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PAIN, PLEASURE, AND THE HUMAN CONDITION IN PEIRCE AND LEVINAS: A COMPARATIVE INQUIRY INTO PHENOMENOLOGY, GNOSTICISM, AND ETHICS

Abstract: This paper offers an analysis of Peirce’s phenomenology in relation to classical metaphysical and religious traditions as well as contemporary philosophical perspectives, such as Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas. By engaging Gnostic, Christian, and Platonic accounts of the divine and of evil, the study situates Peirce’s categories within a broader metaphysical conversation. Particular attention is given to the phenomena of pain and pleasure, understood as elemental structures of Firstness that, when developed within lived existence, disclose a vision of the human condition that bears striking affinities to Gnostic interpretations. Through this reading, Peirce emerges as a thinker whose phenomenology, though pragmatist in orientation, opens onto an almost Gnostic apprehension of human suffering, finitude, and the possibility of transcendence.
Keywords: Phenomenology, Pragmatism, Gnosticism, Christianity, Pain, Pleasure, Evil, Neoplatonism, Metaphysics, Charles Sanders Peirce

INTRODUCTION

Human experience is perennially shaped by encounters with both limitation and intensity, often framed as pleasure, pain, or existential resistance. Philosophical and religious traditions have sought to account for these phenomena through varied ontological lenses. In Gnostic traditions the divine spark within the human is set against the illusory or imprisoning nature of

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the material world; in Christian thought evil is conceived as privation; in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy the divine is a transcendent principle mediated by intermediaries; and in Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism evil appears as a substantive, quasi-cosmic force in dualistic opposition to the good.[2] Human experience is characterized by a continuous negotiation with the pressures and resistances that constitute existence.[3] Philosophical discourse has historically sought to classify these experiences in moral, ontological, or metaphysical terms, yet such categorizations often fail to capture the embodied, enacted, and relational dimensions of lived reality.[4]

Recent interdisciplinary dialogue foregrounds the importance of integrating phenomenology, pragmatism, and metaphysical speculation to examine the structural conditions of experience. Contemporary discussions, like those informed by pragmatism, cognitive science, and phenomenology, reinterpret these classical frameworks, proposing that the relational dynamics of experience, such as the intensity of pain, the contingency of pleasure, and the pressures exerted by existence itself, must be analyzed not merely as ontic facts but as structural features of human cognition and being-in-the-world.[5] Within this framework, pain and pleasure emerge not merely as ethical or hedonic categories but as fundamental expressions of the constraints, affordances, and imbalances inherent in existence.[6] Yet even when modern philosophies open new dimensions of analysis, they cannot escape the metaphysical implications embedded in their own conceptual frameworks. What presents itself as a novel approach to experience often rearticulates positions already familiar from earlier traditions. In this sense, contemporary analyses may be seen less as a radical departure than as a reconfiguration of enduring metaphysical patterns in new conceptual clothing. The focus of this paper is thus Charles Sanders Peirce, whose pragmatism and phenomenology (or phaneroscopy) provide a systematic account of the structures of experience through his categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Within this framework,

2 Widengren, G., *Mesopotamian Elements in Manichaeism (King and Saviour II): Studies in Manichaean, Mandaean, and Syrian-Gnostic Religion*, Almqvist & Wiksell, Uppsala 1946, p. 45.

3 Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity*, Martinus Nijhoff, London 1979. p. 122.

4 Gruica, T., „Existential Groundings and Self-Organisation: Unravelling Psychopathological Helplessness in the Context of Positive Psychology through Heidegger and Autopoiesis," in *Filozofija, bioetika i mentalno zdravlje*, (eg. Kožić, Š.; Janeš, L.), Centar za bioetiku Fakulteta filozofije i religijskih znanosti, Zagreb 2024, p. 125.

