Helping Thought and Keeping it Pragmatical, or, Why Experience Plays Practical Jokes

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In claiming that “the method of our great teacher, Experience” is “a system of teaching by practical jokes,” Peirce’s objective, I argue, is to get us to see the unexpected as cause for neither despair nor nihilism but as an opportunity to strengthen our affinity with the natural world. Peirce’s celebration of the flexibility demanded by the “pedagogic method” employed by “Dame Experience” reinforces the dependence between cultivating a sense of humor and developing fruitful habits of inquiry.

Aristotle famously suggested that we are not only rational, but risible, animals. I find it happily appropriate, then, that the pragmaticism of our American Aristotle, Charles S. Peirce, should provide us with a compelling exploration of this essential connection between our capacity for amusement and our ability to learn from experience. By virtue of both temperament – “personality and pragmatism are more or less of the same kidney” (EP2, 134) – and vocation, Peirce was uniquely qualified to take delight in envisioning “the method of our great teacher, Experience” as “a system of teaching by practical jokes.” (EP2, 154) In this way, he shows us that our failure to achieve lasting certainty is not cause for despair or nihilism but ultimately an occasion to find “saving truth” in our affinity with “the reason operative in experience.” (EP2, 212) Or, so I will argue in this essay.

Taking direction from Arthur Danto’s definition of ‘style’ as “the relationship between representation and the one who makes the representation” (1981, 198), I will focus upon Peirce’s description of the workings of experience, regarding as central his claim that “that which experience does is gradually, and by a sort of fractionation, precipitate and filter off the false ideas, eliminating them and letting the truth pour on in its mighty current.” (EP2, 153) Experience does this by means of “the highly instructive” phenomenon of surprise. Our ability to be surprised is thus crucial to inquiry because it reminds us that “what really is ultimately consists in what shall be
forced upon us in experience, that there is an element of brute compulsion in fact, and that fact is not a mere question of reasonableness.” (EP2, 178) (As Peirce cheerfully points out, this is why “A man cannot startle himself by jumping up with an exclamation of Boo!” (EP2, 195).) It is for this reason, moreover, that it is the surprising that fuels theoretical innovation: “nothing can possibly be learned from an experiment that turns out just as was anticipated. It is by surprises that experience teaches all she deigns to teach us.” (EP2, 154) To be sure, surprises can be – and practical jokes always are – initially disconcerting. Nonetheless, Peirce insists that we ultimately find immense value in happy surprises and successful practical jokes because, by curbing fantasy and promoting humility, they strengthen our practical attunement to reality. In so doing, we come to regard the “pedagogic method” employed by “Dame Experience” to evince “her own affable and complacent nature.” (EP2, 194)

Heeding Danto’s proviso that “only in an act of ruthless but necessary abstraction can we sunder style from substance” (1981, 198), I also aim to highlight how Peirce conveys his account of inquiry to his readers. That is, I will emphasize that he practices what he preaches. For, if the desire to learn requires an appreciation of the unexpected, and if such appreciation is, as John Morreall urges, the essence of amusement (1987, 130), then it is deliciously fitting that Peirce uses his wonderfully wicked wit to introduce and illuminate his major claims. Consider, for example, the slyly mocking way that he chastises Hegel for his failure to acknowledge the ineliminability of brute fact: “Let the Universe be an evolution of Pure Reason if you will. Yet if while you are walking on the street reflecting upon how everything is the distillate of Reason, a man carrying a heavy pole suddenly pokes you in the small of the back, you may think there is something in the Universe that Pure Reason fails to account for.” (EP2, 177) Or, think of his droll illustration of the dangers of blind allegiance to theory, with its correlative neglect of the kind of careful observation that we attribute to the artist, in his arguments against the assumption that ‘pain’ denotes a unique feeling: “But the majority of those who opine that pain is a quality of feeling are not even artists; and even among those who are artists there are extremely few who are artists in pain.” (EP2, 189)

In short, my objective in this essay is to show that not only the content of Peirce’s account of inquiry but the means by which he teaches it to us – both the substance and the style – reinforce the dependence between cultivating a sense of humor and developing fruitful habits of investigation. In this way, both the initial frustration we feel in first reading Peirce and the lasting satisfaction we derive from his originality and wit strengthen that cognitive flexibility definitive of both rationality and risibility.