

About Coenoscopics

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In 1902 the philosopher, semiotician, mathematician and geodesist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) proposed a classification of the sciences. One branch of this classification he reserved for the 'Theoretical Sciences', within which he distinguished three classes: mathematics, philosophy, and the 'special' sciences (what we would now describe as the physical and social sciences). The purpose of the theoretical sciences, Peirce suggested, 'is simply and solely knowledge of God's truth'(1).

The criterion that Peirce used to distinguish between each of the mentioned classes was each discipline's characteristic form of *observation*. In the case of mathematics, Peirce noted that '[i]t is observational, in so far as it makes constructions in the imagination according to abstract precepts, and then observes these imaginary objects, finding in them relations of parts not specified in the precept of construction. This is truly observation, yet certainly in a very peculiar sense; and no other kind of observation would at all answer the purpose of mathematics'(2).

By contrast, Peirce argued that the 'special' sciences depend 'upon special observation, which travel or other exploration, or some assistance to the senses, either instrumental or given by training, together with unusual diligence, has put within the power of its students'(3).

Philosophy, Peirce suggested, 'deals with positive truth, indeed, yet contents itself with observations such as come within the range of every man's normal experience, and for the most part in every waking hour of his life'. 'These observations escape the untrained eye precisely because they permeate our whole lives, just as a man who never takes off his blue spectacles soon ceases to see the blue tinge. Evidently, therefore, no microscope or sensitive film would be of the least use in this class. The observation is observation in a peculiar, yet perfectly legitimate, sense. If philosophy glances now and then at the results of special sciences, it is only as a sort of condiment to excite its own proper observation'(4).

Borrowing from Jeremy Bentham's *Chrestomathia* (5), Peirce described the 'special' scientific forms of observation as the *idioscopic*, and the philosophical, as the *cœnoscopic*. According to Bentham, both terms were neologisms generated by combining Greek words; the 'idio' in 'idioscopic' means 'peculiar', and the 'coeno' in 'coenoscopic' signifies 'common—things belonging to others in common'; in both words, 'scopic' means 'looking to'.

The reader will notice that Peirce also used the word 'peculiar' when he referred to the characteristic forms of observation of mathematics, and philosophy. This may be a useful slip: at least in the critical social sciences, it is often difficult to separate

philosophy from special science, the coenoscopy from the idioscopy (consider, for example, the work of Hannah Arendt, or of Bruno Latour).

Even so, in this series I would like to use the plural of *coenoscopy* (coenoscopies) to name a form of problematisation that scrutinises everyday understandings using 'common' methods of observation. I am no philosopher (if anything, *philosophy* is my condiment), but I nevertheless subscribe to the idea of observations that come within the range of every man's and woman's normal experience even as they enable us to question common sense and habit.

References

- 1) Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Detailed Classification of the Sciences', in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 Vols., Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (eds.) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), Vol. I, p. 109.
- 2) Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Detailed Classification of the Sciences', p. 110.
- 3) Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Detailed Classification of the Sciences', p. 110.
- 4) Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Detailed Classification of the Sciences', p. 110.
- 5) Jeremy Bentham, *Chrestomathia*, 1816, online version <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/bentham-the-works-of-jeremy-bentham-vol-8>> [Last accessed 22 January 2017]. This was a work first published in 1816 that applied utilitarian principles to formal education for middle class and wealthy children.

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