

## C. S. Peirce and G. M. Searle: The Hoax of Infallibilism

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"I would with all my heart join the ancient church of Rome if I could.  
But your book is an awful warning against doing so"  
C. S. Peirce, *Letter to George Searle*, August 9, 1895 (*L* 397)<sup>2</sup>

### 0. Introduction

The relatively scant attention paid in scholarship throughout the years to the religious aspects of Peirce's thought has always seemed to me to be surprising, to say the least. Since I first began to read Peirce, I have been deeply struck by this neglect that contrasted so much with the ubiquity of religious references in his writings, especially in his mature years. It seems to me that understanding Peirce requires dealing with Peirce's religious concerns, which are increasingly recognized as being as philosophically relevant as his scientific concerns (Parker 1998, 231, n. 5; Cantens 2006). In recent times, even Peirce's regular religious practice in his Milford years has been documented (*L* 244), including, at least occasionally, week-day Eucharist services, which were "the hallmark of Tractarian or Anglo-Catholic parishes" (Johnson 2006, 570, n. 22).

I have argued elsewhere (Nubiola 2004a y 2004b) that for Peirce, scientific activity is a genuine religious enterprise, perhaps even *the* religious activity *par excellence*, and that to divorce religion from science is antithetical to both the scientific spirit and the genuine Peirce. In this vein, I have also held that Peirce's framework for the relations between science and religion, reason and faith, seems congenial to the Roman Catholic tradition. Perhaps the strongest conflict between Peirce's view on science and Roman Catholic faith may be epitomized in the dogma of papal infallibility, declared by the Vatican Council I and Pius IX on July of 1870, only eleven weeks before Peirce's first visit to Rome. Since the first moment, papal infallibility has been a permanent object of mockery and derision in the cultivated circles of Anglo-American intellectuals. As the late Rorty wrote, Pius's decision "was making Catholicism look ridiculous" (Rorty 2000).

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<sup>2</sup> Peirce's letters are identified as usual by the numbers of the Robin Catalogue (Robin 1967) available at [http://www.iupui.edu/%7Epeirce/robin/robin\\_fm/toc\\_fm.htm](http://www.iupui.edu/%7Epeirce/robin/robin_fm/toc_fm.htm)

In this broad framework, the aim of my paper is to provide some context for Peirce's letter about papal infallibility, as the doctrine was presented by his former colleague George M. Searle in his 1895 book *Plain Facts for Fair Minds*, which Peirce came across almost by chance. According to Peirce, there is a deep contrast between the genuine scientific attitude and the putative metaphysical notion of 'absolute truth' that was behind Searle's defense of infallibility. "I would with all my heart join the ancient church of Rome if I could. But your book," —Peirce writes to Searle (*L* 397) — "is an awful warning against doing so."

In order to explain Peirce's position, my paper is arranged into four sections: 1) a brief presentation of George M. Searle and his book *Plain Facts for Fair Minds*; 2) a description of Peirce's letter to Searle; 3) Peirce's fallibilism and infallibility; and 4) an attempt to guess how Searle might have responded to Peirce. I will try to collect some of Peirce's texts and to quote them extensively, since it is possible to learn a lot from the exploration of this debate.

### 1. George M. Searle and his book *Plain Facts for Fair Minds*

George M. Searle was born in London in 1839 and was raised as a Unitarian by relatives in Brookline, Massachusetts. He graduated from Harvard College in 1857. He first was an assistant at the Dudley Observatory from 1858-59, where he discovered the asteroid Pandora on Sept. 11, 1858. Later he entered the U. S. Coast Survey, and in Sept. 1862 he was appointed assistant professor at the U. S. Naval Academy. In June 1866 he returned to the Harvard Observatory as an assistant astronomer, under the directorship of Joseph Winlock, and remained there until March 1868, when, as a convert to Catholicism, he left the Observatory to enter the Paulist Fathers. George was replaced by his older brother Arthur Searle (1837-1920), who remained in the Observatory until his death, a period of over 52 years (Bailey 1931, 258-260; Jones & Boyd 1971, 149).

