

Peirce's Maxim of Pragmatism: 61 Formulations

JON ALAN SCHMIDT



Abstract

Peirce is best known as the founder of pragmatism, but his dissatisfaction with how others understood and appropriated it prompted him to rename his own doctrine “pragmaticism” and to compose several variants of his original maxim defining it, as well as numerous restatements and elaborations. This paper presents an extensive selection of such formulations, followed by analysis and commentary demonstrating that for Peirce the ultimate meaning of an intellectual concept is properly expressed as a conditional proposition about the deliberate, self-controlled conduct of its interpreters, not the law-governed behavior of its object.

Keywords: Charles Peirce; Concept; Conception; Conduct; Habit; Maxim; Meaning; Pragmaticism; Pragmatism

Charles Sanders Peirce is best known as the founder of pragmatism, thanks largely to his lifelong friend William James, who popularized it beginning in 1898 but credited it to him. Peirce later recounts how he initially chose to summarize it: “It is because the practical is so preponderant in my doctrine, that I thought the most appropriate form for its enunciation was that of a maxim” (R 318:116[32], 1907).¹ This appeared in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” as “the rule for attaining the third grade of clearness of apprehension” (CP 5.402, EP 1:132, W 3:266, 1878). At the first grade, an idea “is so apprehended that it will be recognized wherever it is met with, and so that no other will be mistaken for it”; and at the second grade, “we can

give a precise definition of it, in abstract terms” (CP 5.389–390, EP 1:124–125, W 3:258).

As for the name, it did not come onto the public scene until two decades later. Peirce notes: “As late as 1893, when I might have procured the insertion of the word pragmatism in the *Century Dictionary*, it did not seem to me that its vogue was sufficient to warrant that step” (R 318:7, CP 5.13, EP 2:400, 1907). He did not miss his next such opportunity, repeating the maxim verbatim in his contribution to the entry for “pragmatism” in James Mark Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* (CP 5.2, 1902), as well as in his sixth Harvard Lecture on pragmatism, “The Nature of Meaning” (EP 2:218, 1903).

Ironically, the maxim itself ended up not being very clearly apprehended. In fact, Peirce became so dissatisfied with how others had appropriated “pragmatism” that he decided to rechristen his own doctrine “pragmaticism,” confident—rightly, as it turned out—that this new name was “ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers” (CP 5.414, EP 2:335, 1905). He eventually composed at least 13 variants of the original version that maintain the same basic form, and he also provided at least 47 restatements and elaborations with more substantial revisions. Both these lists are presented here in chronological order, followed by my own analysis and commentary.²

While the variants are unmistakable and Peirce explicitly labels several of the restatements as such, there is an unavoidable element of individual scholarly judgment involved in classifying specific texts as further elaborations of the maxim. The selection that I present here is presumably not exhaustive, and I also do not claim that it is definitive or authoritative, especially since there is no space to include the context of each excerpt or otherwise justify its inclusion. Nevertheless, I believe that it is sufficiently representative for discerning what Peirce had in mind as the pragmatistic meaning of a concept.

Original and Variants

1. Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (CP 5.402, EP 1:132, W 3:266, 1878)
2. Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of those effects is the *whole* of our conception of the object. (CP 8.119, c. 1902)
3. Consider what effects that *might conceivably* have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have: then, our concept of those effects *is* the *whole* concept in question. (RL 107:6, 1904)

4. Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then, your conception of those effects is **THE WHOLE** of your conception of the object. (CP 8.201n, c. 1905)
5. Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearing you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your conception of those effects is the **WHOLE** of your conception of the object. (CP 5.422, EP 2:338, 1905)
6. Consider what effects that might *conceivably* have practical bearings you *conceive* the objects of your *conception* to have. Then, your *conception* of those effects is the whole of your *conception* of the object. (CP 5.438, EP 2:346, 1905)
7. Consider what effects that *might conceivably* have practical bearings,—especially in modifying your habits,—you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your comprehensive conception of these effects is the whole of your conception of the object. (R 319:9, 1907)
8. Consider what effects that *might conceivably* have practical bearings,—especially in modifying habits or as implying capacities,—you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your (interpretational) conception of those effects is the whole (meaning of) your conception of the object. (R 322:10–11[11–12], 1907)
9. Consider what effects that *might conceivably* have practical bearing you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then [your] conception of these effects is the whole of your conception of the object. (R 321:30[24], 1907)
10. Consider what effects that might conceivably be practical you conceive the object of your conception would have: then your general conception of these effects is the whole of your conception of the object. (R 321:29[27], 1907)
11. Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the object of your conception to have: then the general mental habit that consists in the production of these effects is the whole meaning of your concept. (R 318:177[22], 1907)
12. Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your general conception of these effects is the whole of your conception of the object. (R 318:116–117[32–33], 1907)
13. If we consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have, then our concepts of those effects will be our whole concept of the object. (R 296:6, 1908)
14. Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then

our conception of these effects ... is what our conception of the object should be. (R 647:3, 1910)

