extensive they may be. We see this illustrated in Peirce's account of a heroic act:

Now, it is not necessary for logicity that a man should himself be capable of the heroism of self-sacrifice. It is sufficient that he should recognize the possibility of it, should perceive that only that man's inferences who has it are really logical, and should consequently regard his own as being only so far valid as they would be accepted by the hero. So far as he thus refers his inferences to that standard, he becomes

logic. Peirce often expresses the purpose and function of logic in many ways, but underlying them all is the general idea that "logic is not the *art of method* but the science which analyzes method." *The Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, vol. 4 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982-2010), 510. The manner in which science analyzes method is by determining how well a method is suited to its ends or purposes. In the end, it is the purpose or reason for doing something (i.e., what need of doing it there is) that best serves to guide, direct or govern one's investigation, thereby helping to orient one along the best and most appropriate path. As Peirce says, this is not a trivial observation but is axiomatic if one is to become properly oriented in one's investigation. "Logic is the study of reasoning, it is true, and reasoning may be regarded,—not quite correctly, but we may waive the point,—as a psychological process. If we are to admit that, however, we must say that logic is not an all-round study of reasoning, but only of the conditions of reasoning being bad and good, and if good to what degree, and in what application. Now good reasoning is reasoning which attains its purpose. Its purpose is to supply a guide for conduct,—and thinking, being an active operation, is a species of conduct,—in case no precept from which a judgment could have been directly formed is at hand. Its object is to say what the reasoner either *will* think when that precept occurs, or what he *would* think if it did occur. The psychological process of reasoning is wholly aside from the purpose of logic." See C.S. Peirce, "The Basis of Pragmatism in Phaneroscopy," *Essential Peirce 2*, 360-70, at 386-387. Note Peirce's claim that "thinking, being an active operation, is a species of conduct." This is of vital importance for understanding Peirce's work, and in particular his pragmatism, for most misinterpret his pragmatic principle as referring solely to conduct understood as practical action. It should be clear here that thinking itself "is a species of conduct," so that the pragmatic principle includes determining the meaning of a term in thought as well as practical action. This is a vital and often misunderstood aspect of Peirce's work.

¹⁴C.S. Peirce, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," in *Essential Peirce 2*, 434-450, at

identified with such a mind.¹⁵

While the ideal is actively present within conditions of symbolic life as standard and lure, such *haecceitous* conditions can never fully express or exhaust the ideal toward which they are oriented and against which they are measured, no matter how perfect or complete those conditions may appear. Applied to our nature as logical animals, the ultimate aim of logic will be the advancement of knowledge as a way of “giving a hand toward making the world more reasonable whenever, as the slang is, it is “up to us” to do so,” for knowledge is itself a form of reasonableness, and the aim of rendering the world reasonable is the ultimate aim of all conduct.¹⁶

I want to characterize this essential, constitutive relation to the ideal as a kind of intrinsic *orientation* that functions both as map and as compass, an essential orientation that is also constitutive of our general sense of *place*. As map the intrinsic orientation towards the ideal gives us a sense of where we are and how we are doing, and as compass it also gives us a sense of where we ought to be, or ought to be going.¹⁷ I want to suggest that it is this essential constitutive, *alethic* orientation toward the ideal of reasonableness that marks us as logical animals in Peirce’s sense.¹⁸ If this sounds like a revival of the notion of final causation, that’s because it is, and unabashedly so.

This intrinsic orientation toward the ideal is often embodied and expressed in what Peirce refers to as the principle of *Hope*, a principle that takes the aim at reasonableness to be not only possible, but realizable to increasing degrees. So important is the sense of hope that Peirce even goes so far as to identify it as a fundamental principle of logic per se, an essential and necessary ingredient of our *alethic* orientation as logical beings.¹⁹

¹⁵ C.S. Peirce, “The Doctrine of Chances,” in *Essential Peirce 1*, 142-54, at 149-50.

¹⁶ Peirce, “Three Normative Sciences,” 200; “Outer Classification of the Sciences,” 255.

¹⁷ I want to suggest that this dual sense of where we are and where we ought to be stands as a fundamental ingredient in the importance of place in both its everyday and its philosophical sense. Expressed in terms of Peirce’s account of the Normative sciences, the intrinsic orientation associated with and constitutive of symbolic life takes three basic forms: 1) An *aesthetic* orientation towards the admirable or beautiful; 2) An *ethical* orientation towards what is right or good; and 3) an *alethic* orientation towards what is true or reasonable, with the final aim of the *alethic* being that of rendering as intelligible or reasonable whatever can be so rendered as maximally admirable and right from a logical point of view. C.S. Peirce, “What Makes a Reasoning Sound,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 242-255, at 254-255. As Peirce himself puts it, “what is man’s proper function if it is not to embody general ideas in art-creations, in utilities, and above all in theoretical cognition.” Peirce, “Neglected Argument,” 443.

