


The Percipuum and the Issue of Foundations



Sandra Rosenthal

The Commens Encyclopedia
The Digital Encyclopedia of Peirce Studies
New Edition

Edited by Mats Bergman and João Queiroz

URL <http://www.commens.org/encyclopedia/article/rosenthal-sandra-percipuum-and-issue-foundations>
Retrieved 03.04.2025
ISSN 2342-4257
License Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike

Abstract:

A good deal of attention is beginning to be focused on Peirce's understanding of perceptual judgments and the issue of foundations, and ultimately the nature of the percipuum is central to this issue. An examination of Peirce's understanding of the dual senses of the percept, the perceptual judgment, and the percipuum, as well as the role of the ponecept and ponecipuum, in the logic of perceptual awareness, reveals the radical nature of his rejection of foundationalism. It will be seen that Peirce uses the term "percipuum" in two different senses, a wide sense and a narrow sense, highlighting two corresponding senses of the perceptual judgment, and that what is "given" at the most fundamental level of perceptual awareness is in fact a "taken", incorporating both the nature of the taking and the nature of what is taken. For Peirce, perceptual facts at their very primordial core emerge neither from mind alone nor from the dynamic reality of the universe alone, but rather from the interaction of the two which constitutes experience.

Keywords: Perceptual Judgment, Percipuum, Fallibilism, Certitude, Memory, Doubt, Verification

A good deal of attention is beginning to be focused on Peirce's understanding of perceptual judgments and the issue of foundations. One commentator holds that the percipuum fuses the percept and perceptual judgment into a single whole and represents Peirce's attempt to reject foundationalism, though he never attempts to explicate why this so (Hookway, 1985, p. 166). On the other hand, another critic, in his discussion of the interrelation of observation and theory in Peirce's philosophy, tends to interpret what is given in the percept along foundationalist lines (Gruender, 1983, p. 281-287), while a third argues, similarly, that Peirce is led to a foundationalist position because perceptual judgments are immune from doubt (McCarthy, 1990, p. 63-113). Still another interpreter clearly rejects foundationalist interpretations and recognizes dual meanings of the perceptual judgment in Peirce's philosophy, but links them to a seemingly univocal meaning of the percipuum (Hausman, 1990, p. 271-308). And, ultimately, the nature of the percipuum is central to this issue. The ensuing analysis will attempt to bring into focus Peirce's understanding of the dual senses of the percept, the perceptual judgment, and the percipuum, as well as the role of the ponecept and ponecipuum, in the logic of perceptual awareness, in order to show the radical nature of his rejection of foundationalism. It will be seen that Peirce uses the term "percipuum" in two different senses, a wide sense and a narrow sense, highlighting two corresponding senses of the perceptual judgment. ¹ The term, percipuum, seems to have been first

used by Peirce in a manuscript of 1903 (CP 7. 642-681).² He there proposes "to consider the percept as it is immediately interpreted in the perceptual judgment, under the name of the 'percipuum'" (CP 7.642). Though the term is introduced late in Peirce's career, it can help clarify distinctions toward which he seemed to be groping throughout his writings.

Peirce states that "There is no Percipuum so absolute as not to be subject to possible error." (CP 7.676) However Peirce is here using the term, "percipuum" in its wide sense, a sense which in the preceding context had served the purpose of showing that time is not composed of a series of discrete instants. As he there states, "The percipuum is not an absolute event", but rather occurs in a span of time which includes memory and expectation" (CP 7. 675). Here Peirce is concerned with emphasizing the continuity of time or the passing temporal spread in which the percipuum looks to both the past and the future.

What this passage indicates is that when Peirce makes distinctions within the percipuum he is making abstractions for the purpose of analysis. The terms "ponecipuum," "percipuum," and "antecipuum" are used by him to indicate such analytic abstractions (CP 7.648). The percipuum in its wide sense, as it actually occurs in the so-called specious present, contains several analytic elements, one of which is the percipuum in its narrow sense. Though the use of these terms may seem representative of the unnecessary obscurity often found in Peirce's writings, they will in fact clarify certain fundamental positions which would be obscured or misinterpreted by the use of more traditional epistemological terms. And, without distinguishing the percipuum in its wide and narrow senses Peirce's radical pragmatic transformation of some traditional epistemic concepts cannot fully come to light.