Restatements and Elaborations

15. These are the minds which neglect the maxim of logic that the meaning of a word lies in the use that is to be made of it, so that every term of general physics ought to stand for a definite general phenomenon; and whoever clearly apprehends to what phenomenon a physical term refers, has nothing further to learn about that term except its grammatical construction. (CN 2:184, 1899)
16. In the ardor of youth, I thought that that was all there is in Belief; which led to the doctrine that the meaning of a conception consists in its possible practical consequences,—a doctrine called *pragmatism*, which has found not a few strong and able defenders.... But at present, while I still insist that the meaning of anything lies in what it may bring to pass, I can no longer admit that practical action is a final end. (R 873:35[5], 1901)
17. In my youth, that was all I could see in Belief, and so was led to the doctrine and maxim of right thinking that if we search out all the possible practical consequences of a conception, we have in their sum the entire meaning of that conception. This doctrine, called *pragmatism*, has found some weighty and doughty defenders.... That the meaning of anything lies in what it may bring to pass is as clear to me today, after long years of criticism and review, as it ever was, or more so. But the contraction of the muscles in action certainly cannot be said to constitute the final issue of an idea. (R 873:36–37[6–7], 1901)
18. It was in that way that I was led to the doctrine and maxim of right thinking that, if we search out all the practical consequences of a conception, we have in their aggregate the entire *meaning* of that conception. This doctrine, known as *pragmatism*, has certainly found some redoubtable defenders.... Now *meaning* is *intention*; and if we accept the view that intention lies in the future development, we ought to say that the meaning of a concept lies in what it will surely bring to pass. (R 873:29–30[5–6], 1901)
19. The *meaning* of a proposition is what the conscious habit of the man will be who believes in that proposition. Consequently, when a man sees prediction after prediction of a given hypothesis turning out true, he irresistibly begins to take a habit of expecting that sort of thing; and he not only takes the habit but approves of it; for he sees no objection to regarding those predictions as constituting a sample of all the consequences that ever could be deduced from the hypothesis. (R 873:24–25[4–5], 1901)

20. The doctrine appears to assume that the end of man is action ... If it be admitted, on the contrary, that action wants an end, and that that end must be something of a general description, then the spirit of the maxim itself, which is that we must look to the upshot of our concepts in order rightly to apprehend them, would direct us towards something different from practical facts, namely, to general ideas, as the true interpreters of our thought.... [T]he only ultimate good which the practical facts to which it directs attention can subserve is to further the development of concrete reasonableness; so that the meaning of the concept does not lie in any individual reactions at all, but in the manner in which those reactions contribute to that development. (CP 5.3, 1902)
21. Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood. (CP 5.18, EP 2:134–135, 1903)
22. What is the *proof* that the possible practical consequences of a concept constitute the sum total of the concept? The argument upon which I rested the maxim in my original paper was that *belief* consists mainly in being deliberately prepared to adopt the formula believed in as the guide to action. If this be in truth the nature of belief, then undoubtedly the proposition believed in can itself be nothing but a maxim of conduct. That I believe is quite evident. But how do we know that belief is nothing but the deliberate preparedness to act according to the formula believed? (CP 5.27, EP 2:139–140, 1903)
23. Pragmatism [is] considered as the maxim that the entire meaning and significance of any conception lies in its *conceivably* practical bearings,—not certainly altogether in consequences that would influence our conduct so far as we can foresee our future circumstances but which in *conceivable* circumstances would go to determine how we should deliberately act, and how we should act in a practical way and not merely how we should act as affirming or denying the conception to be cleared up. (EP 2:145, 1903)
24. The importance of the matter for pragmatism is obvious. For if the meaning of a symbol consists in *how* it might cause us to act, it is plain that this “how” cannot refer to the description of mechanical motions that it might cause, but must intend to refer to a description of the action as having this or that *aim*. In order to understand pragmatism, therefore, well enough to subject it to intelligent criticism, it is incumbent upon us to inquire what an ultimate aim, capable of being pursued in an indefinitely prolonged course of action, can be. (CP 5.135, EP 2:202, 1903)

25. For the maxim of pragmatism is that a conception can have no logical effect or import differing from that of a second conception except so far as, taken in connection with other conceptions and intentions, it might conceivably modify our practical conduct differently from that second conception. (CP 5.196, EP 2:234, 1903)
26. Thirdly, if pragmatism is the doctrine that every conception is a conception of conceivable practical effects, it makes conception reach far beyond the practical. It allows any flight of imagination, provided this imagination ultimately alights upon a possible practical effect. (CP 5.196, EP 2:235, 1903)
27. The elements of every concept enter into logical thought at the gate of perception and make their exit at the gate of purposive action; and whatever cannot show its passports at both those two gates is to be arrested as unauthorized by reason. (CP 5.212, EP 2:241, 1903)
28. There is a logical doctrine called *Pragmatism*. It is the doctrine that what any word or thought means *consists in* what it can contribute to an expectation about future experience, and nothing more. (R 462:24[42], 1903)
29. In 1877 he put forth in two articles ... the principle which he called pragmatism, namely that an intellectual concept is nothing but a concept of a purpose that might be entertained under conceivable circumstances. (RL 107(s):4, 1904)
30. But he already held it to be impossible to conceive anything otherwise than as an object of possible experience, and that of the kind that "experiment," or, purposive arrangement of conditions, may bring; and in 1877, ... he put forth the doctrine he called *Pragmatism*, namely, that every concept (as distinguished from a generalized sensation, such as 'red') is equivalent to a conditional purpose, should one have certain desires and certain types of experience, to act in a certain general way. (RL 107:3-4, 1904)
31. In 1877-8 he published a series of articles ... in which he enounced the principle he called *pragmatism*, that is, that every concept (in contrast to qualities of feeling, images, experiences, etc.) is definable in terms of a possible purpose of conduct under hypothetical general conditions. (RL 107:6, 1904)
32. In 1877 and 1878 in a series of articles ... he first put forth the doctrine of *Pragmatism*, as he called it, according to which every concept proper (as distinguished from a feeling, image, or percept) is fully interpretable in terms of conceivable conduct; that is to say, the difference between asserting or denying the applicability of the concept of a given subject, amounts precisely to saying that it consists solely in the fact that the reasoning proceeds according to a method which, persisted in, must