¹⁸ Expressed in semiotic terms, this intrinsic orientation or relation to the ideal is what Peirce commonly calls a reference to a “final interpretant,” where the interpretant stands as that towards which any symbolic representation is aimed or directed as part of the complex, triadic character of a *symbol*, a necessary and constitutive feature of being *in general*, that is, being in the mode of generality. C.S. Peirce, “Excerpts from Letters to William James,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 492-502.

¹⁹ C.S. Peirce, “Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic,” in *Essential Peirce 1*, 56-82, at 81-82. This may also help make clear why Peirce describes despair and pessimism as a kind of insanity, for to give into despair is to lose one’s sense of place in a thoughtful, mindful sense as a logical animal. Peirce, “A Guess at the Riddle,” 275; “Neglected Argument,” 449.

It may seem strange that I should put forward three sentiments, namely, interest in an indefinite community, recognition of the possibility of this interest being made supreme, and hope in the unlimited continuance of intellectual activity, as indispensable requirements of logic. Yet, when we consider that logic depends on a mere struggle to escape doubt, which, as it terminates in action, must begin in emotion, and that, furthermore, the only cause of our planting ourselves on reason is that other methods of escaping doubt fail on account of the social impulse, why should we wonder to find social sentiments presupposed in reasoning? As for the other two sentiments which I find necessary, they are only supports and accessories of that.²⁰

It is this intrinsic orientation towards the ideal as well as the sense of hope associated with it that underlies Peirce's *call* to explain. Such a call is not some whimsical or incidental feature of thought, but stands instead as part of the very fabric and nature of thought as such. It is expressed historically in Aristotle's claim that we desire to know by nature, in Leibniz's "principle of sufficient reason" as well as the "regulative function" of reason in Kant.²¹ But where Kant and many of those who follow tend to characterize this regulative function of reason negatively as a 'transcendental illusion' or some other variation on that idea, Peirce interprets it in a more positive light, as a fundamental feature not only of human being, but of being as such. For Peirce, the orientation towards reasonableness is no mere psychological fancy, anthropological delusion, or self-serving will to truth. It is instead a fundamental condition underlying the evolutionary character of being per se, with our own condition as logical animals being merely an expression and development of the evolutionary character of world as such.

1.2 The Riddle: Lawfulness, Regularity, and the Possibility of Explanation

Returning to our original discussion of the riddle, I want to suggest that what is

²⁰Peirce, "Doctrine of Chances," 150.

²¹ Here is Peirce's version of the principle of reason, at least in one of its iterations (understood as a constitutive, regulative principle of thought): "Never allow yourself to think that any definite problem is incapable of being solved to any assignable degree of perfection." C.S. Peirce, "The Seven Systems of Metaphysics," in *Essential Peirce* 2, 179-195, at 188. Peirce's version of the principle of reason is normative or prescriptive rather than descriptive. It presents the principle of reason as an *ought* (rather than a principle in the traditional sense or a more problematic idol in a more modern sense) that is regulative in the sense that it is to be followed generally as what ought to be for any and all reasoning or a rational attitude proper. The principle of reason does not demand that everything actually be intelligible as a fully determinate or pre-determinate metaphysical (or intentional) condition, but that we aim to make intelligible as a task or obligation, a calling that is itself purposive in its orientation. The principle of reason does not demand that the world be reasonable, only that it be made reasonable as it is possible for it to be, that is, that it grow into something that is increasingly beautiful, good, and true.

really at issue here is the origin and ground of generality or lawfulness as such. Since “Law” for Peirce is synonymous with “regularity itself,”²² then the call to explain the general conformity of events to laws is, in essence, the call to explain regularity or generality as such, a call that arises not merely within the human condition, but from the very essence of world in general. Thus Peirce’s riddle is nothing less than the call to explain, not merely the possibility of the laws of nature, but the possibility of regularity and hence the very reasonableness of being as such. Pushed to its limit Peirce’s riddle brings the call for reasonableness back upon itself in a self-referential manner so that it becomes, in effect, the question of the possibility of explanation and hence of questioning as such (for questioning itself presupposes at least the possibility of order and reasonableness as necessary conditions through which such a state could be rendered intelligible as a question).²³ Thus Peirce’s question of “how the laws of nature came about” does indeed have the significance he attached to it, for addressing *the riddle* demands that we inquire into the essence, purpose, and very possibility of both thought and of being as such.²⁴

2. James Bradley and the Essence of Speculative Philosophy

Perhaps the staunchest, most rigorously developed, and most important defense of speculative philosophy in recent times is to be found in the work of James Bradley. Building upon the work of Peirce, Whitehead, Heidegger, and a host of others within the speculative tradition, Bradley defends an account of speculative philosophy that closely parallels the one developed here. Bradley’s work also points the way to how we might address the kinds of questions that have been raised.