Peirce's most sustained attempt to distinguish percipuum, antecipuum, and ponecipuum is found in his statement that:

It is a difficult question whether the serial principle permits us to draw sharp lines of demarcation between the percept and the near anticipation, or say the antecept, and between the percept and the recent memory (may I be permitted to call this the ponecept ... or whether the percept is at once but an extreme case of an antecept and an extreme case of a ponecept. Or rather- I beg the reader's pardon for my awkwardness of statement-the precise question is not about percept, antecept, and ponecept, but about percipuum, antecipuum, and ponecipuum, the direct and uncontrollable interpretations of percept, antecept, and ponecept. (CP 7.648)

It is with these analytic distinctions and their role in clarifying the nature of the perceptual judgment in its narrow sense that will here be the main concern.

A difficulty immediately arises concerning the intended meaning of the above terms. Peirce has labeled the percept as it is immediately interpreted in the perceptual judgment the percipuum. It seems that only an interpreted percept can have near anticipations or predictive meanings adhering to it, or in other words, only an interpreted percept can be an antecept; the antecept is by its very nature interpreted. Thus, what would be an antecipuum, or an interpretation of an antecept? Similarly, it seems that perhaps the ponecept, as a remembered percept, in some way enters into the interpretation of a present percept in the perceptual judgment. What then, would be an interpretation of a ponecept?

Taking the later question first, it can be held that a ponecept is an "ingredient in" a ponecipuum. A ponecept, which, as Peirce has clearly indicated, is an abstraction made for purposes of analysis, is a percept as remembered. A synthesis of similar past percepts, or ponecepts, held together as a very primitive "criterion in mind" for the recognition of a present percept, is a ponecipuum. Thus, a ponecipuum, as logically prior to any present percept, is required for the interpretation of the present percept via the perceptual judgment. It provides the synthesized criterion for grasp of presentation as a repeatable content which can activate habit. Indeed, it is the very grasping by the ponecipuum which makes the content repeatable. This ponecipuum is what, in the terminology of Peircean semiotic, he calls the "generalized sensation". Indeed, Peirce at times makes a distinction between impressions and sensations. As he states, "No one can know what an impression is like in itself ... an impression in itself is an undifferentiated sensation" (W 1: 515). In keeping with this distinction, the ponecipuum would serve as the vehicle from transforming impressions into recognizable, differentiated sensations which help constitute the immediate interpretant. Since Peirce more often interchanges the terms 'impression' and 'sensation', however, the introduction of this distinction will not be maintained.

The only type of "reference to future experience" implicit in the ponecipuum is the possibility of future presentations of graspable content, which, for purposes of clarity, can perhaps best be termed "possibility of repetition" rather than possibility of future experience. It provides sameness of type but "contains no assertion of a fact" (MS 740). It is that by which one is able to grasp a content which, in becoming a repetition of previous content, can instigate anticipations or "activate" a habit. What instigates activity in the ongoing course of experience is perspectives of objects, appearing facts, but this is possible only because the structure of meaning as habit includes the ponecipuum, or core of generalized sensory content.

The present percept, interpreted in the light of the ponecipuum, is the percipuum in its narrow sense. This percipuum is the outcome of the perceptual judgment in its narrow sense and yields "repeatable content" which serves to activate habit, though as an analytic stopping point, it provides no anticipation of future experience. The perceptual judgment in its narrow sense is the primitive abductive hypothesis of a present repetition of past experiential content, and the content in fact becomes a repetition of previously experienced contents only as the perceptual judgment does assimilate it to those contents in the abductive process of recognition. Or, as Peirce notes elsewhere, "The percipuum is a recognition of the character of what is past" (CP 7.677). The percipuum, even in its narrow sense, must "include" the ponecipuum, for it is only in light of the ponecipuum, representing the character of what is past, that the percept can be recognized in the perceptual judgment in its narrow sense. As an analytic stopping point in the analysis of the perceptual judgment in the wide sense, it contains no reference to future experience. As Peirce states, "What two things can be more disparate than a memory and an expectation?" (CP 2.143). Here it should be reemphasized, however, that while the perceptual judgment in its narrow sense does not include the antecept and anticipuum, but rather provides the repetition which gives rise to them with their near anticipations, yet the very character of past assimilation incorporates assimilation of that which has been partially constituted in action. Even the ponecipuum which yields the repetition which activates habit is not the product of a purely passive assimilation. Human creativity and activity enters into every dimension of perceptual awareness.