- correct any error of that conclusion in the speediest manner. (RL 107(s):3, 1904)
33. Hence it has been justly said that the entire purport of any concept lies in the character of the actions or external effects which it is calculated to produce or bring about. It is just that maxim and nothing else that properly goes by the name of *pragmatism*. (R 1476:46[6], c. 1904)
34. The method prescribed in the maxim is to trace out in the imagination the conceivable practical consequences,—that is, the consequences for deliberate, self-controlled conduct,—of the affirmation or denial of the concept; and the assertion of the maxim is that herein lies the *whole* of the purport of the word, the *entire* concept. (CP 8.191, c. 1904)
35. Have you read Royce's *World and Individual*? It contains the most persuasive presentation of the doctrine that the meaning, or ultimate translation, of a conceptual sign, that is, of a general sign, lies in purposive action. I put it into the form of a logical maxim in the *Popular Science Monthly* for January, 1878. (NEM 2:520–521, c. 1904)
36. Endeavoring, as a man of that type naturally would, to formulate what he so approved, he framed the theory that a *conception*, that is, the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life; so that, since obviously nothing that might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct, if one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and *there is absolutely nothing more in it*. For this doctrine he invented the name pragmatism. (CP 5.412, EP 2:332, 1905)
37. The meaning of a proposition is ... according to the pragmatist, that form in which the proposition becomes applicable to human conduct, not in these or those special circumstances, nor when one entertains this or that special design, but that form which is most directly applicable to self-control under every situation, and to every purpose.... [I]t must be simply the general description of all the experimental phenomena which the assertion of the proposition virtually predicts. For an experimental phenomenon is the fact asserted by the proposition that action of a certain description will have a certain kind of experimental result; and experimental results are the only results that can affect human conduct.... Whenever a man acts purposively, he acts under a belief in some experimental phenomenon. Consequently, the sum of the experimental phenomena that a proposition implies makes up its entire bearing upon human conduct. (CP 5.427, EP 2:340–341, 1905)

38. Pragmaticism makes thinking to consist in the living inferential metaboly of symbols whose purport lies in conditional general resolutions to act. (R 290:54[36], 1905)
39. The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol. (CP 5.438, EP 2:346, 1905)
40. Now the theory of Pragmaticism was originally based ... upon a study of that experience of the phenomena of self-control which is common to all grown men and women; and it seems evident that to some extent, at least, it must always be so based. For it is to conceptions of deliberate conduct that Pragmaticism would trace the intellectual purport of symbols; and deliberate conduct is self-controlled conduct. (CP 5.442, EP 2:348, 1905)
41. Pragmaticism makes the ultimate intellectual purport of what you please to consist in conceived conditional resolutions, or their substance; and therefore, the conditional propositions, with their hypothetical antecedents, in which such resolutions consist, being of the ultimate nature of meaning, must be capable of being true, that is, of expressing whatever there be which is such as the proposition expresses, independently of being thought to be so in any judgment, or being represented to be so in any other symbol of any man or men. But that amounts to saying that possibility is sometimes of a real kind. (CP 5.453, EP 2:354, 1905)
42. Pragmaticism consists in holding that the purport of any concept is its conceived bearing upon our conduct. (CP 5.460, EP 2:358, 1905)
43. That a possibility which *should* never be actualized, (in the sense of having a bearing upon conduct that might conceivably be contemplated,) would be a nullity is a form of stating the principle of pragmaticism. One obvious consequence is that the potential, or really possible, must always *refer* to the actual. The possible is what *can become actual*. A possibility which could not be actualized would be absurd, of course. (R 288:69[134–135], 1905)
44. In order to establish *pragmaticism*, it will be necessary further to show that if the ultimate interpretation of a thought relates to anything but a determination of conditional conduct, it cannot be of an intellectual quality and so is not in the strictest sense a *concept*. (EP 2:361–362, 1905)
45. For example, I agree that of the two implications of pragmatism that concepts are purposive, and that their meaning lies in their conceivable practical bearings, the former is the more fundamental. I think, however, that the doctrine would be quite

estropiée [crippled] without the latter point. By “practical” I mean apt to affect conduct; and by conduct, voluntary action that is self-controlled, i.e. controlled by adequate deliberation. (CP 8.322, 1906)