According to Bradley, if there is one single question or issue that lies at the heart, not only of speculative philosophy, but of “philosophy and our culture

²²Peirce, “A Guess at the Riddle,” 276.

²³ One might be tempted to claim that the rational calling to explain is itself a response to a prior standpoint of questioning, that is, a standpoint of uncertainty, anxiety, wonder, doubt, and so on, for it is only with respect to such questioning that the calling to explain itself arises. Such questioning may be characterized by a sense of incompleteness, imperfection, or radical contingency *about* the world and our place within it. This would seem to make questioning prior to, or at the very least coeval with the calling to explain. But this presupposes that questioning is itself intelligible and reasonable, and is capable of generating something akin to a reasonable response, thereby making intelligibility and reasonableness necessary conditions for the possibility of questioning in general. This is true whether we speak of questioning in the form of uncertainty, anxiety, wonder, doubt, and so on, for all such states presuppose a contrary condition through which they can be rendered intelligible as such states. Whether this contrary, positive state is prior to or coeval with such negative states is an interesting question that deserves more attention than we can give it here.

²⁴ Hookway claims that “The demand that we explain why there is law... certainly is not identical, as Peirce supposes, to the more reasonable claim that it is regularity or uniformity which prompts the search for explanation. Christopher Hookway, *Peirce* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 268. Obviously in claiming that the question of the origins of regularity is in fact equivalent to the calling to explain I am directly challenging Hookway’s dismissal of Peirce’s supposition, for if I am right, then the call to explain that is prompted within us by the experience of regular phenomena is one with the calling to explain as the polar side of the same coin.

as a whole,” it is the question regarding “the nature of existence.” For Bradley the thing that most distinguishes speculative philosophy from its more fashionable naturalist/analytic and “Pseudo-Continental” cousins is an openness to the call for a “theory of existence.”²⁵ So what is the question of existence and how does it relate to Peirce’s riddle?

As Bradley points out, the question of “the nature of existence” is a variation on the Leibnizean question of “Why is there something rather than nothing?” but with these important qualifications: 1) “speculative philosophy need not, and usually does not, deny the priority of the actual in respect of the possible”; and 2) the question should be read as an imperative “to see just how far reflection can go in the analysis of the actual.” According to Bradley, “the question “Why nothing at all?” merely articulates a way of looking at actuality so as to discover what actuality requires in order to satisfy the principle of reason.”²⁶ Thus Bradley’s principle of reason is perfectly compatible with the *calling to explain* outlined above, for it “invites unrestricted commitment to the search for explanation.”²⁷

Bradley’s “question of existence” also turns out to be another way of addressing Peirce’s riddle, for Bradley restates his question by asking “why, among other things, there is order of ordination at all.” Expressed in terms of relations, the question becomes “Why are there instantiations of relations or connectivity?” and “What are the conditions that make relations possible?”²⁸ What Bradley is seeking here, in effect, is some explanation for the origins of regularity and order, the very same questions that lie at the heart of Peirce’s Riddle. Like Peirce, Bradley offers his own guess at the riddle which we will return to in short order.

3. Peirce’s Guess at the Riddle

As its title suggests, Peirce’s guess is a hypothesis that has been divined in response to certain features of phenomena that appear to call for an explanation. Of the many possible hypotheses that may have come upon him, there is one that Peirce claims kept returning to him over and over again no matter how often and how rigorously he may have tried to discourage or disprove it, namely, the hypothesis that the world is comprised of three basic and irreducible *elements* or Categories that Peirce named Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.²⁹ Put simply, Firstness refers to those aspects of phenomena that appear to be non-relational or “non-relative,” e.g., that which appears to be whatever it is intrinsically, absolutely, spontaneously, in-itself, and so on, that is, anything “which is such as it is positively and regardless of anything else.” This non-relational, non-relative,

²⁵James Bradley, “Philosophy and Trinity,” *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2012): 155-177.

²⁶Bradley, “Philosophy and Trinity,” 167-168.

²⁷Ibid., 161-162.

²⁸Ibid., 166.

²⁹Peirce, “Another Guess at the Riddle,” 247.

monadic element or aspect of phenomena Peirce called Firstness, for its non-relational, non-relative nature would seem to imply that it must come before any and all relations.