5 Levinas E., *Totality and Infinity*, p. 114.; Gruica, T., „Existential Groundings and Self-Organisation", p. 129.

6 Gibson, J. J., *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Taylor and Francis, New York 2014, p. 119.

pain and pleasure stand as exemplary manifestations of Firstness, the immediate qualities of feeling that underlie all subsequent modes of existence. By following the ways in which these qualitative states become interwoven with resistance and mediation, Peirce's analysis reveals a vision of human experience that, while articulated within a pragmatist orientation, resonates with patterns recognizable from Gnostic accounts of the human condition. It is in this convergence that Peirce's thought acquires a quasi-Gnostic character, not through direct doctrinal influence but through the structural implications of his phenomenology itself.

PEIRCEAN GNOSTICISM

Pain, from a phenomenological perspective, is not reducible to the firing of c-fibers or to simple nociception. Drawing upon Levinas, it can be understood as a structural pressure of existence compelling action, exertion, and survival.[7] Pain is both unavoidable and epistemically significant, since it reveals limits, constraints, and the relational character of being-in-the-world. Heidegger's analysis of *Sorge,* and Levinas' phenomenology of *jouissance* disclose this as the condition of care, wherein human *Dasein* is revealed in its temporal and embodied engagements with reality.[8] Suffering exposes both possibility and limitation, situating the subject within a horizon where existence is apprehended not as pure autonomy but as vulnerability, dependence, and responsibility toward the world and others.

Phenomenology examines pain, pleasure, and resistance as lived phenomena, showing how consciousness encounters constraints that simultaneously limit and reveal possibilities. Pragmatism situates these experiences functionally, as they guide action, inform judgment, and structure adaptive responses. In synthesis, human subjectivity is inseparable from the resistances it encounters, and ethical and cognitive capacities are structured by the interrelation of experiential constraints and affordances. In Peirce, signs of pain and pleasure are evidential and normative, allowing inferences about the environment and structuring semiotic chains that underlie moral and practical reasoning.[9] Pain is ultimately „*an instance of that kind of consciousness which involves no analysis, comparison or any process whatsoever ... which*

7 Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity*, p. 110.

8 Heidegger*,* M. *Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1967, p. 191.

9 Peirce, C. S., *Pragmatism as a Principle and Method of Right Thinking*, State University of New York Press, New York 1997, p. 3.

has its own positive quality which consists in nothing else …"[10] Furthermore, pain is not an event, not a process composed of phases over time, but rather a state, wholly present so long as it endures.[11] These phenomena accumulate within lived experience, exposing the persistent tension between limitation and possibility. From a Gnostic perspective, this tension mirrors the human condition under the Demiurge, where suffering and resistance both constrain and disclose the relation to a transcendent source. In this sense, Peirce's analysis of pain and pleasure manifests a quasi-Gnostic pattern, revealing how the dynamics of resistance shape human experience and engagement with the world.

Pleasure, conversely, is relationally contingent, often interdependent with pain. From a Peircean pragmatist standpoint, both pain and pleasure function as signs within semiotic processes, since they guide perception, action, support learning, and inform judgments about the world.[12] Intensity and duration affect their perceived quality, producing experiences where pleasure may verge into pain, or pain may contain pleasurable dimensions in its aesthetic or relational context. This aligns with a pragmatic account of experience, wherein phenomenological realities are inseparable from their functional and relational effects. For Peirce, the phenomenology of pain has been proposed as foundational to consciousness, insofar as it represents a sensory experience that eludes rational modulation. Unlike perceptual judgments that can be mediated or reinterpreted cognitively, pain is resistant to volitional alteration: one cannot decide rationally to perceive red when experiencing blue, nor to negate pain through reason alone.[13] From this perspective, conscious experience can be understood as a dyadic structure in which the self is positioned as a subject to sensory and affective objects, while the totality of experience, including its inescapable suffering, remains largely inaccessible to rational control. The cumulative effect of these experiences produces a field of consciousness that is, in its most extreme conceptualization, dominated by discomfort and existential *Angst*.[14]

This description of the human condition led me to approach Peirce's phenomenology through a comparative engagement with Gnostic accounts

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10 Peirce, C. S., „A Definition of Feeling," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 1 (ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss), Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1931, p. 135-137.

