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Bowne and Peirce on the Logic of Religious Belief

Introduction

To compare the origins of personalism and pragmatism in the American philosophical tradition is not a novel idea; at the same time, this comparison has not been extensively studied. In 1934 Edward T. Ramsdell wrote a series of three articles addressing the pragmatic elements in the personalist philosophy of Borden Parker Bowne.[1] And Francis J. McConnell in his biography of Bowne devotes one chapter to Bowne's relation to pragmatism.[2] Both men understand "pragmatism" in its "Jamesian" version. This, of course, makes sense insofar as Bowne was well acquainted with both James and his work. However, Bowne was opposed to the relativizing extreme toward which many so-called pragmatists moved. This opposition put him in the company of Charles S. Peirce, one of the originators of American pragmatism. Peirce likewise resisted the direction of popular pragmatic thought; indeed, he went so far as to rename his own theory "pragmaticism" so that it would be too ugly for kidnappers.[3] Given this commonality of tempered pragmatism, it seems to me reasonable to explore further the similarities in the work of Peirce and Bowne. What follows is a step in that direction.

My purpose in this paper, therefore, will not be to pursue the genealogical connections between Bowne and James that were begun by Ramsdell and McConnell. While in many ways I disagree with Ramsdell's assessment of Bowne, I do think the case for the James-Bowne connection is sound, particularly in light of the correspon-

dence between the two.[4] Nor is my intention here to "revise" the history of American philosophy, though I do believe there is much to be done in reassessing the transition from transcendentalism to "classical American philosophy." Rather, I want to compare some particular features of the work of Bowne and Peirce, who, if not the sole originators, were at least significant contributors to the origins of personalism and pragmatism respectively. The particular features I will explore have to do with understanding the nature of religious belief. The goal of the comparison is twofold. On the one hand, I hope to show both personalism and pragmatism in new lights: to see that pragmatism is not necessarily anti-idealistic, nor personalism anti-pragmatic. On the other hand, I want to suggest, though there is not time here for a thorough defense, that Bowne and Peirce together made a neglected but significant contribution to the philosophy of religion that is relevant to contemporary discussions.

Outline

The comparison at hand shall focus on a few specific articles and should not be understood as an attempt to conflate the work of Peirce and Bowne. Rather, it should be construed as an attempt to draw important similarities out of the context of their differences. My analysis of Bowne's thought derives from two articles: "The Logic of Religious Belief" originally published in 1884 in the *Methodist Review*, and "Gains for Religious Thought in the Last Generation" originally published in 1909-10 in the *Hibbert Journal*.[5] Concerning Peirce's thought I rely primarily on his essay, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God" published in the *Hibbert Journal* in 1908 and its unpublished "Additament" written circa 1910. Each of these readings addresses the question of how a person might come to and maintain a belief in theism. Let me begin, then, by providing a brief overview of the two central pieces: Peirce's "Neglected Argument" and Bowne's "Logic of Belief."

Bowne began his essay by claiming to be examining the actual origins of religious belief. His interest was precisely to assert the pragmatic importance of religious belief. To do this he denied a rationalistic account of the origins of theism; that is, he argued that it is not primarily our reasoning that leads us to believe in God. Rather, theistic belief grows out of ordinary experience through two particular routes: feeling and lived morality. Bowne did not, as Peirce tried to do, articulate a clear division between these two routes. Instead, he offered them as dual aspects of an experiential origin of religious belief. As the article proceeded, Bowne turned from addressing the problem of the origin of belief to the problem of its truth. The upshot is that the experiential origins of religious belief suggest that the test of its truth may be pragmatic as well as logical.

