

Mr. Partridge's Challenge

In the text, "Ideals of Conduct," C. S. Peirce makes a distinction between one's own conduct and ethics. One's conduct is a set made up by one's ideals, rules of conduct that apply to them and knowledge of how past acts worked out. The study of ethics is for him a theoretical inquiry of what conduct, in general, for all men, should be, according to what it is for a person in particular. Peirce gives to the particular search for the best conduct to follow a great value since it is through it that a man can learn about his liberty and practice to improve his ability in finding, each time, the best way to follow in a given situation. He says that moral acts are voluntary acts and compares it to reasoning, saying that the latter is a voluntary thought. "For reasoning is essentially thought that is under self-control, just as moral conduct is conduct under self-control."¹

During Mr. Partridge's class, the students are requested to explain what they understand by 'thinking for oneself' and how it differs from 'thinking'. The responses they give to this request consider some of the aspects that Peirce mentions in his text. Peirce's text goes from personal conduct to what ethics is and then from what reasoning and logic are to what the Reason is. He twice goes from the particular to the general. In the same way, the students' ideas follow from their personal thoughts (from thinking for oneself) to the extensive 'thinking' (that they, as a class, produce). The second one isn't possible if the first does not exist.

One could argue that if the second one is done, someone could just make use of it as if it were his own production. This also does not work because a general law is true only for the past situations that occurred, when circumstances were favorable for it to occur. There is no possible certainty that it will be the truth the next time, too.

Also, there are always new situations in which one has to make decisions and choose how to act. From these particular situations, a general way of conduct might derive. But, in a new situation, it is impossible to look for help in the old in order to have the option of looking on the general thought. There is, therefore, a real need of personal involvement and voluntary reasoning to solve this new matter.

Whenever this kind of situation occurs, one knows that one's decision might show later not to have been the best one possible. This does not matter for one's personal conduct since reasoning improves with practice. "Reason always looks forward to an endless future and expects endlessly to improve its results."² Thinking for oneself is the only possible way to improve the ability of thinking. The appreciation one has for his own thoughts (or ways of reasoning) after they have occurred is an important step to the improvement of the ability besides using the ability itself.

To check over how we have reasoned, we must reason again. And this last reasoning will have to be verified, too. Again, endless reasoning will follow to form a series where every thought (or reasoning) adds strength to the reasoning itself. Mr. Partridge's challenge was, for the students, an opportunity to verify their own beliefs about what thinking is and what thinking for oneself is, how thinking occurs and what are good reasons and what are not.

Every speech on the dialogue (or multi-logue) was a result of someone's thought for himself contributing to general thinking they're doing in class. Upon what each of them said, the others could build their personal beliefs according to the general belief about 'thinking for oneself' and 'thinking'. By doing that, they are giving one more bit of existence to the general Reason, which consists, according to Peirce, to govern individual events (be those thoughts or actions). As individual events will never be over, Reason is endless. Its occurrence, and not its end, is its being. Mr. Partridge presumes the students would not have done the thinking they did in the class if they had not been challenged by him. They oppose this argument on the basis that they would not have had that challenge if they had not already been thinking 'for themselves'. Mr. Partridge gives no answer to that.

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Footnotes

1. Peirce, C. S., op. cit., p. 331.
2. Ibid, p. 336.

Bibliography

- Lipman, M. *Lisa*. 2nd edition. New Jersey: First Mountain Foundation, 1983.
- Peirce, C. S. "Ideals of Conduct," *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Edited by C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss. England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1965, volume I, p. 326-338.