

Gabriele GAVA, *Peirce's Account of Purposefulness: A Kantian Perspective*

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Gabriele Gava, *Peirce's Account of Purposefulness: A Kantian Perspective*, London and New York: Routledge, 2014, 224 p.

In *Peirce's Account of Purposefulness*, Gabriele Gava tackles one of the thorniest questions in Peirce research, namely the problem of Peirce's relationship to Kantian philosophy. The leading argument of the book amounts to what may be the most sustained defence of a transcendental reading of Peirce's thought since Karl-Otto Apel's pioneering efforts. In pursuing this path, Gava is not exactly moving through uncharted terrain; but nor has he chosen the road most travelled in recent times. For this reason alone, Gava's nuanced re-evaluation of the role of transcendental method in Peirce's philosophy ought to be welcomed; for as Gava observes, neither the proponents nor the critics of the transcendental interpretation of Peirce have paid sufficient attention to what "transcendental" means or may entail in this context.

This is not to say that the contribution of *Peirce's Account of Purposefulness* would be limited to the explication of the transcendental element in Peirce's thought. The book includes insightful discussions of Peirce's classification of the sciences, methodeutic, evolutionary metaphysics, pragmatism, and critical common-sensism, among many other key topics in Peirce research. These are valuable in their own right, whether the reader is convinced by Gava's overarching Kantian interpretation or not. While clearly committed to his cause, the author succeeds in providing a balanced account of its main topics, taking note of possible counter-arguments as well as of the broader implications of the positions being defended and criticised.

The book is divided into six substantial Chapters: "The Architectonic and the Fundamental Elements of Thought and Sign Processes", "Methodetic and Speculative Rhetoric", "How Are Synthetical Judgments Possible?", "Teleology in Peirce's Evolutionary Metaphysics", "Peirce and Transcendental Philosophy", and "Pragmatism and Common Sense". This may suggest a fairly standard approach to the interpretation of Peirce's philosophy, starting from the top-level categories and working its way toward metaphysics, pragmatism, and common sense at the bottom. However, the central arguments hinge on the pragmatic character of Peirce's (purported) transcendental method, and its connection to the purposefulness of interpretation, which Gava primarily articulates in terms of Peircean speculative rhetoric and methodeutic. While this does not entail a full-scale overturning of architectonic hierarchies, the proposed reassessment of the systemic roles of the lower normative sciences is arguably one of the main yields of Gava's undertaking. Therefore, after a brief overview of Gava's interpretative strategy and its central transcendental argument, I will focus my comments – both positive and critical – on how these play out in his explication of the functions of Peirce's philosophical disciplines.

From the point of view of recent debates concerning the evolution of Peirce's philosophy, it is interesting to note that Gava on the one hand seems to accept a

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broadly developmental reading (following in the footsteps of Murray Murphey and T. L. Short), while he on the other hand wishes to preserve a special architectonic role for the seminal early article “On a New List of Categories”. It is not so much the actual results of this contested text – the foundational tract for many of those interpreters who argue for a deep and lasting unity in Peirce’s thought – as it is the method of prescision formulated therein that grounds Gava’s reading of Peirce. On this basis, Gava (12, 17) presents his own account of the major forms of dependency underpinning Peirce’s system, distinguishing logical prescindability from factual dependence and logical reducibility. Significantly, logical dependence refers to the possibility of abstracting a simpler conception from a more complex one so that the former can thereafter be referenced without necessarily considering the latter, while factual necessity entails the need to make reference to a more complex conception when introducing a simpler one.

Gava’s central argument is that Peirce’s method of prescision can be construed as a kind of *non-justificatory* transcendental inquiry (153). Its task is to abstract those formal elements that thought itself cannot prescind from. Yet, Peirce’s transcendental approach is not to be understood as a reply to sceptical challenges, but as something that sets out from an acceptance of human knowledge as developed in human practices or sciences. Thus, Peirce’s denunciation of “transcendental apothecaries” is here interpreted as a rejection of the kind of justificatory transcendental philosophy that aims to provide a grounding of knowledge beyond that provided by ordinary life and inquiry. Gava maintains that the non-justificatory stance is compatible with pragmatism; but he also suggests that Peirce late turn toward critical common-sensism amounts to an unfortunate straying from this moderate transcendental path toward a justificatory one.