Peirce's "Neglected Argument" likewise began with a description of the origin of religious belief and moved toward the question of how such belief might be tested. However, whereas Bowne employed a duality of experience and reason, with experience including both feeling and acting, Peirce, following his standard categoriology, presented the development of religious belief in tripartite fashion. Peirce composed his "Argument" for God's reality of three stages that form a nest of reciprocal dependence. The first stage, what Peirce called the "humble argument," consists of the claim that religious belief begins with feeling. The second stage, or "neglected argument proper," argues that the first stage is "vindicated" by its ubiquity in human experience, thus providing a ground for the use of Theism in guiding action. The final stage, what I shall call the "scientific argument," is a kind of design argument that tries to establish the rationality of the humble argument. Given Bowne's dual division, we would consider the first two stages to be addressing the "experiential" and the last stage to be addressing the "rational" elements in religious belief.

With these descriptions in hand, we are nearly ready to address the similarities in the work of Bowne and Peirce. However, insofar as the topic at hand is belief, and inasmuch as Peirce and Bowne both

worked with a particular notion of belief, it is important at the outset to examine briefly what that notion was. "Belief" was of course an important term for Peirce's early pragmatism, and this fact has been driven home by the numerous reprintings of his essay, "The Fixation of Belief." For Peirce, one "believes" when one is willing to act. He viewed belief as living—as rooted in the whole of experience—rather than as merely propositional. Moreover, so far as religious belief was concerned, Peirce was even more emphatic in dissociating belief from some logical state of assent: "it is absurd to say that religion is a mere belief. You might as well call society a belief, or politics a belief, or civilization a belief. Religion is a life, and can be identified with a belief only provided that belief be a living belief—a thing to be lived rather than said or thought" (6.439).

Bowne shared Peirce's notion of lived belief. For him, belief was not only an assent to a proposition, but an assent to a way of conducting one's life. Moreover, genealogically Bowne saw belief, and in particular religious belief, as arising from experience: "We shall see also that our deepest beliefs are not deduced, but grow; they are not made by logic, but developed from life" ("Logic" 152).

This initial similarity is critical, for it established the need in both thinkers for the serious examination of belief that led to the articles under inspection. Moreover, it led each of them to similar understandings of the complexities of what is, in practical experience, a very simple thing. And most importantly for my interests, the notion of "lived belief" led both Peirce and Bowne to examine a belief's need to appeal to all aspects of a person's being: to feeling, willing, and thinking. To try to capture this last point I shall develop my comparison around Peirce's triadic categorization of the person.

Belief and Feeling

The belief that there is an "aesthetic" or "felt" dimension to religious belief has long been a part of the American philosophical

tradition. Edwards and Emerson each in his own way bore witness to this. Nevertheless, with the advent of evolutionary theory and the development of scientific-mindedness—themes that Peirce and Bowne embraced—it became less popular not only to speak of religion in general, but more particularly to talk of the "felt" aspects of religion. Despite this, both Bowne and Peirce began with an acknowledgement of the importance of feeling for religious belief.

Peirce's claim is perhaps the stronger of the two, for in the "Neglected Argument" he maintained that a full religious belief must be grounded in the felt reasonableness of God's reality (6.487)—or as he argued elsewhere, "Religion must begin in feeling" (MS 850, 1). This claim is the heart of the humble argument or first stage of his threefold "Argument." Peirce's concern here is twofold. On the one hand, it seemed to him that feeling is truly the source of religion—that what persons have identified as religion is a felt experience. The corollary here is that he believed that any so-called religious belief that purported to rely only on logical thought was degenerate. On the other hand, it seemed to Peirce that a truly benign God should make His presence "obvious to all minds" (6.457). Thus, difficult metaphysical argumentations could not be the source and sustenance of religious belief. Rather, feeling, which is available to all persons, is that which "appeals to every mind from the most uncultured boor to the most powerful analytic philosopher" (MS 844, 1x).