Where Firstness is the non-relational, monadic element within phenomena, Secondness refers to those aspects or elements within phenomena that are inherently and fundamentally relational, but in a narrow and strictly dyadic sense. This includes those aspects of phenomena that might be characterized as objective, fixed, or individual in the sense associated with brute or stubborn fact. Thus Secondness is the hardness or bruteness of facts, it is also the hereness and nowness of existing things or objects, their *haecceity* as it were (as something *hic et nunc*). Secondness then is any aspect of phenomena that is intrinsically relational in a purely dyadic, forceful, or compulsive respect.

Where Firstness is monadic aspect of phenomena, and Secondness is the dyadic aspect of phenomena, Thirdness refers to those aspects or elements within phenomena that are inherently and fundamentally triadic in nature. This includes those aspects of phenomena that are general, regular, orderly, reasonable, and so on, that is, aspects of phenomena that are as they are by way of some mediating condition or reason. Thus where Secondness is exemplified in dyadic or forceful relations, i.e. relations or conditions that appear not to be intelligible in themselves, but which appear to be given, again through a kind of forceful relation of givenness or strict determination (as hard, brute facts), Thirdness is to be found in relations that seem to be as they are for some *reason*, and hence which can be explained by reference to that mediating condition as the reason behind it. Thirdness is also exemplified in any relation that is directed towards bringing something else about, where the mediating condition is the reason or determining condition behind that which is being brought about. Thus, viewed with respect to the conditions of concrete existence here and now, Firstness would exist as indeterminate possibility, Secondness stands as the condition of determinate existence or determinateness as such (i.e. where determinate means that it allows for “no latitude of interpretation” and so cannot be made otherwise than it is),³⁰ and Thirdness would exist as the *power of determining* or bringing about that which is not yet present and would not otherwise be as it is without the mediating work of Thirdness.³¹ As fundamental, categorical aspects or elements of phenomena, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness stand as irreducible valences, a multiplicity of “Three absolutes” that both underlie and constitute all phenomena in the broadest and most comprehensive sense of that term.³²

Returning now to Peirce’s riddle, what needs to be explained is the existence of the laws of nature which, as we have seen requires that we attempt to explain the conditions that make lawfulness, regularity, orderliness, and reasonableness possible in the first place. In setting up his guess Peirce notes that

³⁰ C.S. Peirce, “The Basis of Pragmatism in the Normative Sciences,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 371-97, at 392.

³¹ C.S. Peirce, “Sundry Logical Conceptions,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 267-289 at 267-272; idem, “New Elements,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 300-325, at 322-323; idem, *Writings of Peirce 1*, 217, 245.

³² C.S. Peirce, “The Categories Defended,” in *Essential Peirce 2*, 160-178, at 177.

“since Law in general cannot be explained by any law in particular, the explanation must consist in showing how law is developed out of pure chance, irregularity, and indeterminacy.”³³ This would suggest that to properly explain the existence of lawfulness or regularity we need to appeal to conditions that are not themselves lawful or regular. To accomplish this Peirce draws upon his previous work on the Categories, claiming, in effect, that the most promising way to explain the origins of lawfulness is to take the Categories as true.³⁴

Peirce begins by positing the existence of a “habit-taking tendency” within the very heart of being. This habit taking tendency, which has the character of a mediating power or Thirdness, is situated between two limits: 1) a limit of absolute lawlessness that extends “back toward a point in the infinitely distant past when there was no law but mere indeterminacy”; and 2) a limit of absolute lawfulness that extends “forward to a point in the infinitely distant future when there will be no indeterminacy or chance but a complete reign of law.”³⁵ In the earliest moment of the universe this original habit-taking tendency would have had nothing to work upon and so would have existed in a state of pure potentiality that Peirce sometimes refers to as a state or “mere possibility.” Peirce describes this original condition as a state of “chaos” or nothingness “where there was no regularity . . . a state of mere indeterminacy, in which nothing existed or really happened.”³⁶ Peirce then suggests that this original state of pure, symbolic indeterminacy must have been broken by ‘flash,’ a spontaneous eruption that would have happened “by the principle of firstness” and which would be followed by “a second flash.”

³³ Peirce, “Sundry Logical Conceptions,” 276.