46. The argument for Pragmatism anachazomenally or recessively stated:³ (0) The meaning of an intellectual concept consists in the general manner in which it might modify deliberate conduct.... (14) And therefore the only essence of the concept—its logical interpretant—is a generalized habit of conduct. (R 330:1–2, 1906)
47. Such reasonings and all reasonings turn upon the idea that if one exerts certain kinds of volition, one will undergo in return certain compulsory perceptions. Now this sort of consideration, namely, that certain lines of conduct will entail certain kinds of inevitable experiences is what is called a “practical consideration.” Hence is justified the maxim, belief in which constitutes pragmatism; namely, *In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception.* (R 323:10–11[11–12], CP 5.9, 1906)
48. ‘Pragmatism’ is a word invented by Mr. C. S. Peirce ... to express his conviction that a practical maxim could embody the entire genuine intellectual purport of any concept. Peirce meant by a practical maxim a rule for attaining a definite purpose, but Professor James gave the matter a slightly different turn by making it include the precept for an experiment with the result. Though it seems like splitting hairs to distinguish and divide between these two aspects of the matter, yet the one means that all thought finds its ultimate interpretation in effort, the other that the ultimate interpretation is in feeling. Accordingly Peirce recommends that while the term pragmatism be retained in a looser sense, his own precise doctrine be technically called ‘pragmaticism.’ (R 331:2–3, 1906)
49. Now experiences seem to me to be rather the object of a conception than its meaning. They are too external to the mind to be meanings; and as for expectations of experiences, if they cannot conceivably have any effect upon conduct, the concept of them cannot be of the intellectual kind. Besides, an experience is a single event, and so is the mental act of expecting it. Now no aggregate of single objects can constitute the meaning of a general concept. This objection does not apply to the effects of a concept upon conduct, since these effects are of the nature of a habit, and a habit is a general principle. These are two out of many considerations which led me to define pragmatism as the doctrine that the meaning of an intellectual concept consists

- exclusively in its *conceivable* effects upon conduct. (R 320:7–8, 1907)
50. But with intellectual concepts,—the only concepts properly so called,—the case is entirely different. The affirmation and denial of such a predicate do differ in their intrinsic significations. The one implies that the object of which it could be truly affirmed would, under some definitely conceivable circumstances, behave differently from any object of which the same predicate could be truly denied. This, to my mind, is the kernel of pragmatism.... Now every existential fact is an object of possible experience, and every such object might conceivably affect anybody's rational conduct. (R 318:95–96[11–12], 1907)
51. Intellectual concepts are general or derivatives of generals, and therefore their meanings must be general.... If, in place of James's "experiences to be expected," we substitute the habits which must result from those experiences,—must result, I mean, if the defined concept be intellectual, but not if it be existential or emotional,—we finally extract, I think, the very quintessence of the logical meaning. Herein, as it seems to me, lies the very inmost secret of the subject: that such an idea as 'green,' or such an idea as that Richard III was humpbacked, does not necessarily,—nor, by itself, even possibly,—result in any habit or general rule of conduct, while a true intellectual concept does lead to the result that, given the appropriate circumstances and motive, a rule of conduct will follow. (R 318:115–116[31–32], 1907)
52. But that the *total* meaning of the predication of an intellectual concept consists in affirming that, under all conceivable circumstances of a given kind, the subject of the predication would (or would not) behave in a certain way,—that is, that it either would, or would not, be true that under given experiential circumstances (or under a given proportion of them, taken as they would occur in experience) certain facts would exist,—*that* proposition I take to be the kernel of pragmatism. More simply stated, the whole meaning of an intellectual predicate is that certain kinds of events would happen, once in so often, in the course of experience, under certain kinds of existential circumstances. (R 318:270[12], EP 2:402, 1907)
53. Consequently, the most perfect account we can give of a concept will consist in a description of the habit that it will produce; and how otherwise can a habit be described than by a general statement of the kind of action it will give rise to under described circumstances? This is the variety of pragmatism that I have urged. (R 318:150–151[76–77], NEM 3:494, 1907)
54. Consequently, the most perfect account of a concept that words can convey will consist in a description of the habit which that

concept is calculated to produce. But how otherwise can a habit be described than by a description of the kind of action to which it gives rise, with the specification of the conditions and of the motive? (R 318:335–336[76–77], CP 5.491, EP 2:418, 1907)