11 Peirce, C. S., „A Definition of Feeling," p. 137.

12 Peirce, C. S., *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings* (ed. J. Buchler), Harcourt, Brace and Company, London 1940, p. 5.

13 Peirce, C. S., *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings,* p. 33.

14 Kierkegaard S, *Der Bergiff der Angst,* Rowohlt, Leck 1967, p. 17.

of existence and creation. To do so requires acknowledging that there was never a single, unified Gnosticism, but rather a constellation of Christian, Judean, and Iranian movements that together formed a broader quasi-tradition. What unites these strands is the predominant idea of a lesser creator, variously named Abraxas, Yaldabaoth, or even identified with the God of the Old Testament, who brought forth an imperfect world marked by suffering and distortion. Such a cosmos, grounded in unfavorable phenomena such as disgust and pain, goes along with Peirce's account of pain as a primordial mood, a fundamental form of being, in which existence is originally disclosed as „being as pain."[15]

TRIPARTITE ANTHROPOLOGY: *PNEUMA*, *PSYCHE*, *SOMA*

But what can we say then about Gnosticism? A shared aspect is their cosmology, where the Demiurge's creation functions as a mechanism of continual suffering, trapping human consciousness within an inescapable structure of contingent being and pain. The true God, by contrast, is posited as a salvific force beyond the Demiurge.[16] Gnostic thinkers often identified this ultimate divinity with pure light, suggesting an analogical engagement with Platonic potentiality rather than a fully articulated metaphysical conception. In this reading, the Gnostic project represents an attempt to reconcile the experiential reality of suffering with the postulated existence of a transcendent source of salvation, even when the ontological nature of that source remains largely speculative.[17]

The emergence of Gnosticism in late antiquity can be situated within the broader historical development of anthropological reflection. Early mythic and religious traditions tended to view the human being in a largely monistic sense, where life was conceived as a unified vital force bound to the rhythms of nature and mortality. With the rise of classical philosophy, however, anthropology became increasingly differentiated. A bipartite model emerged, distinguishing between *πνεῦμα* (*pneuma*, spirit), *ψυχή* (*psychē*, soul), and *σῶμα* (*sōma*, body), and already here the soul was often elevated as the seat of identity and moral worth.[18] Gnostic thinkers, inheriting and radicalizing

15 Peirce, C. S., *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings,* p. 40.

16 Van Den Broek, R., *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013, p. 27.

17 Pagels, E., *The Gnostic Gospels*, Random House, New York 1979, p. 20.

18 Van Den Broek, R., *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, p. 203.

this dualism, developed more elaborate tripartite schemas that reinterpret the dimension of spirit, positioning it as a transcendent element exiled within the material cosmos. [19] In this scheme, the body becomes the locus of corruption and pain, the soul mediates between material and spiritual realities, and the spirit points toward a divine origin beyond the Demiurge's creation.[20] The anthropological shift from unity to duality and finally to a hierarchical tripartition mirrors a broader tendency within Western metaphysics to privilege the immaterial over the corporeal, a tendency that Derrida would later deconstruct as the foundational „logocentrism" of the tradition, in which voice, mind, or presence is consistently prioritized over the body, writing, and materiality.[21]