Bowne began by sharing Peirce's fear that religious belief derived from logic is degenerate if not essentially impossible. He was clear about this in "The Logic of Belief" and restated his view in 1910 in "Gains for Religious Thought." In the latter we also find a kind of syncretism with Peirce's work; Bowne argued here that the rejection of the primacy of logic "is the doctrine of pragmatism, which needs, indeed some guarding lest it deny intellect its full rights, but nevertheless it expresses an important truth. Belief has a vital and practical root rather than a logical and speculative one" ("Gains" 171). Such vital and practical roots are to be found for Bowne in appeals to "faith, or feeling, or some other illogical element" ("Logic"

149). The origin of religious belief is thus not objective but subjective: "man did not begin by demonstrating the possibility and obligations of religion..." ("Logic" 153). Thus, like Peirce, Bowne took experienced feelings as a starting point for religious belief; it served not only as a rational condition of what it means to be a religious belief, but more importantly as an empirical or phenomenological condition of lived religious belief. It is with reference to this condition that Bowne labeled his account "sentimentalism." However, at the same time, Bowne included under "vital origins" more than feeling; he included the "practical" and, by implication, the moral. This inclusion points us to the second stage in Peirce's Argument. Following Peirce's development, then, let us turn to this second condition of religious belief.

Belief and Willing

Peirce labeled the second stage of his argument, the "neglected argument proper," on the ground that this particular stage was regularly ignored by theologians. What was neglected, he argued, was the "instinctive" or "common sense" nature of the humble argument. The point was that if the humble argument could be understood as instinctive—and thus normal or natural for persons—then, in practice at least, it could be confidently employed as a guide to willing. Thus, the second stage of the argument served a dual or reciprocal purpose. It vindicated the felt origin of belief in God and it showed the belief's relation to the will as an implicit guide to conduct.

The neglected argument proper developed out of Peirce's initial concern over the subjectivity of the humble argument. In short, if the humble argument is subjective, what is to prevent excess in the name of religion? As Peirce maintained:

> Religion cannot reside in its totality in a single individual. Like every species of reality, it is essentially a social, a public affair. (6.429)

Moreover, Peirce was concerned about the "livingness" of belief. If religious belief were confined to moments of "enthusiasm" or mystical union, it might become divorced from the rest of our being, from the full range of experience, thereby encouraging a belief that was sporadic if not chaotic. Thus, Peirce also sought to establish the relation of religious feeling to the will, which was concerned with the development of all experience.

In addressing both of these concerns Peirce did not immediately leap to reason for salvation. For reason, like feeling, might fail to cover the development of experience. One might easily be a rational theist in the classroom and a thoroughgoing atheist as measured by one's actions in the world. Therefore, Peirce appealed instead to what he believed was obvious: that persons almost universally embrace some form of theism. He believed that the humble argument, as he understood it, was an experience whose "persuasiveness is no less than extraordinary; while it is not unknown to anybody" (6.457).

This simple fact, he argued, was a vindication of the humble argument and was mysteriously neglected by theologians and preachers, perhaps because they tried to be too metaphysically sophisticated. Peirce put is as follows:

> But they [theologians] might and ought to have described it [the humble argument's universal appeal], and should have defended it, too, as far as they could, without going into original logical researches, which could not be justly expected of them. They are accustomed to make use of the principle that that which convinces a normal man must be presumed to be sound reasoning; and therefore they ought to say whatever can truly be advanced to show that the N.A. ([i.e. the humble argument], if sufficiently developed, will convince any normal man. (6.484)

Of course Peirce was not attempting to defend an *ad populum* fallacy. Rather, his point was that the convincingness of the humble argument suggested that it was instinctive as felt, and commonsensical when examined. This is no proof of God's reality, but it is evidence—perhaps vindicating evidence—in favor of belief in God's

reality. While Peirce did not hold common sense claims to be infallible, he did believe them to be significantly more fixed than purely subjective thoughts. In the same class as belief in God's reality he placed the beliefs that murder and incest are wrong (5.445).