George M. Searle and Charles S. Peirce worked together in the Coast Survey and the Harvard Observatory during the decade of 1860. They were both young scientists in their twenties (both were born in the same year), working in cooperation particularly in observations on asteroids (Lenzen 1964, 36). In Searle's "Obituary" in *Nature* (1918: 101, 430), there are listed the astronomical discoveries that he made, some of them jointly with Peirce and Winlock during his years at Harvard. He was ordained as a priest in 1871, was appointed a lecturer of Mathematics and Astronomy at the Catholic University of America, and became the fourth superior general of the Paulist Order from 1904 to 1909. His computation on the return and appearance of Halley's comet in 1908 was accepted as definitive by American astronomers. Searle wrote many articles in scientific journals. Among the books he wrote for non-Catholic audiences was *Plain Facts for Fair Minds. An Appeal to Candor and Common Sense* (1895), which was reprinted many times over the following years (at least in 1896, 1901, 1906, 1911, 1914 and 1921), and *Truths about Christian Science* (1916).

As Searle explains in the opening lines, "this book has been written, not with the view of controversy, but of simply stating the Catholic doctrine" (Searle 1895: iii). It was an apologetic book of Catholic faith written by a trained scientist. It is

a book addressed principally to what are commonly called Bible Christians, who form the majority of our Protestant population, in order to show them that the Catholic religion, while thoroughly in accordance with Scripture and based on it, also *agrees with reason and common sense, and has nothing*

*to fear from the discoveries or legitimate conclusions of science; that having the historical presumption in its favor, it also in every other way satisfies the demands of the intellect, as well as the needs of the soul. And to show the reasonableness of what is really the only thoroughly reasonable form of Christianity may not be altogether unprofitable even to others also, of whatever kind their belief or unbelief may be.* (Searle 1895: v-vi, [emphasis added]).

The book of 360 pages starts with a comparison of the Catholic idea of Christianity with the Protestant view that bases religion on the Bible alone (chapters II-V), and then sets forth point by point the creed of the Catholic Church (chapters VI-XXX), considering in some detail the common objections and misconceptions about them.

## 2. Peirce's letter to Searle

George Searle and Charles Peirce had been working together in the 1860's at the Survey and in the Harvard Observatory. There are no traces of whether they had any contact in the following thirty years, but perhaps not. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August of 1895, Peirce found Searle's *Plain Facts for Fair Minds* almost by chance: "having to wait in a bookstore yesterday," Peirce writes. The following day Peirce wrote a letter to Searle developing his strong reservations about the book, and in particular about "the central question", the infallibility of the Pope. This letter is almost unknown amongst Peirce scholars, and deserves a full attention in order to grasp Peirce's views about Catholicism and in particular about the polemic issue of papal infallibility.

A handwritten draft of the letter and a typed copy —perhaps by Peirce himself— are kept in the Houghton Library<sup>3</sup>. The letter has no paragraphs, but it is possible to distinguish in it three different sections. First of all, the following prefatory section:

Milford, Pa., 1895 Aug. 9

My dear Father Searle,

Having to wait in a bookstore yesterday, I found a little book before me by you designed to make catholicism palatable to non-catholics. If you have a copy to spare, I should like one. I am incapable of saying anything really disrespectful to you, whom I remember affectionately & whom I still consider as belonging to the holy union of searchers for truth; and I would with all my heart join the ancient church of Rome if I could. But your book is an awful warning against doing so.

In these opening lines, the contemporary reader might be surprised by Peirce's interest in a spare copy of the book, by his affectionate remembrance of the old colleague, whom he considers as "belonging to the holy union of searchers of truth", and also by Peirce's desire to join the church of Rome, were he only able to. In the next lines, Peirce explains his general objection to Searle's book:

Far better is it for a scientific man to follow out his peculiar duty of holding all beliefs lightly, so as to be on the way to detect new truths, even if that course be ruinous to him personally, —ruinous I mean to his spiritual peace. Plainly, that is what he was put into the world for; and were it to involve all sorts of evil personal consequences, on he must go and do what he seems to have been put into this world to do.