Competing models of bipartite and tripartite structure appear already in Greek philosophy. Plato, in the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, and *Timaeus*, describes the tripartite soul, distinguishing between the rational *λογιστικόν* (*logistikón*), the spirited *θυμός* (*thymós*), and the appetitive *ἐπιθυμητικόν* (*epithymētikón*). His well-known charioteer allegory in the *Phaedrus* presents reason *νοῦς* (*noûs*) as the charioteer who must control the two horses of spirit and desire, revealing the internal complexity of the soul while consigning the body to the realm of mutability, mortality, and imperfection.[22] This tripartite structure was later taken up and transformed by Christian thinkers such as Origen. In his interpretation, body is the material vehicle, soul is the seat of life and mediation, and spirit is the divine element breathed into the human by God. This spirit is not identical with the Holy Spirit, but rather constitutes the higher principle within humanity that opens the person to God and to participation in the divine nature (*2 Pet 1:4*).[23] In this way, spirit is the site of communication with God, the dimension that elevates the human beyond the purely creaturely.

The *Book of Wisdom*, written shortly before the Christian era, tends more toward a bipartite anthropology, reflecting the influence of Hellenistic thought.[24] The human is presented primarily as body and soul, without explicit differentiation of a higher *pneuma*. Yet the *Old Testament* already anticipates

19 Farhang, M., *Zarathuštranizam: Uvod u drevnu mudrost Zarathuštre,* Misl, Zagreb 2005, p. 112.

20 Pagels, E., *The Gnostic Gospels*, p. 134.

21 Derrida, J., *Writing and Difference,* Routledge, London 1978, p. 248.

22 Plato, *Republic* IV, 435b–441c; *Phaedrus* 246a–254e; *Timaeus* 69c–72d.

23 Origen, *De Principiis* II.8.3; Crouzel, H., *Origen* (trans. A. S. Worrall), Harper & Row, San Francisco 1989, p. 106-112.

24 Churton T., *Gnostic Philosophy: From Ancient Persia to Modern Times,* Inner Traditions, Rochester 2005, p. 50.

a richer structure. *Deuteronomy* 6:5 commands that God is to be loved „with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength," hinting at a complex anthropology that goes beyond simple dualism. In early Christian theology, *soma*, *psyche*, and *pneuma* were never understood as three separate entities. Rather, they are dimensions of the one human person, each pertaining to the whole. The body (*soma*) is not reducible to the flesh (*sarx*), which in Pauline usage often signifies the sphere of sin and weakness. The body can, in fact, be a „temple of the Spirit" (1 Cor 6:19), while flesh denotes resistance to God. Thus *Ephesians* 5:18 exhorts: „Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit." The verb *plērousthai* here means not only to be filled, but to be completed, to be made whole.[25]

Peirce's phenomenology can be interpreted as closer to a Gnostic than an Aristotelian anthropology, in which the spirit strives to liberate itself from the entanglements of matter and affect.[26] Although he insists on the unity of experience, his categories distribute human existence across a hierarchy that recalls the Gnostic division of body, soul, and spirit. Firstness, the immediacy of pure feeling, isolates the quality of affect in a way that parallels the psychic dimension (psychē), while Secondness, defined by resistance and struggle, marks the irreducible burden of embodiment (sōma), where pain and finitude dominate. Thirdness, by contrast, represents mediation, meaning, and law, the sphere of spirit (pneuma) that points beyond mere facticity toward intelligibility and salvation through semiosis.[27] In this schema, the material and affective dimensions are not denied, but they are subordinated to the primacy of Thirdness, which alone guarantees coherence and orientation. Peirce thus participates in the same metaphysical gesture of privileging spirit and meaning over embodiment, a gesture that both discloses the depth of suffering in experience and simultaneously seeks its redemption through transcendence.

Applying Peirce's categories to the concrete human being yields a compact, triadic anthropology: embodiment as resistance, affective immediacy as Firstness, and mediation as the work of Thirdness.[28] The body occupies the register of limitation and brute alterity; finitude and pain are not marginal phenomena but structural constraints that interrupt projects, impose demands, and disclose that we are finite organisms embedded in a world not of

25 Bultmann, R., *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. 1, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1951. p. 191–198.

26 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1934, p. 23.