³⁴ Some may object here that since Peirce’s “On a New List of Categories” precedes “A Guess at the Riddle” by some twenty years, that Peirce’s guess should be interpreted as a work of Induction rather than Abduction, for it would seem that he devised his hypothesis first and then proceeded to seek out facts in support of that hypothesis (a process that Peirce explicitly describes as Inductive). But a more comprehensive reading of Peirce’s work suggests otherwise. In a telling note from a letter written in 1905 Peirce says the following: “Man seems to himself to have some glimmer of co-understanding with God, or with Nature. The fact that he has been able in some degree to predict how Nature will act, to formulate general “laws” to which future events conform, seems to furnish inductive proof that man really penetrates in some measure the ideas that govern creation. Now man cannot believe that creation has not some ideal purpose. If so, it is not mere action, but the development of an idea which is the purpose of thought; and so a doubt is cast upon the ultra pragmatic notion that action is the **sole** end or purpose of thought.” *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 8, ed. A. W. Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 213. Peirce continues as follows: “It was in the desperate endeavor to make a beginning of penetrating into that riddle that on May 14, 1867, after three years of almost insanely concentrated thought, hardly interrupted even by sleep, I produced my one contribution to philosophy in “The New List of Categories” in the Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. VII, pp. 287-

298.” *Ibid.*, 214. This suggests that Peirce’s attempt to wrestle with the riddle as outlined here was a driving force behind much of his early work with “On a New List of Categories” being his earliest systematic effort to address the riddle. This would support my claim that Peirce’s appeal to the Categories is a continuation of his earlier attempt to think through the riddle, thereby making it part of an Abductive rather than an Inductive process.

³⁵ Peirce, “A Guess at the Riddle,” 277.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 278.

Though time would not yet have been, this second flash was in some sense after the first, because resulting from it. Then there would have come other successions ever more and more closely connected, the habits and the tendency to take them ever strengthening themselves, until the events would have been bound together in something like a continuous flow.³⁷

From this there would gradually emerge the beginnings of time, space, substances, “habits of persistency,” the evolution of life, and so on, all the result of the original habit-taking process now set in motion by the spontaneous flash of firstness. Once set in motion, the original habit-taking tendency then becomes a “self-generative” process towards the production of greater and more complex relations of lawfulness and order, a process of evolutionary growth that continues even now in the evolution of logical animals who are able to further amplify and accelerate the original habit taking tendency by taking control of its development as a self-directed activity.³⁸

We see this same picture reiterated with a more semiotic emphasis in Peirce’s later cosmogony as well.³⁹ In the later, semiotic account, Peirce claims that the original indeterminate condition of the universe would have had the character of a pure Symbol, for “a symbol alone is indeterminate.”⁴⁰ There too he characterizes this original, symbolic state as “Nothing, the indeterminate of the absolute beginning.” This original condition is “a state of things in which there was nothing, no reaction and no quality, no matter, no consciousness, no space and no time, but just nothing at all. Not determinately nothing. For that which is determinately not \mathcal{A} supposes the being of \mathcal{A} in some mode. Utter indetermination.”⁴¹ Thus in each case it would appear that the universe arises out of Nothing.

But we must be careful here, for Peirce’s reference to Nothing as the originary state of the universe is not a reference to Firstness, nor even Secondness. Instead the original condition out of which the intelligible universe is said to have evolved is the condition of pure Thirdness, that is, the condition of pure habit-taking devoid of anything to work upon, or a condition of pure Symbolic form, a pure power of determination without anything to determine.⁴²

³⁷ Ibid., 278.

³⁸ Ibid., 277-279.

³⁹ C.S. Peirce, “New Elements,” 322-324.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 322.

⁴¹ Ibid., 322.

⁴² On Peirce’s account, a Symbol, as Thirdness, is inherently “self-generative” and determining, for “it is of the essential nature of a symbol that it determines an interpretant, which is itself a symbol. A series therefore produces an endless series of interpretants.” Peirce, “A Guess at the Riddle,” 277; idem, “New Elements,” 322-323. A Symbol, as the semiotic expression of Thirdness, by its very nature reaches beyond its present state to a future state. Expressed in slightly different terms, a Symbol possesses an intrinsic orientation towards a consequent or future state which Peirce calls an interpretant. The relation or reference to an interpretant is a constitutive feature of Thirdness (as

In each case the original condition is taken to be a kind of pure activity but without anything to act upon. We see this same idea reiterated with a slightly different emphasis in the work of James Bradley.

4. Bradley's 'Guess at the Riddle'

As noted, we find a similar Peircean-styled explanation of the origins of lawfulness or orderliness in James Bradley's account of the "actualization of the actual." Drawing heavily upon Peirce's work Bradley claims that a theory of existence (or orderliness) must address three basic questions, namely, "questions of the nature of origin, difference and order." Bradley claims that answering these questions (which are central to the question of "the nature of existence") "requires an account of that activity, which is in some sense prior to difference and order because it is the condition of difference and order."⁴³ According to Bradley, the *arche* or originating condition of difference and order (and hence of existence) is pure activity or, as he often likes to put it, the pure activity of actualization. Like Peirce and the other Bradleyan *explicabilists*, "who hold that all things are intelligible but do not identify the intelligible with mind or rationality" (e.g. Duns Scotus and Schelling), Bradley holds that the first principle or *arche* is "nothing more than activity. This activity is unconditioned because it is original. So it is free or spontaneous in that it is sole cause of its own activity. But it is activity, so it is essentially relational and teleological; for it is necessarily ecstatic or communicative in the sense that, whatever else it may be, activity is nothing less than ablative or abductive movement, movement from out of itself."⁴⁴ Like Peirce, Bradley seems to want to characterize the *arche* of