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<sup>3</sup> I have yet not been able to find the papers of Fr. George M. Searle. They are not kept in the American Catholic University Archives, so far it has not been possible for me to check the archives of the Paulist Order (<http://www.paulist.org/main/history.htm>). Perhaps it might be possible to find there the letter that Peirce really sent, and some information about the reaction of G. M. Searle.

Above all, it is forbidden to the scientific man to take sides and to endeavor to make a given proposition palatable. That work is good work in itself, but it is incongruous with the scientific attitude. Therefore, when I see you doing just that, it shocks me, and is a stronger argument against the system of *obedience*, which is *the* thing which distinguishes your Church, than all possible arguments your book might contain.

What Peirce complains about is the waste of time implied by the effort of a scientific man such as Searle, in trying to present as palatable to contemporary minds the propositions of the Catholic creed. This is exactly the opposite attitude to the genuine scientific spirit. The life of the scientist is a mission, a calling, and the scientific attitude requires openness, to hold "all beliefs lightly so as to be on the way to detect new truths". When Peirce realizes that his former colleague is performing in his book exactly the opposite of what the scientific attitude should require, he is shocked. Peirce is moved to attribute this change of the scientific attitude of his former colleague to "the system of obedience", which particularly distinguishes the Catholic Church. The reader of this passage cannot avoid remembering the "method of authority" described by Peirce twenty years earlier in "The Fixation of Belief" (1877):

This method has, from the earliest times, been one of the chief means of upholding correct theological and political doctrines, and of preserving their universal or catholic character. In Rome, especially, it has been practised from the days of Numa Pompilius to those of Pius Nonus. This is the most perfect example in history; but wherever there is a priesthood —and no religion has been without one— this method has been more or less made use of. (*CP* 5.379, *W* 3. 250-1).

Of course, the mention of Pope Pius IX ("the most perfect example in history" of the method of authority) is motivated by his solemn definition of papal infallibility in 1870. Peirce's letters to his family during his days in Rome in the Fall of 1870 are crowded with pejorative comments on Pius IX, who was in the middle of a terrible conflict with the newly born Italian state: "Had I been at the head of the Italian government, I would have dealt ruthlessly with the pope" (letter to his mother of 14 October), or "this goose of a pope", as he said in a letter to his aunt Lizzie (letter of 16 October) (*L* 341 and *L* 336; Kloesel 1990, 9).

The core of the letter deals with the issue of papal infallibility and may be distributed in four steps:

1) I turned naturally to the chapter on the central question, the Infallibility. What do I find? Nothing but edulcorations. Were the Pope to say, "whether or not I be *metaphysically* infallible, I am content that you should hold me for *practically* infallible," a very strong position indeed might be taken & fortified. But when one is asked to believe in an *absolute* infallibility, one cannot see what kind of evidence could possibly lend the slightest plausibility to such a claim. Make up any state of facts you please, and I cannot see how they could justify, or even tend to justify such a claim.

It is clear that Peirce is not against practical infallibility, but against a claim of absolute infallibility, since there is no evidence that might support that outlandish conception.

2) Neither can I see what the *use* is of insisting upon a point of metaphysics, when if the principle were once enunciated, that all dogmas are practical and are only asserted in so far as they can influence practice, you would then have a tremendous lever in your hands, and the road would at once be opened whereby Rome could be atoned to the modern world. There is no other way.

Peirce is supporting the practical value of dogmas, instead of their putative theoretical or speculative value. Even Peirce considers that this would be the way to reconcile the Catholic Church with the modern world.