27 Peirce, C. S., *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings,* p. 75-78.

28 Peirce, C. S., *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings,* p. 87.

our choosing. Affective life furnishes the pre-reflective tones of existence, the pleasures, sufferings, and neutral moods that disclose the world prior to conceptualization. Mediation through habits, memories, signs, and language is what assembles these disjointed materials into a coherent life and orients us toward future possibilities. Pain plays a constitutive role within this configuration. As an immediate resistance it catalyzes interpretation: it forces reorientation, motivates adaptive inference, and propels signification where habit alone is insufficient. Far from being accidental, limitation and suffering instantiate the conditions in which meaning is sought and produced. The human being, therefore, is not a substance or an essence but an enacted nexus of embodiment, sensation, and interpretive practice.[29] Peirce's anthropology thus presents human existence as a triadic negotiation in which finitude, feeling, and the drive to make sense are mutually constitutive.

AS ABOVE, SO BELOW

Theological reflection complicates discussions of moral and existential experience. Gnostic traditions often attribute perceived goodness to God while assigning evil to a separate being, such as Satan or the Demiurge. Iranian religions deals with the origin of evil in a similar way, denying the omnipotence of God and instead postulating two opposite divine powers, where humanity is seen as a by-product of their struggle.[30] This dualistic framework, through Saint Augustine, has influenced Western psychological and cultural development. As Jung observes in *Answer to Job*, the biblical narrative depicts God and the Adversary cooperating in the testing of Job, a dynamic often marginalized because it challenges conventional conceptions of divine morality and omnipotence.[31] An integrated understanding of divinity encompasses both constructive and destructive forces rather than strict moral dualism. Historical mystical thought and cross-cultural perspectives support this view.[32] Jakob Böhme's proto-Hegelian theology frames the Fall as part of cosmic transformation, conceptualized as the *Felix culpa*, in which divine purposes of redemption and incarnation are realized through suffe-

29 Peirce, C. S., *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings,* p. 88-93.

30 Petrić, F., *Zoroaster i njegovih tristo i dvadeset kaldejskih proroštava* (ur. Banić-Pajnić E.), Institut za Filozofiju, Zagreb 2011, p. 42; Farhang, M., *Zarathuštranizam*, p. 92, 97.

31 Jung, C. G., *Answer to Job,* Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011, p. 23.

32 Spinks, C. W., „Peirce and Jung: Modern Gnostics in Search of Soul", *Trickster's Way*, 2 no. 4 (2003), p. 1-6.

ring.[33] Similarly, the God of the Hebrew Bible, as in *Isaiah* 45:7, „*I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things*," demonstrates divine power as encompassing both good and evil.

From a methodological standpoint, consideration of non-dual theological frameworks clarifies how alternative metaphysical models structure human experience. In South Asian traditions, the totality of being, *Adishakti*, is simultaneously the source of both salvation and destruction, exemplified in deities who manifest as nurturer and destroyer, such as *Tara* or *Kali*. Within this framework, individual vice or virtue is subordinated to the agency of the divine, which determines the conditions under which consciousness encounters pleasure, pain, and moral responsibility.[34]

This understanding has two key implications. First, conscious beings cannot fully control their affective states through reason; experiences like pain are irreducible. Second, individual diversity, the interplay of virtue and vice, and the temporal flow of cause and effect are necessary for manifesting a singular cosmic force. Suffering and fulfillment are inseparable in this ontological field. Read through a Peircean semiotic lens, pain and pleasure are evidential states that both mediate action and shape the growth of ideas; suffering is constitutive of experience without thereby implying a morally malevolent cosmos.