Turning now to the antecept, this can be interpreted as that element of vague, not fully conscious anticipation of future experience which follows upon³ the perceptual judgment or the recognition of the presented content and which, as explicitly interpreted in the anticipuum, forms the level of full conceptual interpretation or predictive meaning. Furthermore, by his use of terminology-antecept and anticipuum-Peirce indicates quite clearly that the antecept must be seen, for purposes of analysis, as a primitive "layer" in predictive conceptual meaning rather than as an additional "layer" in the recognition of present content. Thus as an analytic stopping point in the analysis of perception one finds a recognized content or percipuum which is totally devoid of reference to future experience yet which, as a recognized content, is dependent upon and is in fact the outcome of a judgment-the perceptual judgment in its narrow sense. Thus, the "sensing dimension", as it enters the structure of human awareness, is not an absolute given but a taken. The content of this analytic stopping place is difficult to signify, for the narrow percipuum in its purity can be expressed

neither in the language of objectivity nor in the language of appearing. It is a "First" in that "it cannot be articulately thought", for it loses its "characteristic innocence" in the very attempt (CP 1.357). Yet this content is there as an analytic element of the perceptual situation, serving as the basis for our full predictive meanings as developed in the antecept and the antecipuum.

The attempt to explicitly grasp this percipuum yields apprehension of appearance. The focus on appearance is the closest one can come in experience to the grasp of generalized sensory core. But even appearances are apprehended as appearances of objectivities and expressed through the language of objectivities because appearances, as generated through the functioning of habit, reflect, in their very emergence, the structurings of objectivities; they reflect the structurings of the very anticipations which one is attempting to withhold in focusing on the appearance qua appearance. The following focus on Peirce's claims can best be understood in terms of the apprehension of appearances as the closest one can come in the ongoing course of experience to the percipuum in its narrow sense as the abstraction of a "stopping point" in the logical analysis of perception. And, here it must be stressed that appearances are not the building blocks of perception but a verification level brought about by a change of focus when a problem arises. What we ordinarily perceive, what instigates action in the ongoing course of experience, are not appearances, but appearing objects.

Though Peirce speaks of the percipuum as the percept immediately interpreted in the perceptual judgment, he elsewhere states that "Perhaps I might be permitted to invent the term 'percipuum' to include both percept and perceptual judgment," since "the differences are so minute and so unimportant logically that it will be convenient to neglect them" (CP 7.629). As he clarifies, "The forcefulness of the perceptual judgments falls short of the pure unreasonableness of the percept only to this extent, that it does profess to represent the percept, while the perfection of the percept's surdity consists in its not so much as professing anything (CP 7.628). The percept, in its surdity, is infallible because it does not profess anything. And the perceptual judgment is infallible because "to say that the perceptual judgment is an infallible symptom of the character of the percept means only that in some unaccountable manner we find ourselves impotent to refuse our assent to it in the presence of the percept, and that there is no appeal from it (CP 7.628). The percept by itself, then, professes nothing, while the perceptual judgment professes the presence of the percept as a recognized content. Both are infallible because neither professes the existence of any objective fact or the anticipation of any future possibilities of experience. Future experience cannot show the

perceptual judgment in its narrow sense to be in error, since it makes no reference to future experience. Thus Peirce, in replying to the objection that a perceptual judgment is not so utterly beyond all control or check as he says, since it may be revised, states that: the "perceptual judgment can only refer to a single percept which can never re-exist; and if I judge that it appears red when it did not appear red, it must, at least be acknowledged that it appeared to appear red" (7. 376-377n).

In distinguishing percept and perceptual judgment, Peirce observes that perceptual judgments are as unlike the percept "as the printed letters in a book, where a Madonna of Murillo is described, are unlike the picture itself" (CP 5.54). This example may easily lead one to view the relation between percept and perceptual judgment as analogous to the relation between nonlinguistic experience and language. Though Peirce's example is ill chosen, he clearly indicates elsewhere that the perceptual judgment is a higher level in the operation of perception. As he states:

It may be objected that the terms of the judgment resemble the percept. Let us consider, first, the predicate, "yellow" in the judgment that "this chair appears yellow." This predicate is not the sensation involved in the percept, because it is general. It doesn't even refer particularly to this percept but to a sort of composite photograph of all the yellows that have been. On the whole, it is plain enough that the perceptual judgment is not a copy, icon, or diagram of the percept however rough. It may be reckoned as a higher grade of the operation of perception (CP 7.634).