55. But [pragmatism holds] that the *total* meaning of the predication of an intellectual concept is contained in an affirmation that, under all conceivable circumstances of a given kind, (or under this or that more or less indefinite part of the cases of their fulfillment, should the predication be modal,) the subject of the predication would behave in a certain general way,—that is, it would be true under given experiential circumstances (or under a more or less definitely stated proportion of them, *taken as they would occur*, that is in the same order of succession, *in experience*). A most pregnant principle, quite undeniably, will this “kernel of pragmatism” prove to be, that the *whole* meaning of an intellectual predicate is that certain kinds of events would happen, once in so often, in the course of experience, under certain kinds of existential conditions,—provided it can be proved to be true. (R 318:12&16, CP 5.467–468, 1907)
56. Now as I apprehend the matter, pragmatism teaches that the “meaning” of any belief as a mental representation resides in the character of the habit of conduct which it implies. If this be so, it is surely incorrect to say that pragmatism makes the ultimate “meaning” of a concept to consist in any kind of recommendation or other representation. Still less would it suit my way of thinking to say that the meaning of a concept expresses itself in “experience to be expected.” (R 318:152–153[10–11], 1907)
57. The only way of attaining any satisfactory general knowledge of experiential truth is by inductive testing of theories. This is, therefore, the only way to ascertain the meaning of a current concept.... In so far as it has an intellectual character, the experimental investigation will show that to believe the concept in question is applicable to anything is to be prepared under certain circumstances, and when actuated by given motives, to act in a certain way. (R 318:128–129[53–54], EP 2:432, 1907)
58. [I]t is proper to speak of the “meaning” of a concept.... [T]he only way to complete our knowledge of its nature is to discover and recognize just what general habits of conduct a belief in the truth of the concept (of any conceivable subject, and under any conceivable circumstances) would reasonably develop; that is to say, what habits would ultimately result from a sufficient consideration of such truth. It is necessary to understand the word “conduct,” here, in the broadest sense. (CP 6.481, EP 2:447–448, 1908)

59. According to that logical doctrine which the present writer first formulated in 1873 and named Pragmatism, the true meaning of any product of the intellect lies in whatever unitary determination it would impart to practical conduct under any and every conceivable circumstance, supposing such conduct to be guided by reflexion carried to an ultimate limit. (CP 6.490, EP 2:551n15, 1908)
60. Namely, so far as my pragmatism is a doctrine, it is the doctrine that the significance of any intellectual thought consists in the particular manner in which it tends, and will tend, to regulate the thinker's conduct. (R 620:16, 1909)
61. ... I have long ago come to be guided by this maxim: that as long as it is *practically certain that we cannot* directly, nor with much accuracy even indirectly, observe what passes in the consciousness of any other person, while it is far from certain that we can do so (and accurately record what [we] can even glimpse at best but very glibberly⁴) even in the case of what shoots through our own minds, it is much safer to define all mental characters as far as possible in terms of their outward manifestations.... That maxim is, roughly speaking, equivalent to the one that I used in 1871 to call the rule of "pragmatism." (EP 2:465, 1913)

Analysis

Despite coming from four different passages written at four different times, #2–5 all emphasize the word "whole" in the second sentence, which is consistent with #34, #36, #52, and #55. Variant #3 further emphasizes "might conceivably" in the first sentence, along with #7–9; this is consistent with #23 and #49, as well as Peirce's reference to "possible practical consequences" in #16–17 and #22, his extension of meaningful conceptions to "any flight of imagination" in #26, and his focus on real possibility in #41 and #43. Variant #3 also replaces "the whole of our conception of the object" with "the *whole* concept in question"; unlike #1–3 and #13–14, which are in first person, #4–12 are in second person; and #5 has the singular "bearing" rather than the plural "bearings," as does #9.

#6 comes right at the beginning of "Issues of Pragmaticism" and is immediately followed by #39 as a restatement of it. Peirce pluralizes "object" to "objects" and emphasizes all five instances of words that have *conceive* as their root, explaining why in a manuscript draft:

This employment five times over of derivatives of *concipere* must then have had a purpose. In point of fact it had two. One was to show that I was speaking of meaning in no other sense than that of *intellectual purport*. The other was to avoid all danger of being understood as attempting to explain a concept by percepts, images, schemata,

or by anything but concepts. I did not, therefore, mean to say that acts, which are more strictly singular than anything, could constitute the purport, or adequate proper interpretation, of any symbol. (R 290:50[34], CP 5.402n3, 1905)

He likewise limits the scope of the maxim to “intellectual concepts”—“those upon the structure of which arguments concerning objective fact may hinge” (R 318:10, CP 5.467, EP 2:401, 1907), such as hard vs. soft but not red vs. blue—in #29, #44, #46–47, #49–52, #55, #57, and #60. Peirce also stresses here—as well as in #16–17, #20, and #24—that the meaning of a concept is not to be found in *individual* actions, applying this specifically to both “an experience” and “the mental act of expecting it” in #49. Along with #56, this implies that #28 is referring to a *general* “expectation about future experience,” i.e., what #19 calls “a habit of expecting that sort of thing.” While only implicit in the original version’s “practical bearings,” the related notions of purport and purpose appear in #27, #29–31, #33–42, #45, and #48.

#7–12 are from the multiple manuscript drafts for “Pragmatism” (R 318–322&324, 1907) and reflect aspects of #49–57 accordingly; in fact, #12 follows closely after #51.⁵ #9 is almost identical to the original version, while the others introduce some notable differences.

#7 suggests that “modifying your habits” is the most relevant effect of a conception to be considered, and #8 adds “implying capacities.” Both further qualify “your conception of these effects”; #7 calls it “comprehensive,” while #8 calls it “interpretational” and hints that “the whole of your conception of the object” is its whole *meaning*. In each case, Peirce goes on to explain the changes: “In order to make the rule plainer and more explicit, the words between the dashes, and the adjective ‘comprehensive’ have been inserted. The intention of the maxim remains just what it originally was” (R 319:9–10). “The words between dashes and in parentheses have been added in transcribing the maxim, in hopes of rendering it clearer, without substantially modifying it” (R 322:11[12]).