3) As long as she will insist on metaphysics, with metaphysics she must fall. For it is a long journey but to a certain end that of metaphysics, —namely, it is bound to search a conception different from that assumed at the outset. This notion of laying down absolute truth, being the very first idea that would occur to any awakening mind, is simply going to be more and more puerile as the ages roll on.

The idea of an "absolute truth" is for Peirce simply bad metaphysics, totally incompatible with a sound understanding of modern science.

4) Were your Church only to reflect that if it could gain power over the human heart equal, say, to the horror against *incest*, it would have power enough, and that nobody ever has proved, or is likely within, say, a century to prove, that incest is contrary to rational principles of conduct, but that we all fully accept the judgment of common sense against it, without in the least pretending that common sense is infallible in any metaphysical sense, but simply that *practically* the dicta of the heart ought to be accepted *practically* as infallible, then, i. e. if Rome were content with as much authority as *that*, and it is mighty, there might be a strong probability of her uniting the entire *Christendom*. In short, the great foe to Rome is metaphysics. It is her malady.

If Rome, instead of claiming *theoretical infallibility* — "a phrase that logical analysis proves to be a mere jingle of words with a jangle of contradictory meanings", Peirce writes two years later (*CP* 1.661, 1898)— were to content herself with *practical* infallibility, she could attract the entire *Christendom* to unity. The letter ends with a postscript that deserves also to be transcribed:

P. S. You probably like to know how the type of man I represent is impressed by a hasty glance at your book. It is simply as offering such information I send this letter. I am not dreaming of changing your views.

After presenting Peirce's letter, it is interesting now to turn to the fourth chapter of *Plain Facts*, in which Searle deals with papal infallibility, which Peirce read while having to wait in a bookstore the day before. According to Peirce, the putative metaphysical notion of *absolute truth* is behind Searle's defense of the *absolute* infallibility of the Pope, but to the surprise of the reader those expressions of "absolute truth" or "absolute infallibility" do not appear at all in the text. As Peirce wrote in his letter, the only thing he found there were "edulcorations". Searle explains the infallibility of the Pope in traditional terms as

his ability to decide questions concerning religion about which there might be room for doubt in the minds of Christians, either on account of there being a large number of adherents, or apparently strong arguments, on both sides of the questions (1895, 36),

but it is not the office of the Pope "to settle matters of science, or ordinary questions of fact" (1895, 37), nor is he infallible in ordinary conversation nor is impeccable, incapable of doing anything morally wrong. Papal infallibility "has a very special and limited range" (1895, 36), and Searle's presentation is not based on any notion of absolute truth. It seems that it is required to turn to the more general ideas of Peirce about fallibilism and infallibility to get a clearer view of his position, which inspired his letter to his former colleague.

### 3. Peirce's fallibilism and infallibility

As is well known, for Peirce science is an essentially fallibilistic endeavour. "Indeed, out of a contrite fallibilism, combined with a high faith in the reality of knowledge, and an intense desire to find things out, all my philosophy has always seemed to me to grow" (*CP*

1.14, c.1897). This well-known quotation from the concluding paragraph of the preface of *CP* is extracted from the *MS 865*, which was tentatively titled by Richard Robin as "Notes on Religious and Scientific Infallibilism," and which was summarized in the following way: "Anticipated awakening of religious life, with greater simplicity of belief and greater spiritualization of the creeds. The Church's claim to infallibility is sound enough if by 'infallibility' is meant practical infallibility" (Robin 1967, *MS 865*).

Although some discussion of the notion of infallibility appears scattered in Peirce's texts throughout all his life, attention will be paid here only to the references appearing in the decade from 1893-1902, providing the context for Peirce's letter to Searle. In 1893, in Peirce's prospect of *The Principles of Philosophy*, the idea of continuity is presented as "the great idea which has been working itself out". Peirce announces there that in that volume he wants to present a "Sketch of a thoroughgoing philosophy of continuity" and he adds: "The great opponent of this philosophy has been in history, and is in logic, infallibilism, whether in its milder ecclesiastical form, or in its more dire scientific and materialistic apparitions". (*CP 8*, 284, c.1893). In this same year, in his review of George Gould: *The Meaning and Method of Life: A Search for Religion in Biology*, Peirce complains that "these two things, mechanicalism and infallibilism, are the great obstacles to any common understanding between religious thinking and scientific thinking." (*CN 1.176*, 1893). Peirce is arguing in this review against "mechanical infallibilism", exemplified by the materialist philosopher Ludwig Büchner's *Kraft und Stoff*. Peirce is strongly against the 'scientists' who treat