The upshot of the neglected argument proper is thus twofold. On the one hand, it provided an experiential vindication of the humble argument. That is, since it was commonsensical—though of course open to criticism— it was not merely subjective in the sense of being a personal whim, as for example we might construe a "conversation" with God. The universal appeal of the argument makes it "ours" rather than "mine." This means that the humble argument is in some sense public and is therefore a matter of human practice. At the same time, this means that the belief in God's reality can more confidently be extended to all of our conduct, to all of our willing. In short, it can function as a guide to how we choose to act. In sum, then, the second stage of Peirce's argument brings the belief begun in feeling "to life," to everyday experience, by establishing it as commonsensical and thus "practiceable" for willing.

Whereas Peirce's approach to relating religious belief and the will reflected his desire to construct a nest of arguments, Bowne's approach was somewhat more direct. His concern was to examine the phenomena of human experience directly. Therefore, instead of building a foundation for moral instinct, as Peirce seems to have done, he began by acknowledging moral instinct as a fact of human experience. Bowne began by considering the act of the will as one of the vital origins of religious belief. As a result, whereas for Peirce religious belief began in feeling, for Bowne it began in feeling *or* in moral conduct.

As early as 1874 Bowne argued that there were indeed different avenues to God even within the "vital" realm. We saw in the first section his appeal to feeling; he gave equal emphasis to the efficacy of the will's moral instinct. "There are," he said, "persons of ethical habits of thinking...who are apt to look coldly upon ecstasies, but

who do have a deep reverence for all moral good. To them the dictates of conscience are the voice of God" ("Gains" 174). For these persons, the belief in God's reality begins in moral experience, not in religious sentiment. And, according to Bowne, this origin leads to God in two ways, through two classes of belief: an experiential one reflecting "an implication of our nature itself," and a rational one that takes moral instinct and experience as facts requiring "explanation" ("Logic" 154).

The rational avenue, which involves a kind of design argument, I reserve for the third stage of my comparison. The experiential avenue is more directly relevant to the immediate concern for willing. We must recall that for Bowne the vital origins—representing the experiential class of belief—are pretheoretical: "Thus man did not begin by inquiring into the implications of ethical existence and by settling all the metaphysical difficulties involved therein, but he begin [sic] by being ethical, and by implicitly assuming all which that implies" ("Logic"). In being ethical, then, or in willing morally, there is a divineness in experience. The force of conscience was for Bowne itself a religious force, such that there are some persons "whose religion consists in the single performance of duty" ("Gains" 174).

It is important here to think of Bowne's point outside of the context of his own Christian belief. He is claiming that experience itself, as human willing, leads us into religious belief. Indeed, we can even think of atheistic humanisms that hinge on such a claim. For Bowne, however, even the experience is suggestive of theism; moral conduct exemplifies divinity and thus is one version of "that living apprehension of God in which alone he can be truly known" ("Logic" 154). The "truly known" here of course refers to knowledge by acquaintance. In short, then, the morally acting will, which as a matter of fact represents a way of being human, is for Bowne sufficient to originate a belief in God.

Despite his separate treatment of sentiment and willing, however, Bowne was not willing that these should be understood to function

independently of each other. Faith, he argued, "is not meant to stand in opposition to the moralities, but to supplement them, to aid their growth" ("Logic" 175). Bowne viewed these two vital avenues to belief as reciprocally dependent. Moral conduct is a way of bringing to life the religious feeling one has; it is neither a substitute for it nor an unrelated human pursuit. The complementarity of sentiment and willing reminds us of Peirce's similar incorporation of the two into his single Argument, though Bowne's approach clearly lacks the developmental and hierarchical attributes of Peirce's view. Moreover, while both men acknowledged the need for feeling and willing in some fashion, both also maintained that these aspects, even taken together, are insufficient for a full belief in God's reality. A third element is required: reason or thinking.

