

TO CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE, NOVEMBER 18, 1891<sup>73</sup>

103 Irving St. Cambridge.  
Nov. 18, 1891

My Dear Mr. Peirce:—

You know, I suppose, that I have been consulting freely with William James as to the current controversy. You may know also that he is my most intimate friend outside of my own family. You will not then be surprised that, in view of the closing words of your letter to him yesterday, viz., the words "*Will Royce say he did not mean this?*" James has felt free to show me your letter. James knows that I like candid criticism, and that I feel perfectly sure that your letter in the *Nation*,<sup>74</sup> plain-spoken as it was, was written with the motive of clearing up the case, and of doing justice. James also knows that I deeply respect your work, and your opinion of philosophical matters. Of this fact you surely have been a long time aware. Under the circumstances then you surely will not object to my writing to you a plain statement of my state of mind about Dr. Abbot. I must leave to you the judgment of what it is best for you to think and say of it all. In appealing thus privately to one who will be my critic in future, as in the past, I don't do so for the sake of staying your hand whenever your mind is made up. I have the defects of my qualities, and no doubt many other defects too. I don't lament the pointing out of such defects in public where they concern my professional work, or the spirit of it. I can only gain by such criticism, where it is made with a knowledge of the facts, and by a man of your strength. I may not agree with you,

<sup>73</sup> ALI. Peirce Papers. HL. Partly printed in James Harry Cotton, *Royce on the Human Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 297-300.

<sup>74</sup> "Abbot Against Royce," *Nation* 53 (November 12, 1891): 372. Peirce's letter is addressed to Abbot's two charges: (1) that Royce libelled Abbot, and (2) that Royce used unfair means to stifle Abbot's reply in the *International Journal of Ethics*. In this letter to Peirce, Royce answers both charges in reverse order. James answered Peirce under the same heading in *Nation* 53 (November 19, 1891): 389-90. Joseph B. Warner answered the second charge in "The Suppression of Dr. Abbot's Reply," *Nation* 53 (November 26, 1891): 408. Abbot responded to Warner in "Mr. Warner's 'Evidence in Full' Completed," *Nation* 53 (December 3, 1891): 426. This ended the controversy in *Nation*.

but I shall carefully consider the matter in the light of what you say, and shall, I doubt not, profit by the experience.

I write, then, only to tell you, with all the plainness of speech of the private letter, what the facts in question are, as I conceive them.

1. As to the editorial conduct of the *Review* [i.e., *International Journal of Ethics*] in the matter of Dr. Abbot's reply, a fuller statement will very likely appear next week, written by Jos. Warner. That is a matter of history. I may perhaps not improperly ask you to defer any public comment on James's letter to the *Nation*, until you have seen that of Warner. A deliberate attempt to suppress the fullest possible argumentative defence on Abbot's part, would have been, as he says, an act of "incredible cowardice and meanness." At my request, and after hesitation on the part of the Editors as to the propriety of printing the personal passages of the thirty page reply that Abbot sent us, we decided to print it all, strong of speech as, in the opinion of a number of very impartial judges (who sooner or later had occasion to see it), it undoubtedly was. We also offered Abbot the last word in the further controversy, his reviewer agreeing never to make more than one rejoinder in the *Journal*. But we did feel impelled, by the very necessity of explaining our course to our readers, to have the reviewer try to show, in his one pretty brief rejoinder, to be printed with the reply, that he hadn't spoken in heat, or with personal motive, and that he had had in mind some pretty definite reasons for his severe judgment. I say "we," for we had no chief editor, and consulted as to all these matters, although my own judgment was, so far, largely considered, and I don't wish to minimize my full personal responsibility for what was done. As for the "last word" which we gave to Abbot, we also insisted that, since it was to be never replied to in the *Journal* by me, it should be free from violent personalities of a distinctly unparliamentary sort. We left it perfectly free to annihilate my whole case by arguments that were never to be answered in the *Journal*. We had given ample room for personalities before.

As you know, Dr. Abbot hereupon declined to accept our conditions. That in these negotiations the April number was passed, was not my fault. I was anxious to have the affair over. I had made no delays at any point, and had written my rejoinder so promptly as to cause very little loss of time indeed there. If I am right in my memory I wrote it within 24 hrs. of receiving his reply in final

form. The notice of the short time for the "last word" of which Abbot complains, was sent from Philadelphia by the "Managing Editor" there. I knew nothing about it, and had no control over the office management of the *Journal*. I was only clear that I had done all I could to hasten things. I was sorry when the matter was thus delayed.