expressed semiotically in the Symbol as sign). As I have argued elsewhere, the semio-illative inferential structure constitutive of a symbol is inherently and essentially *ecstatic* in the sense that it always extends beyond its past and present conditions to a future state that takes up or inherits its antecedent determinations and brings to them a determining power of its own. Philip Rose, "Inference as Growth: Peirce's Ecstatic Logic of Illation," in *Argumentation: Cognition and Community*, Proceedings of OSSA 9, May 18-21, 2011, ed. Frank Zenker, 1-16. Bradley provides a helpful summary of this complex relation. "Whatever in a given context plays the role of interpretant is the ordering principle of discourse, for the interpretant attempts to work out the relation of the sign and object under the guidance and constraint provided by the insistent specificities of both. The interpretant is thus a vague potentiality also, for the interpretant determines itself (as well as its object and sign, so far as possible) by its ordering or structuring work. The results of such work constitute a new sign/object for further interpretants, and so on *ad infinitum* in iterative historical succession. Object, sign and interpretant are thus all three historically saturated and historically variable entities." Bradley, "Trinity," 175. Because it gives rise to an endless series of interpretants, a symbol is intrinsically oriented towards an Absolute or Final Interpretant which serves as its limit, a limit that we earlier outlined is expressed in three distinct forms or modes of orientation: 1) An aesthetic orientation towards Beauty; 2) An ethical orientation towards the Right; and 3) An alethic orientation towards the Truth. These stand as the limit of Thirdness or semiotic life per se, and it is from this essential condition, as a pure state of Thirdness, that Peirce claims that the universe and the laws of nature as we currently know them evolved and will continue to evolve indefinitely.

⁴³ Bradley, "Trinity," 169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

originary activity as *nothing*, not in the sense of a state of chaos (for this presupposes the existence of “determinate entities (*ens*) that have some sort of unity (*unum*)” and hence are “chaotically related”),⁴⁵ nor in the sense of pure absence or even pure possibility (for absence and possibility cannot stand as adequate grounds for the “activity of actualization” needed in an originary condition or *arche* as Bradley conceives it). Instead, in keeping with Peirce, Bradley takes the *arche* of activity to be a “potential syncategorematic infinite . . .

. . . a continuum of potential parts.” As such the *arche* of pure activity is nothing in the sense of “no-thing . . . not as all-containing plenitude (*per excellentiam nihil*), nor as vacuity (*omnino nihil*), nor as negation (*nihil privatum*), but only as infinite free indeterminacy (*nihil per infinitatem*).”⁴⁶ The *arche* of pure activity is nothing in the sense that it “has no specific nature of its own,” beyond the pure activity of “communicating itself.”

In keeping with the long tradition of speculative thought to which he is explicitly aligned, Bradley associates the *arche* of unconditional communicative activity with the principle of unconditional love, as a kind of gift of act of pure unconditional giving. Thus the *arche* underlying the nature of existence is love understood in the traditional sense associated with *agape*, for “ultimate reality *is* love as infinite or inexhaustible *agape* or self-donation. . . . For these reasons, the real is not only the true; the real is essentially good.”⁴⁷ Rejecting the dominant fashion towards descriptivist and naturalist accounts of phenomena, Bradley claims that it is only when we identify the *arche* of existence with the self-explanatory activity of love (for love is its own reason and needs no reason beyond itself) that we satisfy the call to explain. According to Bradley,

Experience demands that we go beyond descriptivism and naturalism. For one of our historically-saturated intuitions is that the hallmark of all genuine love is some element of unconditional concern. This is not a feeling or a disposition, for we can and should show unconditional concern to those we may be disposed to dislike, even hate. We have here an alignment of feeling and action with an ideal, where feeling is no longer erotic, nor merely an affective sympathy, but a matter of self-surrender.⁴⁸

I want to claim that, like Peirce’s pure Symbol or pure habit-taking tendency, Bradley’s original state or pure, potential activity or unconditional communication is not pure Firstness as he himself claims, but is instead another case of Thirdness. As the power or activity of communication or “self-donation,” Bradley’s pure, potential activity is clearly relational, a point that he himself takes great pains to emphasize. Thus Bradley’s *arche* is not pure Firstness in Peirce’s categorial, elementary sense, for as a power of determination it falls

⁴⁵ Ibid., 165.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 173-177.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 178.

explicitly within what Peirce has identified as Thirdness, that is, the power of ordination or reasonableness per se.