#10 revises “have practical bearings” to “be practical” and replaces “to have” with “would have.” More significantly, along with #12 it characterizes “your conception of these effects” as “general,” and Peirce adds after #12, “The immediate effects can only be efforts. The general conception of them is the concept of the habit that governs them” (R 318:117[33]). #11 is similar but more direct, replacing “your conception of these effects” with “the general mental habit that consists in the production of these effects,” and echoing #8 by calling this “the whole meaning of your concept” rather than “the whole of your conception of the object.” Peirce again explains:

These are nearly the very words in which I originally put forth the maxim. The slight discrepancies are owing to the fact that from September, 1877, when it was first penned, to April, 1907, I have been as incessant a self-critical student of reasoning, as the nature of the subject, which requires much digestion, advantageously allowed; as I had already been for twenty years before the earlier date. (R 318:177–178[22–23])

#13 is from a draft of Peirce's never-finished "apology" for pragmatism. Rephrased as a conditional proposition, it matches the plurality of "effects" with "concepts" in the consequent. Finally, after quoting the original version in a manuscript entitled "Definition," Peirce says that he "should have done better" to put it as given in #14. He thus introduces a normative dimension and proceeds to give the reason why:

For the difference between the three grades is not so much quantitative as qualitative. The first grade enables a man to know whether a given appearance agrees with the idea or not. The second grade enables him to know in what respect what agrees with the idea differs from what disagrees with it. The third grade enables him to know not what are but what ought to be the distinctive differences. (R 647:3, 1910)

After more than three decades, Peirce still associates the maxim with the third grade of clarity and once again compares it to the other two.

Commentary

In summary, the original version has three basic components:

- Our *whole* conception of an object is our conception of its *effects*.
- Those effects need not be actual; it is sufficient that they are *conceivable*.
- The only relevant effects are those that might have *practical bearings*.

What is missing, likely fostering the subsequent diversity in understanding and application, is designation of exactly which conceivable effects of an object qualify as having practical bearings and thereby contribute to the meaning of a concept that represents it.

James maintains that they are "consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experiences to be expected" (CP 5.2, 1902), but #49, #51, and #56 squarely reject that approach. Burke attributes to Peirce an "*operationalist* reading," which "emphasizes interactions with objects falling under given concepts," and to James an "*inferentialist* reading," which "emphasizes repercussions of beliefs upon other beliefs" (2013:43–44). As Hookway observes, "Scholars generally seem confident that they understand the pragmatic maxim [*sic*],

in most cases adopting a verificationist reading” (2004:120–121n3) as opposed to what he calls a “pragmatist” reading (ibid.:121–126).⁶ He reflectively counts himself among them in his own previous treatments, and Forster articulates such a position:

According to Peirce, a statement of the experimental content of a concept comprises a set of conditionals whose antecedents describe actions to be undertaken with respect to an object and whose consequents describe the anticipated behaviour of the object ([CP] 5.453, 1905). These conditionals take the form: ‘If act *A* were performed under conditions *C*, result *R* would occur’ and provide practical rules for determining by means of experiment whether a concept applies to a given object. (2011:71–72)

This “does seem to fit his [Peirce’s] examples better,” like the hardness of a diamond, and “also fits some of his other statements about the principle” (Hookway 2004:126)—perhaps including #28, #36–37, #47, #50, #52, and #55. On the other hand, #48 defines “a practical maxim” that “could embody the entire genuine intellectual purport of any concept” as simply “a rule for attaining a definite purpose,” and it distinguishes pragmatism as *not* “making it include the precept for an experiment with the result.” Moreover, in a few of the 1907 variants and many of Peirce’s other formulations, he adds three key terms that shed further valuable light:

- general: #10–12, #15, #20, #30–31, #37–39, #46, #49, #51, #53, #55, #57–58
- habit: #7–8, #11, #19, #46, #49, #51, #53–54, #56, #58
- meaning: #8, #11, #15–21, #23–24, #35, #37, #41, #45–47, #49, #51–52, #55–59

In particular, #7–8, #11, and Peirce’s comments immediately preceding and following #12 (#51 and quoted above) imply that effects having practical bearings are those produced by the habits of an interpreter, not directly by the object itself.⁷ This is another way of saying that a concept is a genuine *sign*—i.e., a symbol, “a sign which is fit to serve as such simply because it will be so interpreted” (EP 2:307, NEM 4:243, c. 1904)—whose primary function is to *mediate* between its object and its meaning or interpretant:

I will say that a sign is anything, of whatsoever mode of being, which mediates between an object and an interpretant; since it is both determined by the object *relatively to the interpretant*, and determines the interpretant *in reference to the object*, in such wise as to cause the interpretant to be determined by the object through the mediation of this “sign.” (R 318:302[44], EP 2:410, 1907)

#11 is especially noteworthy for carefully keeping these separate as Peirce advocates a few pages earlier in the same draft:

Now any sign, of whatsoever kind, professes to mediate between an Object, on the one hand, which it presents, to some sort of conformity to which it is, therefore, conceived to be moulded, and by which [it is conceived] to be determined, and an effect, on the other hand, which the sign is intended to bring about, representing it to be the outcome of the object's influence upon it. I need not say that this influence is usually indirect and not of the nature of a force. It is of the first importance in studies like this that the two correlates that are essential to a sign, its Object and its Meaning, or, as I usually call it, its Interpretant, should be clearly distinguished. (R 318:97&169[13–14])

