Qualitative Immediacy and the Communicative Act

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ABSTRACT
"Qualitative immediacy" (also termed "quality" in its philosophical sense and "esthetic quality") is of fundamental importance within the pragmatic conception of meaning as interpretive act, and yet it has been virtually ignored by social scientists. The concept is traced through its foundations in Peirce's philosophy, its development in Dewey's theory of esthetic experience, and its relation to the general pragmatic conception of the self. The importance of the "I" in Mead's view of the self is seen as similar to Firstness in Peirce and esthetic experience in Dewey. Those turning to qualitative approaches ought to consider qualitative immediacy as a genuine addition to our understanding of human communication.

One of the distinguishing features of American social thought is the emphasis placed on immediacy in experience. From Peirce's discussions of "Firstness"—or roughly the phenomenological present—and James' discussions of "the stream of consciousness" through contemporary symbolic interactionist discussions of the situation, there is a shared attempt to get at the directness and flow of events, to grasp the mercurial essence that is the vital source of meaning. Critics have charged that these attempts in fact miss the importance of meaning as a system of conventional rules, that in concentrating on the uniqueness of a situation the inquiry becomes bogged down in a morass of subjectivity that ignores the influence of objective norms and social structures (Lewis, 1976; Gonos, 1977). Although these criticisms may be accu-
rate for some recent trends within symbolic interactionism, they ignore or distort the fundamental importance of qualitative immediacy within the pragmatic conception of meaning as interpretive act. Thus the "qualitative tradition" I will examine is literally a tradition concerned with "quality" in its philosophical sense. I will explore what has been termed "qualitative immediacy" or "esthetic quality" in the context of the pragmatic tradition by tracing its importance to the theories of meaning and communication of C.S. Peirce, John Dewey, and G.H. Mead.

The origins of the philosophy of pragmatism are not to be found, as it is often thought, in the work of William James, but rather in that of his lifelong colleague, Charles Sanders Peirce. It can be argued that the foundations for pragmatism can be discovered in an early series of articles Peirce wrote in the late 1860s criticizing the Cartesian quest for indubitable foundations of thought (Peirce, 5:213-357). When Descartes borrowed the Augustinian notion "I think, therefore I am," as the clear and distinct idea that could provide a foundation for thought, he helped launch a view that saw direct immediate knowledge as the goal of inquiry. Through introspection one could peel away the vaguenesses and uncertainties of the world and attain the realm beyond doubt—the cogito or subjective self-consciousness. "Of thine eye I am Eyebeam," said Emerson's Sphinx in his poem, The Sphinx, and similarly Peirce would probably argue that the Cartesian quest to attain the pure "I!" through introspection (as if the "eye" could see itself), can only end in blindness, as it did for Oedipus. The point of Peirce's early articles is that all thought or knowledge, including self-knowledge, is inferential and general, that is, it is of the nature of a sign, and it takes time to occur. Thus even in a late article, Peirce (1905) answers his own question—"What is the bearing of the Present instant upon conduct"—by replying:

Introspection is wholly a matter of inference. One is immediately conscious of his Feelings, no doubt; but not that they are feelings of an ego. The self is only inferred. There is no time in the Present for any inference at all, least of all for inference concerning that very instant (Peirce, 5:462).

Here Peirce is arguing against immediate knowledge through "introspection" or "intuition," terms which usually suggest unmediated direct inner perception. Yet he does ac-