Belief and Reason

By way of his appeals to feeling and moral willing Bowne described his experiential class of belief. However, he did not leave matters at the pretheoretical stage. Ethical being, he maintained, has both implications and presuppositions that require rational explication. Thus, while reason cannot be itself establish a full religious belief, neither can it be ignored. As Bowne put it: "We may allow that belief has a highly complex genesis which admits of no very clear presentation, but we must not affirm that therefore belief has no accountability to logic" ("Logic" 153). Looked at more affirmatively, belief in God's reality must make some sense; it must appeal to the rational element of personhood. The question is how this is to be done.

To use Peirce's terms, rational beliefs arise in one of two ways: as logical deductions or as abductive hypotheses. Thus, a belief in God's reality might be either the upshot of some fact or belief or it might be the condition of some fact or belief. Bowne chose to focus on the latter. He made no attempt to deduce God's reality in a formal way; rather, he saw God as an explanation of what is which led him

to argue that "God appears as a hypothesis..." ("Logic" 154).

Bowne's move at this point is interesting not only because it renders his own view more clear, but because of its haunting similarity to Peirce's pragmaticistic view. The use of God as a rational hypothesis becomes focused as an epistemological concern. That is, without assuming that God arranges the possibility of our knowing his work (the universe), the possibility of any knowing seems greatly reduced. There is no reason why my belief need have anything to do with reality apart from some assumption that there is a guarantor. God's reality, in serving as such a guarantor, is therefore one clear hypothesis for grounding the possibility of any knowing. However, the implications extend further. That is, the hypothesis of God's reality grounds the possibility of knowing by asserting the trustworthiness of our natural, instinctive ability to know—it supports the general reliability of human instincts. As a consequence, the appeal to the rational element in believing in God itself further vindicates the religious person's belief insofar as that belief is derived from a natural sentiment or instinctive moral conduct. Bowne thus suggests that a belief in God's reality both constitutes a reasonable hypothesis for explaining knowing and serves as a way of sensibly integrating religious sentiment and moral willing. Therefore, as Bowne put it:

> If we assume a harmony between our nature and the nature of things...or if we assume that God will take care of our faculties and their essential veracity, then these subjective interests become reasons for believing. ("Logic" 162)

Peirce made nearly the same point in his own triadic fashion. Having addressed feeling and willing, he turned to the final argument in his nest: his appeal to the logic of inquiry or science. If we take all three of his arguments of the nest, we can see the sense in which he intended them to be "involving and relating to one another" to constitute a single Argument. The humble argument remains the source of religion; the neglected argument proper serves as a way of making the belief generated by the humble argument "practice-

able"; and the final argument, the "scientific argument," demonstrates the scientific significance of the humble argument. For Peirce, the adoption of a belief in God's reality (which occurs in the humble argument), was precisely an instance of the first stage of scientific inquiry, which he called "abduction": that is, the creation and tentative adoption of a hypothesis. Clearly, qua hypothesis, the notion of God's reality is capable of explaining a number of things in Peirce's understanding of experience. However, what was most telling here for Peirce was that belief in God's reality is one of the few ways of easily explaining the efficacy of abduction and therefore the very possibility of any human knowing. That is, abduction requires an instinct for guessing right more often than we guess wrong out of the unlimited number of hypotheses that might solve any given scientific problem. Moreover, this instinct must be something whose efficacy we can trust. For Peirce, the God hypothesis accounts for both of these needs. Indeed, the two elements seemed to him intimately linked: "the hypothesis of God's Reality is connected so with a theory of the nature of thinking that if this be proved so is that" (6.491).