He later adds that “the reference of a sign to its object merely serves the purpose of identification; namely, the identification of the actual or supposed previous experience with which the new meaning, conveyed in the sign, is to be attached” (R 318:172–173[17–18]). Similarly, #49 suggests that experiences are “rather the object of a conception than its meaning,” while “the effects of a concept upon conduct ... are of the nature of a habit, and a habit is a general principle” such that “the meaning of an intellectual concept consists exclusively in its *conceivable* effects upon conduct.” This helpfully spells out just how the “elements of every concept enter into logical thought at the gate of perception and make their exit at the gate of purposive action,” as #27 states.

In fact, although “conduct” is absent from Peirce's variants of the maxim itself, he employs it in his alternative formulations almost as frequently as “meaning”—in #22–23, #25, #31–32, #34, #36–37, #39–40, #42–47, #49–51, #56, and #58–60—often using both terms. He depicts conduct as “deliberate” and “self-controlled” in #34 and #40; “voluntary,” “self-controlled,” and “controlled by adequate deliberation” in #45; and “guided by reflexion carried to an ultimate limit” in #59. #46 is thus a comprehensive yet remarkably succinct restatement of the maxim, consisting of the first and last items in a brief and little-known sketch of an argument for pragmatism that Peirce apparently never fleshed out in full.

The upshot is that in accordance with #41, the *ultimate* meaning of an intellectual concept is properly expressed by “conceived conditional resolutions ... with their hypothetical antecedents.” In accordance with #21, the consequent in each case does not *describe* the law-governed behavior of objects as a “theoretical judgment ... in the indicative mood”; it *prescribes* the purposive behavior of interpreters as a “practical maxim ... in the imperative mood.” In other words, these conditionals take the form: “If result *R* is intended under conditions *C*, perform act *A*.” Consistent with #51 and #53–54, this conveys a habit,

one that would never conflict with any future experiences just in case its subjunctive counterpart (quoted above, Forster 2011:71–72) is true. Hence the common verificationist reading is not incorrect, but incomplete.⁸

Conclusion

It is important to recognize again that for Peirce, rather than stipulating particular actions in particular situations, these propositions signify general tendencies to act in certain general ways under certain general circumstances—not a collection of discrete actualities, but a continuum of real possibilities. As he states right before both #52 and #55:

Intellectual concepts, however,—the only sign-burdens that are properly denominated “concepts,”—essentially carry some implication concerning the general behaviour either of some conscious being or of some inanimate object, and so convey more, not merely than any feeling, but more, too, than any existential fact, namely, the “*would-acts*” of habitual behavior; and no agglomeration of actual happenings can ever completely fill up the meaning of a “would-be.” (R 318:11–12, CP 5.467, EP 2:401–402)⁹

It is presumably along these lines that Peirce’s long-sought proof of pragmatism “would essentially involve the establishment of the truth of synechism” (CP 5.415, EP 2:335, 1905), which is “that tendency of philosophical thought which insists upon the idea of continuity as of prime importance” (CP 6.169, 1902). He elaborates on this connection right after stating #20:

Almost everybody will now agree that the ultimate good lies in the evolutionary process in some way. If so, it is not in individual reactions in their segregation, but in something general or continuous. Synechism is founded on the notion that the coalescence, the becoming continuous, the becoming governed by laws, the becoming instinct with general ideas, are but phases of one and the same process of the growth of reasonableness. (CP 5.4, 1902)

In conjunction with #24, this invokes an ethical obligation grounded in what esthetics identifies as our “ultimate aim” because it is admirable in itself:

I do not see how one can have a more satisfying ideal of the admirable than the development of Reason so understood. The one thing whose admirableness is not due to an ulterior reason is Reason itself comprehended in all its fullness, so far as we can comprehend it. Under this conception, the ideal of conduct will be to execute our little function in the operation of the creation by giving a hand toward rendering

the world more reasonable whenever, as the slang is, it is “up to us” to do so. (CP 1.615, EP 2:255, 1903)

The meaning of a concept consists in *rational* conduct, which contributes to the ongoing development of *concrete* reasonableness. Following Peirce's advice in #61, we “define all mental characters as far as possible in terms of their outward manifestations,” such that his maxim of pragmatism amounts to “nothing but a particular application of an older logical rule, ‘By their fruits ye shall know them’” (R 318:9, CP 5.465, EP 2:401, 1907). Much more could certainly be said about these and other implications, and I hope that the community of Peirce scholars will join me in exploring them further.¹⁰

Independent Scholar
JonAlanSchmidt@gmail.com

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1 Published writings by Peirce are cited as follows: CN with volume and page number(s) for (1975–1987), CP with volume and paragraph number(s) for (1931–1958), EP with volume and page number(s) for (1992–1998), NEM with volume and page number(s) for (1976), and W with volume and page number(s) for (1982–2010). Manuscripts by Peirce (1839–1914) are cited as R or RL with manuscript or letter number as assigned by Robin (1967 or 1971) and page number(s) corresponding to the microfilm sequence as reproduced in the scanned images made available online by the Digital Peirce Archive (<https://rs.cms.hu-berlin.de/peircearchive>) and the Scalable Peirce Interpretation Network (https://fromthepage.com/collection/show?collection_id=16), followed by Peirce’s handwritten page numbers [in square brackets] where different. The year of publication or composition is that assigned by Robin (1967) unless subsequent investigation has produced an updated estimate as documented at <http://www.commens.org>.

