

'Universe of Discourse' (pub. 25.11.12-15:23). Quote in M. Bergman & S. Paavola (Eds.), *The Commens Dictionary: Peirce's Terms in His Own Words. New Edition*. Retrieved from <http://www.commens.org/dictionary/entry/quote-multitude-and-number>.

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**Term:** Universe of Discourse

**Quote:** Whether the constituent individuals or units of a collection have each of them a distinct identity of its own or not, depends upon the nature of the universe of discourse. If the universe of discourse is a matter of objective and completed experience, since experience is the aggregate of mental effect which the course of life has forced upon a man, by a brute bearing down of any will to resist it, each such act of brute force is destitute of anything reasonable (and therefore of the element of generality, or continuity, for continuity and generality are the same thing), and consequently the units will be individually distinct. [—] If you and I talk of the great tragedians who have acted in New York within the last ten years, a definite list can be drawn up of them, and each of them has his or her proper name. But suppose we open the question of how far the general influences of the theatrical world at present favor the development of female stars rather than of male stars. In order to discuss that, we have to go beyond our *completed* experience, which may have been determined by accidental circumstances, and have to consider the possible or probable stars of the immediate future. We can no longer assign proper names to each. The individual actors to which our discourse now relates become largely merged into general varieties; and their separate identities are partially lost. [—] The possible is necessarily general; and no amount of general specification can reduce a general class of possibilities to an individual case. It is only actuality, the force of existence, which bursts the fluidity of the general and produces a discrete unit. Since Kant it has been a very wide-spread idea that it is time and space which introduce continuity into nature. But this is an anacoluthon. Time and space are continuous because they embody conditions of possibility, and the possible is general, and continuity and generality are two names for the same absence of distinction of individuals.

When the universe of discourse relates to a common experience, but this experience is of something imaginary, as when we discuss the world of Shakespeare's creation in the play of Hamlet, we find individual distinction existing so far as the work of imagination has carried it, while beyond that point there is vagueness and generality. So, in the discussion of the consequences of a mathematical hypothesis, as long as we keep to what is distinctly posited and its positive implications, we find discrete elements, but when we pass to mere possibilities, the individuals merge together. This remark will be fully illustrated in the sequel.

**Source:** Peirce, C. S. (1897). *Multitude and Number*. MS [R] 25.

**References:** CP 4.172

**Date of** 1897

**Quote:**

**URL:** <http://www.commens.org/dictionary/entry/quote-multitude-and-number>