

# The Principle of Continuity in Charles S. Peirce's Phenomenology and Semeiotic

## ABSTRACT

Kelly Andrew Parker  
Department of Philosophy  
Vanderbilt University

1992

PH.D. DISSERTATION, DR. JOHN LACHS, DIRECTOR

The aim of the dissertation is to propose a new understanding of the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce. Peirce sought to construct a philosophical system applicable to all of human experience, but he never presented this system in a unified work. In the dissertation I attempt to present the strongest possible reconstruction of Peirce's mature philosophy. My thesis is that Peirce's philosophy is best understood as an extended exploration and application of his concept of mathematical continuity, which he called "the master-key of philosophy."

Many scholars have recognized that Peirce's concept of continuity is important to his metaphysical theories. The bulk of the dissertation is devoted to examining this concept and explicating its importance throughout his philosophy. I argue that Peirce's theory of semeiotic provides a general model of experience that elaborates the direct experience of continuity described in phenomenology. This model in turn serves as the basis for his metaphysics and evolutionary cosmology.

Part I of the dissertation sketches Peirce's response to Kant's philosophy and presents an outline of his classification of the sciences. Part II presents Peirce's technical conception of continuity, showing its origins in formal logic and in his revision of Cantor's theory of transfinite sets. Part III examines the role of the continuity principle in phenomenology, esthetics, ethics, and semeiotic, which bridge the rather wide gap between mathematics and metaphysics in Peirce's system. Part IV presents an overview of Peirce's cosmology and metaphysics, with particular attention to their methodological dependence upon semeiotic. Part IV includes consideration of two issues that emerge as crucial to the assessment of Peirce's thought. The first concerns the ontological status of extra-semeiotic entities, and is known as the problem of "semiotic idealism." I argue that Peirce is not a semiotic idealist. The second issue concerns the testability of Peirce's metaphysical hypotheses. Peirce insists that metaphysical theories be subject to testing. Accordingly, I consider how and to what extent Peirce's metaphysics meets this demand.