2 This approach was inspired by Robert Marty’s “76 Definitions of the Sign by C. S. Peirce” (<https://arisbe.siteshost.iu.edu/resources/76defs/76defs.htm>). Following his example, I intentionally focus almost entirely on Peirce’s own words and engage only very briefly with secondary literature, especially since (surprisingly) “little scholarly attention has been paid to Peirce’s detailed explanations of his pragmatism” (Hookway 2004:120n3). Where different formulations come from alternative drafts of the same manuscript, their arrangement here is based on my own examination of the texts, except in the case of R 318 as explained in note 4.

3 The ancient Greek verb ἀναχάζω is translated as “force back” or “draw back” (<https://lsj.gr/wiki/ἀναχάζω>), so its adverbial form is roughly equivalent to “recessively.”

4 On the meaning of “glibberly,” the editors of EP helpfully tell us that “Peirce apparently coined this adverb himself, from the rare dialectical word ‘glibber’ meaning either ‘worn smooth’ or ‘slippery’—so that the adverb may be read ‘with all edges worn smooth’ or ‘in a slippery fashion’” (EP 2:553n5).

5 Altogether there are over five hundred handwritten pages in the drafts of “Pragmatism,” more than two-thirds of which are in R 318 alone, and none of which include dates. André De Tienne (e-mail correspondence, August 28, 2020) recalls that while preparing what became EP 2:398–433, the Peirce Edition Project undertook the monumental task of ascertaining the various sequences of composition. He kindly shared the results with me, as well as a remarkable diagram created many years later by Priscila Borges that traces the composition of R 318, referencing the page numbers assigned by the Institute for Studies in Pragmatism, and is now available online (https://peirce.iupui.edu/resources/ms318_diag.pdf). Peirce evidently wrote R 324, R 320, R 319, R 322, and R 321 in that order in February–March 1907; the first three major versions of R 318 in March–April 1907; and the remaining two major versions of R 318 some months later. I have arranged the maxim formulations in both lists accordingly and included the manuscript page number(s) in citations even for published quotes. High-resolution color images of R 318 are also now available online (<https://iijf.lib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:48987092>) from Houghton Library at Harvard University.

6 Although ubiquitous in secondary literature, as far as I know Peirce himself *never* refers to “the pragmatic maxim” in his writings. Instead he calls it “the pragmatist maxim” (NEM 4:162, 1903) or “the pragmatist maxim” (CP 5.426,

EP 2:340, 1905) only once each, and “the maxim of pragmatism” or “the maxim of pragmaticism” otherwise. In fact, Peirce rarely uses “pragmatic” as an adjective for “of or pertaining to pragmat(ic)ism,” consistently preferring “pragmat(ic)ist” or “pragmat(ic)istic.” In light of the vernacular implications of “pragmatic” in contemporary discourse, scholars would do well to follow his example and ethics of terminology (CP 2.219–226, EP 2:263–266, 1903) by adopting one of these distinctly philosophical alternatives.

7 Peirce even says as much in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” shortly before introducing the original maxim:

[T]he whole function of thought is to produce habits of action; ... whatever there is connected with a thought, but irrelevant to its purpose, is an accretion to it, but no part of it... To develop its meaning, we have, therefore, simply to determine what habits it produces, for what a thing means is simply what habits it involves. Now, the identity of a habit depends on how it might lead us to act, not merely under such circumstances as are likely to arise, but under such as might possibly occur, no matter how improbable they may be. What the habit is depends on *when* and *how* it causes us to act. As for the *when*, every stimulus to action is derived from perception; as for the *how*, every purpose of action is to produce some sensible result. Thus, we come down to what is tangible and practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice. (CP 5.400, EP 1:131, W 3:265, 1878)

8 Bellucci proposes that “the conception of the effects of an object can be said to be the *immediate logical interpretant* of that concept, while the habit that that concept produces is the *final logical interpretant* of it” (2017:329). Peirce himself introduces the latter term (R 318:334–335[76–77], CP 5.491, EP 2:418), but not the former. The relationship between the interpretant trichotomies of immediate/dynamical/final and emotional/energetic/logical is a matter of longstanding controversy and beyond the scope of this paper.

9 In R 318 Peirce first wrote “would-dos” but then struck through that phrase and wrote “*would-acts*” above it. As it appears in EP (2:402), the passage includes only “*would-acts*,” but the editors of CP chose to include both phrases: “... namely, the ‘would-acts,’ ‘would-dos’ of habitual behaviour ...” (5.467).

10 I am grateful to Cornelis de Waal and Robert Lane for their willingness to consider a submission consisting mostly of Peirce’s own words, as well as the two anonymous reviewers of the initial draft for their helpful comments that resulted in marked improvements.