

# Charles S. Peirce and Mapping the Terrain between Commonsense and Science

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Daniel-Hughes (2017) offers a vision of Peirce's conservatism consistent with his impetus to perform inquiry. The account on offer proposes that Peirce's conservatism reconciles engaged and disengaged inquiries, theorizing the two as continuous, rather than in tension. In order to make this case, Daniel-Hughes argues that Peircean conservatism is at odds neither with Peirce's account of critical commonsense nor his theory of inquiry. Tracing Peirce's conservatism in relation to these fundamental aspects of Peirce's work, Daniel-Hughes motivates a return to Peirce as a resource for bridging rather than exacerbating the gap between "hot and cold," engaged and disengaged cognition. "Conservatism" in Peirce is not always read as compatible with the picture of inquiry offered, however. After inviting comment on these moments of apparent tension in Peirce, I draw attention to an issue related to the classification of types of inquiry in relation to control and practical stakes in determining the role of conservatism. In brief, I wonder if moving to the second-order level, and inquiring into whether conservatism might be appropriate in a given case, might risk an incursion of conservatism into science. In light of questions regarding the "territorial dispute" over the domain of science and varieties of commonsense, I turn attention to the claim that Peirce's conservatism merits attention, "[...] because it offers a prescriptive strategy for managing the relationship [...] between controlled scientific inquiry and other, older, perhaps deeper aspects of cognition" (2017, p. 212). I hope these points and questions are helpful in developing what I am confident is an extraordinarily worthwhile project, mapping continuity between scientific and "ordinary" inquiry.

Before drawing attention to the move from conservatism's place in commonsense to compatibility with Peirce's theory of inquiry and the possibility of bridging interested and disinterested inquiries, it will be helpful to offer a few of Peirce's references to conservatism. Broadly, conservatism, as an epistemic position, maintains that the fact that one has a belief offers some *prima facie* reason for continuing to believe it. Regarding religious belief, for instance, Peirce writes in "Philosophy and the Conduct of Life," "[...] the man who would allow his religious life to be wounded by any sudden acceptance of a philosophy of religion [...]"

is a man whom we should consider *unwise*" (1992, 2.32). Regarding the moral life, Peirce advocates a "sentimental conservatism," arguing that moral qualities like courage, docility and devotion have their origin "from the biped who did not yet speak, while the characters that are most contemptible take their origin in reasoning" (1992, 2.31). Vincent Colapietro and Vincent Potter affirm that underlying this analysis of sentimental conservatism is a species of moral realism, "the sensitive person is responding to some actual suffering that but for the blindness of others would be seen as irreducibly real" (1996, p. xx). Reasoning, conceived as a process unhinged from the deliverances of these emotional responses inherited from evolutionary processes, can move us from this position. Should it do so, the consequences could be dire. Conservatism shows up in Peirce's comments on the "first principles" of inquiry, as well. For example, in "Issues of Pragmatism," Peirce suggests that inquiry demands "original principles," that "[...] are indubitable in the sense of being acritical" (1958, p. 204). Though these "original principles" are not themselves subject to live doubt and thus inquiry, we should still accept them, given their role in demonstration and inquiry.

But there are moments where conservatism seems to block the path of inquiry. At one point, Peirce explicitly denies that conservatism has *any* role to play in our more theoretical or disengaged investigations. He writes, "Conservatism—in the sense of a dread of consequences—is altogether out of place in science [...] Indeed, it is precisely among men animated by the spirit of science that the doctrine of fallibilism will find supporters" (1955, p. 58 [italics added for emphasis]). Susan Haack, in the course of delineating aspects of Peirce's program for "economy of research," identifies the conservatism of this passage as "the fear of discovering disturbing or unpalatable truths," and "one of the biggest obstacles to inquiry" (2014, p. 328). Now, one might suggest that this comment accords with the taxonomy. After all, conservatism accords with critical commonsense, and in the low-risk inquiries of science, fear of consequences would be out of place. One point of tension in Peirce stems from his characterization of conservatism as a habit, which he articulates immediately before the claim that a mark of cultivated intellects is to distinguish speculative and practical inquiries. Qua habit, "it tends to spread and extend itself over more and more of the life. [...] conservatism about morals leads to conservatism about manners and finally conservatism about opinions of a speculative kind" (1955, p. 44). In these moments, Peirce suggests a tension between the habits at home in vital pursuits and those involved in science, and the parsing out of proper domains of conservatism looks improbable.

Here I would like to invite further comment on the taxonomy offered by figure 1. First, in Peirce's work these categories seem to me to be generally or vaguely delineated. For instance, sometimes "play" or "musement" can carry some important consequences. Peirce's "neglected argument for the existence of God," for instance, commences as "musement." But it seems like such an inquiry carries a high risk. At least, it has the potential to radically reshape the habits in relation to theism. Musement that winds up lending support for theism, for Peirce, does not seem inappropriate. In light of the possibility of high-risk musement, should we expect a fair amount of bleeding between the categories? Is there another element or axis, other than the resources risked, that might help explain the appropriateness of different forms of inquiry?

Second, there is a question regarding the place of conservatism in both first and second-order inquiries. Critical commonsense is the appropriate mode of inquiry for high-risk investigations characterized by a greater degree of control. Here, conservatism as a species of trust in inherited habits is supposed to be justified insofar as the potentially disastrous consequences of abandoning that trust would, in effect, block future inquiry. But Daniel-Hughes argues, "the key skill in critical commonsense is the ability to judge between dangerous lines of inquiry and novel lines that promise to yield considerable fruit" (2017, p. 211). Here, it looks like conservatism would also be appropriate in this second-order arena. After all, the stakes of being wrong about the stakes could have deleterious consequences. In essence, my worry is that if (a) conservatism is justified as a corollary of not blocking the road of inquiry insofar as keeping the path clear demands some mechanism that distinguishes high- and low-risk inquiries, and (b) the judgment of whether an inquiry is of such a risk is itself potentially high risk, then conservatism can block that path. Peirce's comment on conservatism as a habit that bleeds into different domains of life compounds this worry, insofar as such a habit might tend to extend itself into "speculative" arenas.

Finally, the offered analysis suggests a Peircean "way forward" in bridging hot and cold cognition, interested and disinterested inquiry. In light of the concern that conservative tendencies, even in the second-order determination of the stakes of the examination, can undermine scientific inquiry, it seems that Peirce's conservatism is in tension with the ability to distinguish the speculative and the practical. In another sense, however, conservatism as a mechanism for keeping open the path of inquiry in "vital matters" seems to render the different forms of inquiry answerable to disclosing truth in matters both vital and jejune in the long run. That is, by showing that conservatism is a strategy for continuing inquiry, Daniel-

Hughes is, I think, successful in making the first steps of the bridge between different forms of engagement. Moving forward, though, I worry that Peirce's conservatism betrays an impulse to treat some scientific inquiries as the proper domain of commonsense.

It is my hope that these questions and comments are helpful. I want to extend many thanks to Daniel-Hughes for the fine paper, and to the Southwestern Philosophical Society for the opportunity to participate in this community of scholars.

### Works Cited

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