The distinction between the perceptual judgment in its wide and narrow senses can gain further clarity by using as a point of departure Chisholm's claim regarding Peirce's position that, "since it takes time to make a perceptual judgment, by the time we have succeeded in judging what it is that direct experience contains, the experience will be past and we will have to appeal to memory." (Chisholm, 1952, p. 105). In his analysis, Chisholm makes reference to a statement by Peirce which is perhaps not so clear cut as at first appears. Peirce writes:

Now let us take up the perceptual judgment "This wafer looks red." It takes some time to write this sentence, to utter it, or even to think it. It must refer to the state of the percept at the time that it, the judgment, began to be made. But the judgment does not exist until it is completely made. It thus only refers to a memory of the past; and all memory is possibly fallible and subject to criticism and control. The judgment, then, can only mean that so far as the character of the percept can ever be ascertained, it will be ascertained that the wafer looked red.

In just what sense does Peirce mean that memory is subject to criticism and control? As Peirce notes in the paragraph immediately following the quotation above, "Perhaps the matter may be stated less paradoxically" (CP 5.545). And Peirce proceeds to do this in a

discussion which concludes that "to say that a body is hard, or red, or heavy, or of a given weight, or has any other property, is to say that it is subject to law and therefore is a statement referring to the future" (CP 5.545). It is evident that in the above discussion Peirce has switched from the term "looks to the term "is" and that the character of the percept is ascertained by reference to the future; in this way then, by the test of future experience, memory is subject to criticism and control.

However, in confounding the percipuum in its wide sense and appearing apprehensions Peirce does make an important point concerning appearances. Though he never explicitly discusses the point, its significance is to be found among the confused statements of the two passages cited above. "All memory is possibly fallible", yet "so far as the character of the percept can never be ascertained, it will be ascertained that the wafer looked red" (CP 5.544). If one does not continue on to Peirce's "less paradoxical" statements of the issue, this can be taken not as a confused statement concerning future verification but rather as a statement concerning the nature of the content of the "seeming" statement.

If, as Peirce explicitly states, all memory is fallible, it is difficult to see how that which is indicated by the seeming statement in its attempt to grasp the percipuum in its narrow sense can provide the bedrock of certainty in any absolute sense. The reliability of memory must be questioned not only in regard to what can be predicated from the present content but in regard to the recognition of the present content itself. Memory is involved in the very recognition of that content which has been seen before and may be seen again, a grasp which allows the content to become the basis for predictive meaning. This basis, then, is not certain but rather subject to the error of memory and incapable of providing an indubitable bedrock of empirical knowledge in any foundationalist sense of the terms.

What is provided is not the absolute certainty of foundationalist claims but "pragmatic certainty". The apprehension of an appearance is indubitable in the sense that its falsity is inconceivable. It is beyond conceivable doubt, because to doubt it in the sense that one thinks it may be proven wrong is senseless; indeed, literally so. To doubt it is to put into question something for which there is no tool for getting "behind" it to compare it with anything more fundamental. For us, it must itself be the final court of appeal. The apprehension of an appearance is not certainly true as opposed to possibly false. It is "certain" in the sense that neither truth nor falsity is applicable to it. The perceptual judgment in its narrow sense cannot even be labeled certainly correct as opposed to possibly incorrect. There is no correct or incorrect recognition involved at this level, for

what the percipuum is is determined only in its recognition and can be determined in no other way. It becomes a "repetition" of previous contents only by being assimilated to those contents in the perceptual judgment. In relation to more traditional views, this conclusion is surely more paradoxical than the conclusion that the perceptual judgment, in its wide sense, is fallible because it can be proven wrong by reference to future experience. Perhaps the novelty of the former conclusion, coupled with his own failure to clarify the conceptual distinctions towards which he was groping, led Peirce subtly to switch in his attempt to make his position seem "less paradoxical." However, apart from such speculation, it does seem that Peirce's confused discussion stems from a careless slipping back and forth between two concepts which he later clearly though briefly distinguished.