Gava gives Peirce credit for having reinvented transcendental philosophy in a pragmatic context (154). In effect, this means that the Peircean categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness are not “mathematical” starting points; they are phenomenological elements prescinded from a semiotic whole, and therefore both indeterminate and capable of evolution (155-156). By this “pragmatic” move, Gava in effect excludes certain texts in which Peirce at least appears to perform a mathematical abstraction or derivation of the basic relational categories; indeed, the connection between mathematics and philosophy is not addressed in depth in the book. If the categories are grounded in (or factually dependent on) signs in the way Gava suggests, with prescision and the other forms of dependency providing the philosophical tools needed to perform the analysis, we are then left with the question of the precise function of Peircean mathematics in the proceedings. Some other significant issues are also left mostly unaddressed, such as the nature of the alleged categoreal indeterminacy. Here, it would have been interesting to see a discussion of how this might pan out in terms of Peirce’s logic of vagueness. Moreover, it could have been useful to pursue a closer comparison between Peirce’s supposed reinvention of the transcendental method with more recent accounts of “pragmatised” Kantian philosophy (as e.g. developed by Sami Pihlström); but that is perhaps a task for different book.

As Gava's exploration into the transcendental depths of Peirce's thought progresses, it becomes gradually clearer that it involves a specific understanding of the job of philosophy; philosophical inquiry is, first and foremost, charged with the task of disentangling the semiotic structure of our thought and experience, with a special emphasis on those cognitive elements that we call "knowledge". The categories are understood as transcendental "conditions" for the semiotic experiences and thought-practices from which they are prescinded. Consequently, Gava can consistently say that the pragmatic factually precedes the phenomenological, while at the same time identifying a relation of logical dependence between the abstract categories and more concrete semiotic experience.

Gava may indeed be on to something in his reappraisal of the transcendental element in Peirce's thought. Putting certain pragmatist prejudices against "transcendental philosophy" aside, it is arguably possible to identify a "pragmatically transcendental" method guiding much of the work that Peirce does in phenomenology and semeiotic. With this in mind, it is a bit surprising that Gava does not make more of a quite well-known passage (CP 2.227) in which Peirce characterises the task of "quasi-necessary" semiotic as a process of abstraction leading to fallible statements concerning "what *must be* the characters of all signs used by a 'scientific' intelligence".

While the categories, as accounts of the most basic relational structure of experience and thought, are singled out as the central transcendental conceptions in this reading of Peirce, Gava also identifies other Kantian elements in Peircean philosophy. Their special transcendental status is due to their necessity for the progress of inquiry; Gava ranks the esthetic ideal and regulative hopes as such requisites. These are definitely regulative principles – invaluable guides that provide no guarantees for success. In contrast, Gava considers the categories to be constitutive as well as regulative. Their regulative character is revealed by the fact that they do not state anything determinate about experience before they receive an *a posteriori* determination; but they are nonetheless constitutive in the sense that they are present in every phenomenon.

These claims are in need of some clarification and specification. It is not self-evident, for example, to what degree the progress of science requires an esthetic ideal of the kind envisaged by Peirce – at least if the ideal is understood as the *summum bonum*. Inquiry can make progress with much more modest means; there are arguably cases of scientific advancement that have been driven by much baser motives. A stronger case can perhaps be made for the Peircean thesis that a hope for the discoverability of the truth is involved in any particular inquiry; but in a sense, that is a less ambitious proposition. That is, Gava appears to argue that the process of development *must* be supported by the esthetic ideal; but this may be one step too far toward idealism – granted, one that Peirce also may have taken at times. Likewise, I find it difficult to get behind Gava's (160) contention that Peirce's transcendental analysis of the fundamental elements of our representational thinking *must* come before any hypothesis about nature in its independency. Perhaps this is just a bit carelessly formulated, but I fail to see what would necessitate such an ordering of inquiry – even in a less exacting regulatory sense.

Fittingly, a substantial portion of Gava's book is dedicated to the question of the ordering of philosophical inquiry. He argues that Peirce's grand classification of the sciences – or at least its philosophical part – is fundamentally grounded in the method of prescision. Thus, although Peirce sometimes appeals to the Comtean principle of ordering as a leading principle of classification, Gava (21) contends this is not its true source. In his terms, the hierarchical organisation of the sciences is logical rather than factual. On the other hand, sciences higher up in the ranks are characterised as factually dependent on more concrete fields of knowledge. As Gava (20) points out, this perspective leaves room for the fact that a discovery in a certain domain of inquiry may necessitate a development in a more abstract science on which it logically depends. Purportedly, another aspect of factual dependence is manifested by the way the lower sciences “furnish cases” for more abstract inquiries.