5. Yet Another Guess at the Riddle

I want to align myself with much of what Peirce and Bradley suggest. Insofar as existence does in fact presuppose conditions of determination and relationality of some sort, then existence is indeed best explained by some underlying activity or power of determination that is intrinsically relational in character and possesses an equally intrinsic teleological orientation (however that is to be spelled out and understood). Still, while I accept much, if not all of this, there is something about both Peirce's and Bradley's responses to the riddle that I find deeply unsatisfying. More specifically, I find their account of the *arche* as a kind of primal activity problematic, whether latent or potential, because this is the very thing that I believe needs to be explained. Thus I want to push the call for explanation beyond where Peirce and Bradley seem willing to go and to ask how it is that Peirce's habit-taking tendency or symbol and Bradley's activity of actualization or unconditional communication could themselves have come about. Now I suspect that Peirce might respond here by claiming that my question is unintelligible and that these phenomena don't call for an explanation, while Bradley would likely respond by claiming that his activity of actualization does not require explanation precisely because it is entirely self-explanatory, but I want to challenge both of these claims. I want to suggest that the question of the origins of Thirdness (for that is what these claims actually amount to) is indeed intelligible and that it can be answered (or at least that we can make the attempt at answering it, however unsatisfactory it might end up being). In the end I want to propose that the *arche* or ground of Thirdness is indeed Nothing as both Bradley and Peirce suggest, but in a more radical sense than either of them seem willing to risk. What follows is actually a return to an old cosmological model, but as amended with a few important revisions, qualifications and so on.

In the beginning there was Nothing. Not the nothing of Peirce's potential "state of mere indeterminacy" nor the nothing of Bradley's "potential syncategorematic infinite," but the Nothing of pure, indeterminate possibility. As Nothing, the original ground or *arche* involves no activity of any kind, latent or pure, it has no orientation, no unconditional communication, no power of self-donation, and so on, for it has no power of determination in any positive sense. It is purely non-relational, or at least as purely non-relational as it is possible to conceive, and so is radically indeterminate and equally radically non-determining. The only positive thing we can say about this original state of pure possibility is that while it is itself indeterminate and non-determining, it is nevertheless determinable, for if it were not determinable then this would imply some determining or active power to prevent or prohibit its possible determination, and as pure possibility, the original *arche* can have no such

power.⁴⁹ Put simply, as pure possibility, the original *arche* can be said to prohibit nothing and permit anything, even the impossible, which would be encompassed by this original ground.

As already noted, the condition of pure possibility that marks the original *arche* of Firstness or Nothing prohibits nothing and so permits everything. It follows that the original condition of pure possibility permits the possibility of some other condition coming into being that is itself categorial or *elementary* in the sense that it is distinct from and irreducible to the original ground of Firstness. It is from this original condition of possibility or absolute *permissibility* that the elementary condition of Secondness would have arisen or emerged. As elementarily distinct from and irreducible to its ground, the emergent condition would have to be relational, for Firstness is non-relational. In fact, Secondness would have to be relation per se, and hence would necessarily involve some minimalist sense of limit as a relation of otherness or difference. Hence in keeping with Bradley's three questions, we have difference emerging from origin as its ground.

Following upon the infinite or indeterminate permissibility of the original *arche* of Firstness as well as the determinate, dyadic relationality of Secondness or difference, we then get the emergence of Thirdness as a complex relational structure that brings together or works to reduce the determinable possibility of Firstness and the dyadic limitability or difference of Secondness to the Unity of reasonableness or Thirdness.

6. Some Possible Implication of this Guess

First, on this account, the emergence of Secondness and Thirdness might be said to be destined without being determined, for each arises not from any original power or activity of determination, but as spontaneous conditions that are made possible, i.e. not prohibited, by the absolute permissibility of Firstness as the pure possibility that serves as their *arche* or ground.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Now the *arche* as outlined bears strong resemblance to the classical idea of the Boundless as expressed in Anaximander's cosmogony, as well as the idea of Aristotle's account of prime matter (a notion that Aristotle seemed deeply uncomfortable with but which he could not ignore). Recall that the primary criticism of Anaximander's account of the Boundless was that, as something indeterminate it did not appear to contain a sufficient basis for explaining the emergence of the determinate, for how can the determinate be said to arise out of that which itself has no determining power. It is for this reason that we see Plato, Aristotle and others positing an active principle or essential activity as the original ground of being, a strategy that is reiterated with important variations in the work of Peirce and Bradley. I strongly suspect that the rejection of Anaximander's starting point rests largely upon an overly narrow conception of what counts as a sufficient reason or a reason as such, and more particularly on what it means for something to "follow from" something else as a logical or rational relation, but I will have to leave this for now as a topic for future research and work to be done.