In repeating this now weary tale to you, I only want you to consider, before you write again, whether, in view of these facts, the expression "brutal life-and-death fight from the first," expresses justly the true situation. There was a contest. I have had more than one in my life. But it was a contest about a matter of scholarship, not about anybody's life or death as to any other matter than just *this* question of scholarship. On my side I tried to observe the rules of the game. Dr. Abbot was equally sincere. We differed as to the right of personal abuse in his "last word," to which I was not to reply. That was all.

After the withdrawal, came the threats of legal process, or at all events what seemed trustworthy information that there were such threats made. I went to Warner for advice. I asked him in as conciliator first of all, as defender only in case I was actually prosecuted. He is a member of the Overseers' Committee of Visitors to the Philosophical Department. You know his type. He is surely no man for cruel measures. I beg you to read what he wrote to Abbot, if the *Nation* prints his words, and to compare that with Abbot's charges, before you regard his conduct in the case, or mine under his advice, which I have ever since followed, as anything but conciliatory as to this matter.

I sum up so far here by saying that I thus did everything in my power to get Abbot the chance to answer me in the most effective argumentative way, and in our *Journal*, to give him full space, to treat him with editorial courtesy as to his reply, and to give him in every way fair play. I am ignorant how I could have done better for him, consistently with my duty to the *Journal*, or to the public, which I had no desire to trouble with any scandal of personalities, in our *Journal's* pages, or outside them.

2. Now as to the spirit and intent of my review. I will speak with the most complete frankness. You may then judge my spirit as you think best. I am not writing to please you. I have no doubt I tire you much. I only want you to get as near the facts as I can put you, before you finally decide what to think of me. Then you may think as you will, and say it as you please.

I said the words about *giving and asking no mercy*. I said them with explicit reference *not* to the treatment of any man's character, feelings, inner life, general reputation, means of livelihood, or the like, but to the public judgment of his method of treating questions of the most significant and objective truth. I referred in the same context to Aristotle's so often quoted word about truth as the "greater friend than Plato." I said that, esteem a man as we may,—and I did heartily esteem Abbot,—we have to show no mercy to his work when his undertaking is of the most significant, when the demands upon his skill are of the most marked, and when the workmanship seems to us of low grade. I supposed all this a commonplace maxim of scholarship. Had I ever dreamed of a personal interpretation of these words by men of your experience and insight, I should of course have used others. I should perhaps have said, "In judging matters of such importance, we may feel every esteem for the man, every wish for his personal happiness, every desire to have him live long, prosper, get a good livelihood, and the rest; but our good wishes will not make his bad work good, nor change it an atom; and the truth, in the long run, is absolutely merciless to us all, in just so far as we err; whilst the critical cannot possibly do otherwise, where the cause is of such vast importance, than to speak honestly the critical truth as he sees it." That was what my "no mercy," in its context, with the reference to the "greater friend" phrase, and to the questions of fundamental significance as the topics about which no mercy is to be shown—that I say, is what it meant. May the Lord do so to me and more likewise if ever I desire the truth to be anything but merciless to my errors in philosophy, or my critics to do less than to say of me what they believe to be the truth concerning my philosophic work.

But, as you well say, philosophy is no science. Is such mercilessness, in view of our common ignorance, our right? If such mercilessness leads to "professional warnings" about the "philosophical pretensions" of an opponent, is not that an abominable assumption?

My reply is that I did *not* "warn" merely because Abbot and I differ about whether some doctrine, say "Idealism," is right or not, but because of the following expressed reasons fully stated in my review:—Here are topics of deep significance—none deeper. Here is a history of philosophy, working at them for ages. Here is a man who, not only in this book but elsewhere, very sternly attacks certain methods and notions that seem to me of the greatest historic prominence and worth in this historical process. Well, *so far* he is

in his right as a scholar and thinker. I may assail him. I must not merely on *this* account "warn." Only now, in the next place, come his "pretensions,"—perfectly honest and sincere, but sanguine to an extreme. He tells us that, these long and historically momentous processes having gone utterly astray, and ended in Agnosticism, he has found the right method. He gives it a special name to characterize its epoch-marking significance. It is the "American Theory of Universals." It is "wholly new." The "Greek" and the "German" theories are the other principal ones. His is the third. Not only in the book before me, but in other public utterances (e.g. in a Lecture printed in the *Unitarian Review*)<sup>75</sup> he announces the far-reaching importance of the new thought.