Thus, Gava claims to have identified the leading architectonic principles grounding Peirce's classification of scientific inquiry. Of course, Gava is not the first to have detected categoreal ideas at play in Peirce's system of classification, with its tell-tale tendency to unfold in groups of three; but by applying his particular interpretation of the non-justificatory transcendental method, Gava provides a unique and thought-provoking – but not fully convincing – account of how things are supposed to hang together.

One difficulty, which Gava (22) duly notes, is that the dependencies between the sciences – even if restricted to the branches of philosophy – tend to be less rigid than those between the basic Peircean categories. The principles laid out by Gava also seem to fit certain instances better than others. They provide a reasonable description of the relationship between Peircean phenomenology and semeiotic (Peircean logic in the broad sense); the signs investigated by semeiotic are logically dependent on the phenomenological categories, while phenomenology still relies on signs in order to abstract the categories. In other words, the categories are prescindable from sign relations, but nonetheless factually dependent on the sign relations of thought and experience (27). Conspicuously, Gava struggles with the application of this model to the connections between Peirce's normative sciences. Still, after some hesitation, he outlines a tentative explication where self-control is prescindable from representation (but not *vice versa*).

However, the claim that philosophy (in general) would be factually dependent on the special empirical sciences (25) may be even more problematic, at least if the question concerns its adequacy as a description of Peirce's position. Although it is true that Peirce emphasises that philosophy has much to learn methodologically from the “successful sciences” (such as physics and chemistry), it is not clear to me that he would be advocating a factual dependency in any substantial sense of the term. Rather, he tends to stress that the primary raw material of philosophy is *common* experience, for which no special means and methods of observation and acquisition are needed. Perhaps the strongest counter-example (which Gava also mentions on 25) to this would be Darwinian evolutionism – or perhaps more generally, evolutionism, which undeniably undergirds Peirce's scientific metaphysics – if not his entire philosophical world-view. However, given his explicit emphasis on the relative autonomy of

philosophical inquiry, this is perhaps best viewed as secondary support for something that is purportedly discoverable without any help from the special sciences. At any rate, it does not seem plausible to hold that Peirce's system would *necessarily* require special empirical studies as "occasions of introduction" of philosophical conceptions; and a similar case could be made for mathematics in relation to philosophy. To be fair, Gava is careful not to overstate his case; but questions such as these cast at least some doubts on his architectonic explication of Peirce's model of scientific inquiry.

This brings us to another challenge for Gava's approach, related to some seemingly incongruous claims that Peirce makes for his arrangement of the sciences. While the hierarchical ordering of inquiries is an evident result of the project, Peirce also repeatedly asserts that his classification is not meant to be an imaginary construct of disciplines identified on *a priori* grounds, but of activities that do (or at last could) occupy actual inquirers. Here, Gava's account may be more descriptive of what Peirce actually does than of what his programme prescribes; one can at any rate question whether such projected lines of inquiry as Peircean phaneroscopy and esthetics fulfil the Peircean criteria for *a* science. Even if it is possible to make a case for remarkable prescience in some cases, to aver that there would ever have been a full-blown science of esthetics in Peirce's sense would be dubious. Instead, it seems that esthetics is posited at the head of the normative disciplines for systemic reasons. In Peirce's treatment, it tends to evolve into a relatively narrow thesis concerning the *summum bonum*, the singular study of which would arguably be too thin for a "living body" of inquirers. This is not to say that a broader view of Peircean esthetics could not be developed; but I would argue that Peirce is just more realistic when he concedes that the normative sciences are best viewed as three phases of one and the same line of inquiry, rather than as sciences in their own right.

In fact, Gava seems to suggest something along these lines in his reassessment of the third branch of (semiotic) logic, which Peirce variously called "rhetoric" or "methodeutic". One of the boldest contentions of Gava's tome is that it is on this level of philosophical inquiry that we fully uncover the leading transcendental regulative principle of Peirce's undertaking, namely the *purposefulness* governing the pursuit of new knowledge in inquiry (5). It is comprehended as an orientation toward an end involved in a thought process, and thus distinguished from purposiveness understood as a conformity to an end (69). According to Gava, it is speculative rhetoric – "the general study of the conditions of interpretation in order to reach any kind of purpose" (36) that is charged with laying out the principles of this teleology – and arguably, the leading rationale of Peirce's overall philosophical project.