⁵⁰ Does this put me in Bradley's *descriptivist* camp with Nietzsche, Whitehead and Deleuze? Well, yes and no, with everything depending on what one means by self-explanatory (for that is the primary difference between the *explanatorist* and *descriptivist* in Bradley's account). Expressed in slightly different terms, a lot depends upon how one understands what it means for something to be

Second, by placing Firstness and Secondness as prior to Thirdness (with Thirdness being work upon the other two), possibility and difference are made elementary in an important sense that would prohibit and disavow any attempt to present a final or totalitarian condition as the concrete realization or completeness of the ideal state of Unity. Put simply, *possibility* and *difference* are posited as prior to *unity* (with unity or what I want to recast as the *principle of reasonableness* always being work upon possibility and difference). Because possibility and difference are prior to any effort at bringing about reasonableness or unity, then all attempts to make the ideal real must necessarily be taken to be provisional and hence as inevitably falling short of the ideal, no matter how complete and reasonable they may appear. This applies not only to the search for knowledge, but also in the work towards developing aesthetic, ethical, and political ideals. Work towards advancing reasonableness and unity must thus always be work in progress.

Third if we accept this account as reasonable in some sense, then it may call for a rethinking of what it means for something to *follow from* something else in a logical or reasonable sense. I suspect this could well involve broadening our notions of the logical and reasonable by assigning more importance to non-deductive modes of reasoning such as the Abductive and Inductive modes outlined by Peirce (e.g. a logic of inclusion or a logic of emergence). This could very well be important work that yet needs to be done.

Fourth, the cautionary lesson about the aim at reasonableness and unity can be further extended to Peirce's identification of the ideal of Truth with the ideal of Community (as grounded in our nature as social beings). First the sense of community outlined by Peirce should likely be extended to encompass not only the ideal of community in a logical sense (as a community in truth), but the ideal of community in an ethical and aesthetic sense as well, (with the aesthetic ideal being a community of admirable feeling (e.g. Schiller's beautiful souls), and the ethical ideal being a community of right action (e.g. Kant's Kingdom of Ends). It would also follow that the ideals of reasonableness and community should not be interpreted in a one-sided fashion where the social would be said to override the importance of the individual, for this intrinsic orientation toward community includes the equally important emphasis upon an increasing appreciation of the worth of the individual as a complementary and correlative

a good reason, where one thing follows from another such that one stands as a good reason for the other. My guess is indeed descriptivist if one takes self-explanatory to mean self-determining or self-causing (*causa-sui*) in Bradley's sense. If, however, one takes self-explanatory to mean self-sufficient then my guess would seem to fall more squarely into the explanatorist camp. As Bradley himself notes, for a condition or principle to be self-explanatory "it must possess in its own nature, or provide out of its own nature, all the reasons needed to explain its existence or activity." I want to claim that the element of Firstness understood as pure possibility does indeed possess, "out of its own nature, all the reasons needed to explain" or account for it's being as it is, as a groundless, spontaneous mode of *being possible* that is not only distinct from the more limited, determinate modes of being associated with Secondness and Thirdness, but is a sufficient condition and ground that, as purely intrinsic and non-relational, can have no basis or ground for its being beyond itself.

feature of this ideal condition.⁵¹ Thus the better way of characterizing the ideal is not the idea of community per se, as Peirce often states, but a *community of individuals*, an ideal that embraces the non-reducible, elementary conditions of possibility and difference, as embodied in the value of individuals, alongside the idea of unity associated with the notion of community.

Finally (at least in some provisional sense), placing Firstness and Secondness ahead of Thirdness may also require that we modify the emphasis traditionally found within the traditional notion of *agape* or love. We may acknowledge with Bradley and the speculative and theological tradition with which he is aligned that love does indeed involve the work or activity of unconditional giving, but that such unconditional giving should include both the moral *recognition* of otherness or *difference* and the aesthetic *appreciation* of the intrinsic, non-relational ground of the being of things. Put simply, to love in this fuller, richer sense would involve a lighter sense of unity, promoting a sense of community that not only recognizes the dignity and good of the other, but that also includes a level of appreciation expressed through the simple gift of letting be.

⁵¹ C.S. Peirce, "On a New Class of Observations Suggested by the Principles of Logic," in *Essential Peirce 1*, 106-108, at 105.