*Still*, however, he is in his rights as a thinker. Did I differ here only, viz. as to the importance of his work in this respect, I could speak very plainly my difference. "Warning" I should have no right to give.

But last of all comes the question of historical fact as to all this. My own opinion, now, is, that, *after* this indictment of a great part of the evolution of philosophy as utterly wrong, and *after* this announcement of so momentous a discovery, the new theory appears with entire obviousness to be "a maimed version of Hegel's theory," as you paraphrase my view—"Hegel with the subtlety left out," as I myself put it. Now Hegel stands at the culmination of the whole historical process which my author so strenuously condemns. And yet the connection in question seems to me absolutely demonstrable. Hegel's patent as to the theory of the Organic Universal ought to be recognized by everyone who deals with this branch of the subject. The English Hegelians (e.g. John Caird in his *Philos. of Religion*, p. 229 sqq.) have for years popularized the thing. John Caird, pp. 241 and 242 of *op. cit.* uses for the theory Abbot's own illustration of the "Family." (I could multiply citations at great length.)<sup>76</sup> To get out of puzzles by that device of the Organic Universal is what the Hegelians have been counseling us for years. Some of us have struggled long to escape from the

<sup>75</sup> "Scientific Theology the Ground of All Liberal Religion," *Unitarian Review* 32 (1889): 481-99.

<sup>76</sup> Royce did so in his unpublished "The 'American' and the Hegelian 'Theory of Universals,'" a rejoinder to Abbot's unpublished reply, "Dr. Royce's 'Professional Warning'." Printer's proofs for both of these articles have been preserved in the Abbot Papers, HUA.

Organic Universal, and have got caught. *No* idea is more characteristically Hegelian.

Well now, combining all these facts with this: I myself am a lover and teacher of the history of philosophy. I believe most ardently that *only* this history can help us out, that its principal outcome has been the movement which my author condemns, and that its principal methods are those of which the theory of universals which he propounds forms a fragment. If I am right as to the facts, must I not under the whole combination of circumstances find this "unconscious borrowing" a very important blunder, yes, in view of the significance of the problem, in view of the magnitude of the aforesaid "pretensions," a blunder that throws a very deep shadow over all of this portion of Abbot's doctrine? *This* portion of the doctrine being about all of the system that the present book and the *Scientific Theism* propound, I judge accordingly. It seems to me that such work is doing serious harm to the cause of philosophy and of its historical study in this country. It seems to me that the man ought long since to have recognized his historical position. It seems to me that his failure to do so is in itself a disqualification for his task. It seems to me that I must put this plainly. I do so. I am accustomed myself to plain speaking about scholarly matters. I have always profitted by my severest reviewers. The man before me is an experienced and doughty controversialist, who as Editor of the *Index*, was always earnest, often unsparing, and, as I believe, constantly insistent on the transcendent value of truth as against any other interest.—Well, with this all together in mind, I sincerely supposed, as I wrote, that my intellectual warmth of onslaught was in itself a tribute to his highmindedness. I did not suppose it possible that he would confound person and doctrine. I struck home for the truth, and supposed that I was meeting an armed man. The result has proved that I was assailing a man of the most sensitive tenderness.

I had never quarrelled with him. Our relations had always been cordial. I held him in high personal esteem. I said so in my review. I meant it. I now very deeply regret having so touched his heart when I struck home at his work. I had no desire to "ruin his happiness" other than in so far as the desire to do a necessarily severe thing in what seems to us a great cause necessarily involves, like any other severe act of business or of active life, the knowledge that severity isn't pleasant. But that knowledge does not forbid

plain speech, and constitutes no part of our motive in such cases.

You see then, I don't conceal that I am *willing to have the reputation of a man who fights hard with intellectual weapons, in a scholarly cause,...*<sup>77</sup>

<sup>77</sup> The rest of the letter is missing.