the law of the conservation of energy, in its extremest applications, the most remote from anything we can measure, as something it would be absurd to doubt. Such an opinion, which on the one hand sets up certain propositions as truth infallible and past all doubt, and which on the other hand leaves no possibility for motions not produced and completely swayed by blind mechanical force, may properly be termed mechanical infallibilism. (*CN 1.176*, 1893).

And four years later, Peirce writes on other place about the incompatibility between the principle of continuity and his scientific infallibilism:

The ordinary scientific infallibilist —of which sect Büchner in his *Kraft und Stoff* affords a fine example— cannot accept *synechism*, or the doctrine that all that exists is continuous — because he is committed to discontinuity in regard to all those things which he fancies he has exactly ascertained, and especially in regard to that part of his knowledge which he fancies he has exactly ascertained to be *certain*. For where there is continuity, the exact ascertainment of real quantities is too obviously impossible. (...) Thus scientific infallibilism draws down a veil before the eyes which prevents the evidences of continuity from being discerned (*CP 1.172*, c.1897).

"Though infallibility in scientific matters seems to me irresistibly comical" (*CP 1.9*, c.1897), it would be a quite misunderstanding of the doctrine of fallibilism to suppose that it means that we can not count with accuracy, or that we cannot attain a sure knowledge of the creations of our minds, "it only says that people cannot attain absolute certainty concerning questions of fact" (*CP 1.149*, c.1897)<sup>4</sup>. A few lines below, dealing with the persons who think that the consequences of this doctrine of fallibilism would undermine religion, Peirce writes that he does not believe that it is incompatible with religion:

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<sup>4</sup> The text continues: "Numbers are merely a system of names devised by men for the purpose of counting. It is a matter of real fact to say that in a certain room there are two persons. It is a matter of fact to say that each person has two eyes. It is a matter of fact to say that there are four eyes in the room. But to say that if there are two persons and each person has two eyes there will be four eyes is not a statement of fact, but a statement about the system of numbers which is our own creation."

The dogmas of a church may be infallible —infallible in the sense in which it is infallibly true that it is wrong to murder and steal — practically and substantially infallible. (...) For the present those knowing in divine things insist that infallibility is the prerogative of the church, but maybe bye and bye we shall be told that this infallibility had always been taken in an *ecclesiastical sense*. And that will be *true*, too. I should not wonder if the churches were to be quite agile in reformed teachings during the coming thirty years. (CP 1.151, 1897)

The reading of these texts suggests clearly that theoretical or absolute infallibility is a complete nonsense for Peirce, but not *practical infallibility*. In his *Vitally Important Topics*, as in his letter to Fr. Searle of three years before, the idea of practical infallibility appears in relation to horror at incest. Let us recall Peirce's claim:

The regnant system of sexual rules is an instinctive or Sentimental induction summarizing the experience of all our race. That it is abstractly and absolutely infallible we do not pretend; but that it is practically infallible for the individual, — which is the only clear sense the word "infallibility" will bear, — in that he ought to obey it and not his individual reason, *that* we do maintain. (CP 1.633, 1898; RLT 111).

And a few pages below:

Thus, true conservatism is sentimentalism. Of course, sentiment lays no claim to infallibility, in the sense of *theoretical infallibility* (...) But still, on the whole, he [the conservative] thinks his wisest plan is to reverence his deepest sentiments as his highest and ultimate authority, which is regarding them as *for him practically infallible* — that is, to say infallible in the only sense of the word in which *infallible* has any consistent meaning. (CP 1.661, 1898).