Peirce's categories make affective states semantically significant: immediate qualities register as Firstness, brute resistance as Secondness, and the work of habit and inference as Thirdness. Pain and pleasure function within this triadic economy as data for inference and as normative signals for conduct. Pain often precedes and grounds pleasure; biological privation, for example hunger, shows that positive valence is intelligible only relative to prior lack. Suffering therefore operates as a structural condition of conscious life. Framing this condition in quasi-Gnostic language clarifies the epistemic limits of reason and the asymmetry between human striving and cosmic constraint, but it need not posit an intentional malignancy. The Demiurge figure, if invoked, indexes structural opacity rather than a moral agent acting with malice. Pain is best construed as a baseline qualia against which other states are calibrated rather than as the outcome of a purposeful evil. Under Peircean pragmatism, pain and pleasure are not merely private feelings but processes by which subjects test hypotheses, revise habits, and develop capacities for

33 Böhme, J., *The Signature of All Things,* Evinity Publishing, Santa Cruz 2008, p. 126.

34 Flood, G., *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, 109-112.

action. Suffering thereby acquires normative force: it both motivates moral cultivation and functions as evidence in inquiry. The cultivation of virtue and the recognition of any transcendental order are practical engagements with these conditions. In short, suffering is intrinsic to the semiotic architecture of human life; it is necessary for the emergence of consciousness, knowledge, and moral responsiveness, while not entailing metaphysical vindictiveness.

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

One recurring objection to Gnostic accounts of the material realm concerns the problem of agency: how can the world be described as ordered toward harm or deficiency without presupposing intention or consciousness? In conventional ethical reasoning, evil is typically conceived as the outcome of a willing subject. To ascribe a systematic negativity to existence, then, seems to require a conscious and malevolent source. From a phenomenological standpoint, however, suffering can be understood as structurally embedded in the conditions of life without necessitating intentional design.[35] The analogy of an environment configured to produce pain, even in the absence of a governing agent, illustrates how constraint may operate independently of will. Within such a framework, the tension between structural imposition and human agency becomes evident. The material world confronts human beings with unavoidable hardships, yet conscious agents can recognize these conditions and cultivate relative goods. Acts of creating beauty, seeking pleasure, or engaging in meaningful practice reveal the capacity to mitigate, though never abolish, the fundamental burden of existence. In this sense, the Gnostic depiction of a cosmos intrinsically marked by suffering can be reconciled with the observable capacity of human beings to shape their circumstances, without recourse to a transcendent source of value as its ultimate ground.[36]

Read triadically, Peirce's categories provide a precise anthropological schema: embodiment as brute resistance, affective immediacy as Firstness, and mediation as the work of Thirdness. Within this framework, pain is structural: it is not an occasional disturbance but a recurrent datum that discloses finitude, compels inferential reorientation, and supplies the evidential

35 Schopenhauer, A., *The World as Will and Idea*, Vol. 1 (trans. R. B. Haldane), Trübner & Co., London 1909, p. 67; Nagel, T., *The Possibility of Altruism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1979, p. 15.

36 Justin, „The Book of Baruch," in *Essential Gnostic Scriptures* (ed. W. Barnstone and M. Meyer), Shambhala, London 2010. p. 86.

material for semiotic and ethical formation. Peirce furnishes the semiotic mechanism through which these preconceptual tones are integrated into habitual inference and practical reasoning. The body exemplifies Secondness: it resists projects and manifests limits that cannot be wished away.[37] Affective Firstness establishes the pre-reflective tonal field in which pleasure and pain emerge. Thirdness constitutes the ensemble of habits, signs, and language that renders these tones intelligible and future-directed. Pain is decisive because it simultaneously reveals the non-consensual character of embodiment and activates the operations of Thirdness, forcing hypothesis testing, habit revision, and moral recalibration.[38]

