

Peirce and Arendt in Dialogue:

Insights for Pragmatist Sociological Theories of Inquiry and Action

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Short Abstract

Charles S. Peirce and Hannah Arendt are both major figures in American social thought, yet their work has never been put into direct dialogue. Their shared status as brilliant thinkers, along with the range and depth of the resonances between their work, warrants exploring what a dialogue between them might yield. In this paper, I argue that appreciating the points of resonance between Peirce's and Arendt's thought helps reveal limitations and opportunities in contemporary pragmatist approaches to inquiry and action—both central themes in the pragmatist tradition. I make my case primarily through a comparative exegesis of Arendt's "Thinking and Moral Considerations," a lecture which indexes some of the major themes in her last major but relatively little known work, the *Life of the Mind*, and Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief," one of his earliest major and among his most well-known writings. I argue that Peirce and Arendt share similar insights regarding doubt as provoking inquiry/thinking, as paralyzing action, and as insufficient for carrying inquiry or thinking through. I discuss how reading Peirce and Arendt together 1) draws attention to the fact that inquiry is contingent and precarious, 2) problematizes the centrality and way of conceptualizing action typical in contemporary pragmatist theory, and 3) points to the value of considering inquiry as oriented not to action per se but rather the development of good habits and judgment.

Extended Abstract

Charles S. Peirce and Hannah Arendt are both major figures in American social thought, yet their work has never been put into direct dialogue. This is strange, as there are a number of similarities between them that suggest such a dialogue would be productive. While both are famous for their brilliance, their thought remains under-appreciated by sociologists, though social theorists in recent decades have been working to correct this (e.g., Strand and Lizardo, 2025; Walsh, 2015; Baehr and Walsh, 2017; Martin, 2024). Both Peirce and Arendt were philosophers, and deeply Aristotelian. Both were ontological realists, and phenomenologists in a sense: Arendt was influenced by her mentors Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, and Peirce invented his own version of phenomenology ("phaneroscopy") around the same time as Husserl. Both Peirce and Arendt were non-determinists, with Arendt ardently committed to the possibility of freedom, and Peirce committed to "tychism," or the doctrine that there is an element of chance in the world. Both appreciated the human ability to generate novelty, with Arendt articulating this in terms of "natality," and Peirce apprehending it in a more logical register with his concept of "abduction." Both Peirce and Arendt were triadic thinkers, with Arendt's oeuvre focused on two triads of human activity, one corresponding to the *vita activa*: labor, work, and action, and the other corresponding to the *vita contemplativa*: thinking, willing, and judging. Peirce found triads wherever he set his analytical gaze: for instance, he posited three basic categories of being and experience: Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, and three main types of signs: icons, indices, and symbols. Of course, the differences between Peirce and Arendt are also many, but their

shared status as original and brilliant thinkers, along with the range and depth of the resonances between their respective works, warrants exploring what a dialogue between them might yield.

Focusing on what a dialogue between Peirce and Arendt might mean for pragmatist sociological theory, in this paper I argue that appreciating the points of resonance between Peirce's and Arendt's thought helps reveal limitations and opportunities in contemporary pragmatist approaches to inquiry and action—both central themes in the pragmatist tradition. I begin by observing that these themes are also central to Arendt's thinking about "thinking." I offer a comparative exegesis of Arendt's "Thinking and Moral Considerations," a lecture which indexes some of the major themes in her last major but relatively little known work, the *Life of the Mind*, and Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief," one of his earliest major and among his most well-known writings. Both Arendt and Peirce take what Plato referred to as the "silent speech of the soul" as a prototype of thinking. Both consider the conditions for the possibility of thinking, or inquiry, and locate its arousal in doubt—not Cartesian doubt, but doubt prompted by social influence. Both understand doubt as irritating, and conducive to learning about reality, though always fallibly and never certainly. Both also understand doubt as paralyzing when it comes to action. Where Peirce's thoughts on this are explicit, Arendt's are implicit in her account of the three metaphors with which Socrates—who embodies thinking—describes himself: the gadfly, the midwife, and the electric ray. Further, both Peirce and Arendt also recognize that inquiry, once prompted by doubt, can go astray—in Arendt's words, "turn against itself" (1971: 435). Arendt demonstrates this possibility by reference to two of Socrates most infamous students, Alcibiades the headstrong warrior and Critias the tyrant, for whom, as the gadfly, he aroused doubt, but who then turned to what she describe as "license and cynicism" (1971:434). Peirce discusses the method of tenacity, the method of authority, and the *a priori* method as alternatives to the method of science as ways of escaping the irritation of doubt and fixing upon belief.

Reading Peirce and Arendt together raises important questions for contemporary pragmatists regarding how best to conceptualize inquiry, action, and their relation. Inquiry is a central theme in the pragmatist tradition and in contemporary pragmatist theory, but rarely is it discussed as a highly contingent and precarious phenomenon whose activation and follow-through has everything to do with whether and how people respond to doubt. Reading Peirce and Arendt together draws attention to the fact that inquiry is not to be taken for granted, and to how it can be derailed even when an important condition for its possibility—the arousal of doubt—has been met.

Action is not only a central theoretical category in contemporary pragmatist theory: there is a strong tendency among pragmatists to regard action in a normative manner as in some sense superior to habit and somehow at the heart of what it means to be human. Yet Peirce insists that action is not the "summum bonum." Indeed, this is one of the reasons why he distanced himself from James's version of pragmatism, which he viewed as mistaken in this respect. Arendt's conceptualization of action as distinct from labor and work, bound up with "natality," and conditional on a political community, raises questions as to whether the typical pragmatist concept of action as creative action (which resonates with natality) via problem solving (which sounds closer to labor or work) conflates what ought to be kept analytically distinct, and whether it misses something important about what is truly distinctive about human action and what makes it possible. Where Peirce might call for de-centering action, Arendt offers a nuanced

conceptualization of action that might allow for retaining the centrality of action—but action conceived in very specific way.

Further, in contemporary pragmatist theory, inquiry is seen as a pathway to action: when we find ourselves in problematic situations, we problem-solve, and this yields creative action. For Peirce, however, what inquiry aims at is not action per se but the development of good habits. Arendt, likewise, rejects the idea that the end of thinking is action. In her view, thinking is for its own sake; it does, however, have the incidental consequence of liberating judgment, which may inform action, yet this connection remains indirect. Together, Peirce's and Arendt's insights regarding the relation between inquiry (or thinking) and action indicate it is worth considering whether contemporary pragmatists' prioritization of action over habit has it backwards. Without eschewing a theory of action, we might ask: is the development of good habits, or of judgment, even closer than action to the heart of what it means to be human? This possibility calls for theorizing not just habit in relation to action, but the relation between action and the development of good habits.

By putting Peirce and Arendt in dialogue in a way that throws new light on central concepts in contemporary pragmatist theory, this paper contributes to efforts to enhance sociological theory by leveraging insights from two of America's most important but under-appreciated social theorists.