One last quotation of *Minute Logic* will be useful to summarize Peirce's view against absolute or theoretical infallibility and in favor of practical infallibility:

There is nothing at all in our knowledge which we have any warrant at all for regarding as absolute in any particular. Absolute infallibility may belong to the pope and the ecumenical councils: it is outside my province to discuss that question. But I am quite confident it does not belong to the multiplication table. If I must make any exception, let it be that the assertion that every assertion but this is fallible, is the only one that is absolutely infallible. But though nothing else is *absolutely* infallible, many propositions are *practically* infallible; such as the dicta of conscience. (CP 2.75, c. 1902).

#### 4. How Fr. Searle might have answered Peirce

We have not yet encountered Searle's answer to Peirce, but it might be possible to try to guess how he might have responded. Probably, Searle would repeat his train of thought in *Plain Facts*, and in particular he would recall that "it would be an enormous mistake to suppose that the Pope is considered [by the Catholics] infallible, even on matters of faith, in his ordinary conversation; nor is he believed to be so in preaching; nor necessarily in his writings concerning matters of religion" (Searle 1895, 38). In particular, Fr. Searle would have replied to Peirce that from a scientific point of view the Catholic claim on papal infallibility should be understood as a type of *practical infallibility* and that it should not be considered as much more than the last word of the Supreme Court to settle disputed questions<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps an answer in this vein was the motive for Peirce's comment two years

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<sup>5</sup> If I remember well, this interpretation of papal infallibility was suggested by Joseph Ransdell in the Peirce-List several years ago.

later: "Religious infallibilism, caught in the current of the times, shows symptoms of declaring itself to be only practically speaking infallible" (*CP* 1.8, c.1897).

Along this line, I would like to imagine that Searle would have highlighted his sympathy with Peirce's defense of practical infallibility, against theoretical and absolute infallibility, since both were also in agreement that this approach paves the way for an ecumenical encounter of the different Christian traditions, in particular the Anglican and Roman Catholic communities of the time. Perhaps Searle, striking a personal chord, would mention to Peirce that both were raised as Unitarians, and both converted to Episcopalianism in their youth, but that Peirce was still unwilling to take the further step of joining "the ancient church of Rome" as he —according to his letter— was yearning with all his heart.

## 5. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to recall a detail that Ken Ketner mentioned in his obituary of the outstanding Peirce scholar Carolyn Eisele:

Carolyn was an Episcopalian, and I can recall on many conference trips she would want to be taken to the main cathedral — in Europe, typically the Catholic cathedral. There she would inevitably "burn a candle for Charley", as she described it. After all, Peirce was her fellow Episcopalian, and both of them — as well as I can determine — saw no conflict between right religion and right science. In decades of study of the matter, I also haven't detected any such conflict. (Ketner 2001, 481).

In fact, the Episcopalian Charles Peirce and the Catholic George M. Searle, in the best vein of Catholic and scientific traditions, were both in deep agreement about the "marriage of science and religion," as Peirce entitles his paper of 1892<sup>6</sup>, and it is not unlikely that they could have reached an agreement on the disputed issue of papal infallibilism: "A certain kind of infallibility the church claims rightly enough; but it is a practical infallibility not a mathematical one" (*MS* 865, p. 7, c.1897).

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<sup>6</sup> "The day has come, however, when the man whom religious experience most devoutly moves can recognize the state of the case. While adhering to the essence of religion, and so far as possible to the church, which is all but essential, say, penessential, to it, he will cast aside that religious timidity that is forever prompting the church to recoil from the paths into which the Governor of history is leading the minds of men, a cowardice that has stood through the ages as the landmark and limit of her little faith, and will gladly go forward, sure that truth is not split into two warring doctrines, and that any change that knowledge can work in his faith can only affect its expression, but not the deep mystery expressed." (*CP* 6.432, 1892)



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