Framing this dynamic in quasi-Gnostic terms is methodologically instructive, insofar as it designates persistent opacity, but it must not be construed as metaphysical pessimism. Analytically, suffering indexes structural constraint, and this index is constitutive for inquiry, ethical reasoning, and the formation of communal institutions. Peirce's picture is both coherent and programmatic, yielding three methodological commitments. First, it preserves the modal distinctions between immediacy, resistance, and mediation in the treatment of affective phenomena. Second, it treats pain as evidential rather than merely evaluative: it provides data for inferential and normative practice. Pain delineates limits; it does not, by itself, indicate cosmic malevolence. The value of this approach lies in its analytic precision, it situates suffering within a semiotic economy that accounts for the joint constitution of finitude, affect, and sense-making in human existence.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF PAIN AND UNPLEASANT SENSATION

Pain exemplifies the conditions of embodiment and consciousness, disclosing contingency and relationality, yet its immediacy does not justify treating it as a universal principle. It is central to lived experience because it presents itself as unavoidable and non-consensual, imposed upon the subject without volition. This centrality, however, must not be mistaken for ontological privilege, since consciousness is constituted by a plurality of qualitative modes, pleasure, perception, memory, anticipation, none of which can be reduced to pain.[39] The significance of pain lies in its capacity to structure

37 Peirce, C. S., „The Reality of Thirdness," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 5, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1935, p. 50-58.

38 Peirce, C. S., „The Reality of Thirdness," p. 58-60.

39 Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception,* Routledge, London 2012, p. 93.

responsiveness. Its occurrence compels adaptation, shaping bodily comportment, reflection, and deliberation. It reveals the passivity intrinsic to embodiment, the fact that experience is never wholly under volitional control, while simultaneously becoming the condition for active negotiation with the world. Pain thereby functions both as limitation and as stimulus, constraining while also calling forth endurance, skill, and moral discernment. Nietzsche's aphorism, „*Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker*,"[40] condenses this insight into a paradoxical formula: adversity threatens the subject, yet in threatening also discloses capacities otherwise latent.

To privilege pain as a universal model for experience risks distortion. Its immediacy is powerful, but power is not equivalent to necessity. Pain clarifies the fragility of agency and the interdependence of subject and world, but it does not exhaust phenomenality. It is best understood as paradigmatic rather than absolute: a privileged site for observing how consciousness is structured by forces it cannot command, but not a principle that defines reality as such. Recent phenomenological and pragmatic accounts support this position by treating affective states not as metaphysical categories but as structuring conditions of relational experience.[41] Recognizing the inevitability of suffering allows for a strategic engagement with life's conditions. Struggle and adversity are not moral imperatives in themselves, but they define the terrain of agency, requiring reflection and purposive response.[42] Peirce complements this analysis by emphasizing the functional role of suffering. Within his framework, pain operates as a semiotic event, it directs attention, guides inference, and conditions practical reasoning; revealing the possibility of transforming adverse conditions through reflective action.[43]

To reconstruct Peirce's phenomenology, the core thesis is that pain is a paradigmatic instance of the subjective character of experience whose immediacy and resistance reveal structural limits of conscious autonomy. This revelation is epistemically important for phenomenology and ethically consequential, but it does not show that all phenomenality is essentially suffe-

40 Nietzsche, F., *Götzen-Dämmerung* (ed. Baeumler, A.), Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart 1954, §8, p. 82.

41 Zahavi D., *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014, p. 87–92; Leder, D., *The Absent Body*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990, 72–76.

42 Peirce, C. S., „Three Types of Reasoning," in *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 5, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1935. p. 92.

43 Peirce, C. S., *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. J. Buchler, Dover Publications, New York 1955. p. 238.

ring. By conscious experience it is meant the subjective character or what-it-is-like aspect of mental states, and by pain it is meant first-person, negatively balanced bodily sensation or suffering that resists deliberate alteration by the subject. Finally, autonomy is the capacity of an agent to shape, with some reliability, the contents or valence of her conscious life by intentional action or reflective reinterpretation.