Peirce's use of the perceptual judgment in its narrow sense has been discussed in detail because it is the "more paradoxical" and less emphasized of the two senses. That this is so is no doubt due both to Peirce's brief and late exposition of a distinction in levels of judgment and to the preconceived assumption that what is the outcome of a judgment must be capable of being shown to be true or false. It had been pointed out that if the perceptual judgment cannot be true or false it is not a judgment, and again, that if there is a hypothetical element involved in every perceptual judgment, then every perceptual judgment is fallible and subject to future tests (Bernstein, 1964, p. 175, 173). Conversely, it is acceptance of the claim that perceptual judgments are immune from doubt which allows another critic to hold that Peirce makes use of an observation-theory distinction which turns him into a foundationalist (McCarthy, 1990, pp. 63-113). The perceptual judgments in their narrow senses do have a "hypothetical element", As Peirce states, both conceptions and sensations involve hypothetical inferences for the judgment is a hypothesis that a content is "the same as" that which has been seen before or "appears as" (W 1: 471) However, the above analysis has shown that these narrow uses of the perceptual judgment are not fallible and subject to future tests, for they make no references to future experience. Thus Peirce can claim that their surdity is almost complete. They cannot be characterized as true or false, for, as indicated above, we have no more fundamental perceptual tool by which to assert their truth or falsity. To deny the term "judgment" to that which can be characterized as neither true nor false is one way to avoid the frequent confusions which pervade Peirce's analysis of perception because of his dual uses of this term, and it allows one to follow a more conventional terminological procedure. It is not, however, to offer an objection to that concept which Peirce intends by the term. By characterizing this primitive synthesis in terms of a perceptual judgment which yet cannot be true or false, he brings home more

forcefully the radical novelty of his rejection of both foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. What is "given" at the most fundamental level of perceptual awareness is in fact a "taken", and it incorporates both the nature of the taking and the nature of what is taken.

The perceptual judgment in its wide sense is indubitable, not in the sense that the discovery of its falsity is inconceivable, for its truth or falsity may be ascertained by future experience, but rather in the sense that there are no positive grounds to stimulate doubt present in the perceptual situation. As Peirce has stressed in his rejection of Descartes' universal doubt, we cannot feign doubt (CP 5.265). Unless some positive ground for doubt is given in the perceptual situation, perceptual judgments and certain vague beliefs (CP 5.442) must be taken as indubitable, for they cannot seriously be doubted—though they are eminently fallible, since subject to the test of future experience. Thus, we arrive in a broad sense at Peirce's "fallibilism." The fallibility of the perceptual judgment in its wide sense, as it actually occurs in the passage of the present and makes a claim about an objective state of affairs, lies in the fact that it will be rejected as false if it does not fit into the general interpretive context as discussed earlier. The indubitability at this level enters in the sense that the formation of the perceptual judgment cannot be controlled and is beyond logical criticism in its formation. While we cannot critically control the judgment, however, we can criticize its results and conclude, based on future experience, that it is false. Underlying the very possibility of these common sense indubitables which may turn out to be false, however, there has been seen to lie an indubitability to which neither truth nor falsity is applicable, which is "pragmatically certain". This type of distinction is aptly characterized in one scholar's remarking of the difference between indubitables which cannot conceivably be doubted and indubitables which are so only because there is no positive ground to stimulate doubt (Savan, 1965, pp. 40-41).

It can be seen then that for Peirce perceptual facts at their very core emerge neither from mind alone nor from the dynamic reality of the universe alone, but rather from the interaction of the two which constitutes experience, beginning with the pragmatic indubitables of what is "given" in experience.

References

Bernstein, R. (1964). Peirce's Theory of Perception. In E. Moore & R. Robin (Eds.), *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Second Series). University of Massachusetts Press.

Chisholm, R. (1952). Fallibilism and Belief. In P. Wiener & F. Young (Eds.), *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Harvard University Press.

Gruender, D. (1983). Pragmatism, Science, and Metaphysics, In E. Freeman (Ed.), *The Relevance of Charles Peirce*. The Hegeler Institute.

Hausman, C. (1990). In and Out of Percepts. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy*, 26.

Hookway, C. (1995). *Peirce*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.

McCarthy, J. (1990). Peirce's Proof of Pragmatism. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy*, 26.

Savan. D. (1965). Decision and Knowledge in Peirce. *Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* (1), 35-51.

Endnotes

1. Carl Hausman's analysis of two meanings of the perceptual judgment in Peirce's philosophy does not correspond with the distinction being made here. "In and Out of Percepts", pp. 271-308 ↵
 7. 642-681. Peirce's late introduction of this term has been noted by Richard Bernstein in "Peirce's Theory of Perception," *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Second Series, ed. Moore and Robin (Univ. of Mass. Press, 1964), p.175
↵
2. It cannot be overemphasized that the present analysis is abstracting discernable dimensions from what is a continuous process. Thus, "follows upon" as well as other such terminology should not be taken in the sense of discrete elements. ↵