Furthermore, Gava puts forward a novel reconstruction of the relationship between speculative rhetoric and methodeutic. The latter is construed as a special case of the former; while Peircean rhetoric is concerned with the full range of emotional, energetic, and logical interpretants; methodeutic is limited to the study of logical interpretation. In other words, methodeutic is a study of the purposeful development of knowledge (33), and thereby given pre-eminence as the subdivision of logic that best manifests its normative character.

As Gava (39-40) observes, Peirce's hierarchical ordering of the sciences might lead us to assume that methodeutic does not play central role in development of the Peircean philosophical system, as the principles it discovers are applicable only to metaphysics and other "lower" sciences. In contrast, Gava (42) boldly argues that methodeutic can be applied to more fundamental disciplines. However, its task is not one of justification; rather, it is to make heuristic principles already working in our unreflective methods of investigation explicit.

Regarding this rather controversial point, I am broadly in agreement with Gava. The understanding of the relationship between philosophical inquiries he outlines here not only helps us to make sense of the classification of sciences; it also casts some new light on the role of leading principles of inquiry in Peirce's philosophical vision. Instances of such "presumptions" noted by Gava include the *il lume naturale* thesis and the assumption that there is a discoverable reality at all. Other prominent examples could perhaps be added, e.g. fallibilism and synechism (the latter understood not as a metaphysical doctrine, but as "a regulative principle of logic, prescribing what sort of hypothesis is fit to be entertained and examined" (CP 6.173)).

However, Gava's contribution to the study of Peirce's rhetoric is not limited to the reassessment of the role of methodeutic for the Peircean system as a whole. For Gava, speculative rhetoric is explicitly focused on the study of interpretants, which in his reading seems to be equivalent to a philosophical investigation of the transcendental conditions of interpretation. Thus, Gava parts way with those commentators who have construed Peircean rhetoric as a study of communication, and have argued that methodeutic (as a narrower specialisation) could be understood as a study of scientific communication. Here, I find my own earlier construal of speculative rhetoric and methodeutic on the firing line, and not without reason. Gava puts forward a careful reading of Peirce's "Ideas, Stray or Stolen, about Scientific Writing", and quite convincingly argues that the listing of rhetorical studies sketched at the end of this article should not be understood as a classification of *philosophical* rhetoric, but rather as an outline of the need to develop different rhetoric for different, more concrete, fields of interpretation.

Still, other aspects of Gava's reconstruction are not equally satisfying. For one thing, he seems to operate with a rather narrow traditional conception of communication, namely that of one individual conveying something to another. However, Peirce's characterisation of "internal" thought in terms of communication between selves puts an interesting twist on this story. Arguably, communication is not as supplementary in relation to interpretation as Gava seems to suggest; and given his idealistic emphasis on thought, Peirce's dialogical view of mind renders any strict distinction between the two questionable.

Understanding speculative rhetoric strictly as a study of interpretation may exclude more from the purview of Peircean philosophy than one would like. True, Gava can find a lot of support for his reading in Peirce's definitions of rhetoric, which often place the emphasis squarely on the interpretant pole of the sign relation. However, if taken too literally, this leaves a curious gap in the account: it has no place for the study of *utterance*. I would argue that Peirce's explication of assertion needs to be

considered here. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to maintain that the function of methodeutic is not restricted to right interpretation; a substantial part of its normative force relates to questions of the requirements of apposite scientific utterance. The community depends on it; thought is not strictly, perhaps not even predominantly, individual.

Consequently, I tend to favour Gava's more general characterisation of methodeutic as "a scientific study of the principles that guide the effective use of signs in processes of investigation" (61); and I would argue that it would be more productive to construe speculative rhetoric as a philosophical study of sign use rather than as interpretation merely. Analogously, I find Gava's (75) contention that the normative sciences do not provide any prescriptions but only describe the fundamental purposeful character of thought, will, and feeling too restricting. Are not regulative methodeutic principles highly prescriptive, indicating what to do and not to do in inquiry, albeit on a highly general level? It may be true that Peirce's emphasis on the theoretical character of the normative sciences entails that they are primarily descriptive; but surely it is a description undertaken in order to facilitate the improvement of our habits – or, to put the matter in more elevated terms, to contribute to the development of concrete reasonableness. This is a discussion that needs to be pursued; and I am gratified that Gava has provided us with new means and incentives to push it forward. His re-examination of the transcendental element in Peirce's philosophy and the accompanying reassessment of the function of speculative rhetoric – Peirce's "highest and most living branch of logic" (CP 2.333) – deserve to be widely read, intensely debated, and carefully criticised in Peirce scholarship.