The rational aspect of religious belief, for both Peirce and Bowne, culminated in a way that underscored the similarity of their views. Since neither believed God's reality could be deduced, but that it could function as a rational hypothesis, both believed that it could be "tested." Let us recall, however, that belief is an affair of living, not of propositions. Therefore, the test cannot be merely formal, but must occur in experience. Both Bowne and Peirce accordingly proposed pragmaticistic tests for belief in God's reality, the similarity of which is best indicated by stating their claims side by side:

> This brings him [a man of science], for testing the hypothesis [of God's reality], to taking his stand upon Pragmatism, which implies faith in common sense and instinct, though only as they issue from the cupelfurnace of measured criticism. In short, he will say that the N.A. is the First Stage of a scientific inquiry resulting in a hypothesis of the very highest Plausibility, whose ultimate test must lie in its value in the self-controlled growth of man's conduct of life. (Peirce, 6.480)

> The proof of such beliefs [religious beliefs] rests entirely on the energy of the life they express, and on their power to further that life in practice. This is the pragmatic test of truth, and for concrete truth there is no deeper or surer test than this. ("Gains" 171)

In a strictly logical sense Bowne's and Peirce's rational appeals fall to a charge of circularity. They use a belief in God's reality to ground the possibility of belief in God's reality; furthermore, in their pragmaticistic test, they test the belief's impact on a conduct which they in turn use to vindicate the belief. However, from the perspective of scientific inquiry they are merely presenting coherent world views that appeal to a kind of radical empiricism—an empiricism that involves "internal" as well as "external" facts. In short, as both men pointed out, they are not proving God's reality, but demonstrating the reasonableness of believing in God's reality—and these are very different projects.

Significance of the Comparison

The significance of this analogical look at the arguments of Bowne and Peirce is twofold. On the one hand, the arguments presented by Peirce and Bowne contain some relevance for contemporary discussions in the philosophy of religion. First, in the rational aspect of their arguments, Bowne and Peirce both presented an argument that is in itself important—what we might call the "epistemological argument" for God's reality. This is the claim, as we saw above, that any human knowledge, and in particular scientific knowledge that is developing, depends on a guarantor of our trust in the possibility of human knowing. This guarantor they took to be God. Thus, Peirce, for example, used God's reality as a hypothesis to ground the possibility of abductively acquiring a correct scientific hypothesis for some problem when there are an infinite number of hypothesis available. While such an epistemological argument is not new in the history of philosophy, its peculiarly "scientific" use by both Peirce and Bowne suggests that it be given serious reconsideration.

A second point of relevance for contemporary philosophy of religion is the appeal both men made to the whole person when addressing the problem of religious belief. Each maintained that true belief cannot occur without full involvement of all corners of our being. The long battle among reason, feeling, and willed faith is not over. Despite the medieval attempt to integrate faith and reason, the battle for the right to originate and legitimize religious belief remains a primary issue in contemporary discussions. In an important way Bowne and Peirce demonstrated the possibility of drawing all aspects of personhood together as elements of religious belief instead of forcing a disunion of these elements in order to describe such belief.

The other primary significance of the comparison is an historical one. It seems to me clear that a radical division or separation of pragmatism and personalism in the American tradition is mistaken. The current application of "pragmatism" to figures such as Richard Rorty and W.V.O. Quine is clearly a variant usage—one perhaps that Peirce foresaw when he renamed his thought "pragmaticism." Likewise, the use of "personalism" to mean a more general humanism is a move away from Bowne's theistic beginnings. My quarrel here is not with contemporary usage; with time all usage changes, and should do so. However, the change in usage should not lead us to misconstrue the origins of personalism and pragmatism. Bowne and Peirce were attempting to straddle the gap between absolute idealism and naturalistic necessitarianism—both were scientifically-minded theists. What is significant is that their work led them, quite independently, to some strikingly similar accounts of the world.

Notes

[1]See Ramsdell, "Pragmatism and Rationalism in the Philosophy of Borden Parker Bowne," "The Sources of Bowne's Pragmatism," and "The Religious Pragmatism of Borden Parker Bowne."

[2]See McConnell, *Borden Parker Bowne*.

[3]See Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 5.414. As is standard practice, references to *Collected Papers* will be given in the text by volume and paragraph number. All manuscript (MS) numbers refer to the Robin listing: Richard Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*.

[4]See McConnell for some instances of this correspondence.

[5]Both articles are reprinted in Steinkraus (ed.), *Representative Essays*.

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