Now, the first premise (1) is that conscious experience has an irreducible subjective character: there are facts about what it is like for a subject to undergo a state that are not captured by purely objective description. This is also Nagel's central point about phenomenal facts.[44] Secondly (2), some experiential states are amendable to intentional modulation, reframing, or attenuation by reflective or practical activity: memory can be revised, moods can be regulated, attention can be redirected, and certain perceptual interpretations can be bracketed. These are within the practical purview of an agent's agency. Lastly, (3) pain, by contrast, commonly manifests as immediate, non-revisable, and non-volitional. It resists the ordinary cognitive manoeuvres that subserve modulation, and it often defeats attempts at re-description or intentional sidelining. Phenomenologists and critics emphasize pain's inexpressibility and its capacity to restructure temporality and practical orientation. From (1) and (3) it follows that pain exemplifies a category of phenomenal facts that both instantiate subjective character and constrain agency in ways that other states do not. Pain thereby functions as a diagnostic case for the limits of autonomy in the space of conscious life. This leads us to premise (4): to infer from the diagnostic relevance of pain to a universal metaphysical claim that all phenomenality is reducible to suffering requires an additional and unsupported step: namely, that every phenomenal state shares the causal and structural properties of pain.[45] That generalisation is false because other phenomenal states (e.g. pleasure, aesthetic perception, deliberate thought), exhibit different modal profiles with respect to volition and modifiability. Therefore, we can bring the conclusion that pain is paradigmatic for revealing limits of autonomy and the irreducibility of subjective facts, but it is not metaphysically primary in the sense of being the constitutive template of all phenomenality.

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44 Nagel, T., „What Is It Like to Be a Bat?", *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974), p. 435–450.

45 Atkins, R. K., „Inferential Modeling of Percept Formation: Peirce's Fourth Cotary Proposition," in *Peirce on Perception and Reasoning: From Icons to Logic* (ed. K. A. Hull and R. K. Atkins), New York 2017. p. 32-38.

Peirce's account of the subjective character of experience shows why certain first-person facts resist translation into wholly objective description; pain is one of the clearest instances of such facts because it resists translation into third-person functional description while being manifestly operative in practical life. Pain's resistance is not merely rhetorical. As Elaine Scarry argues, suffering often defeats linguistic and social channels; it reorganises the subject's relation to the world and can unmake ordinary projects.[46] Phenomenological analyses confirm that chronic or intense pain alters temporality and agency in ways that non-painful states do not.[47]

It is important to mention that one might hold that neurophysiological description will eventually dissolve the stubbornness of the first-person: once we have the right objective account, the apparent immediacy of pain will be explained away. But, Peirce's methodological point is that objective description faces a constitutive explanatory gap when it comes to subjective character. Even if neuroscience supplies highly detailed correlations and mechanisms, the explanatory move from third-person description to the „what-it-is-like" remains non-trivial. Pain's immediacy intensifies the gap but does not uniquely create it. The proper philosophical response is methodological humility combined with targeted conceptual analysis, not premature ontological reductionism.

One could claim that treating pain as paradigmatic risks reifying a pathological mode as normative for consciousness and thereby distort theory, a form of homogenising phenomenology. This objection succeeds against an overgeneralising move. Analytically, one must distinguish the epistemic status of a case and its metaphysical status. Pain has epistemic salience for revealing limits on autonomy without thereby functioning as metaphysical ground for all conscious states. The argument proposed maintains that distinction: pain is salient; it is not universal. This would require an analytic clarity, which I would argue requires (a) isolating modal properties of experience (e.g. volitional modifiability, intentional directedness, temporal structure), (b) showing which properties pain uniquely or strongly exemplifies, and (c) resisting illicit generalisation from exemplarity to universality. This is precisely the attitude one finds in Peirce: careful delimitation of the subjective/

46 Scarry, E., *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985. p. 15.

47 Wagner, J. N., „Pain and Temporality: A Merleau-Pontyian Approach," *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (2024), p. 321–331.

objective divide, not rhetorical inflation of a single case into a metaphysical principle.[48]

But can there be morality in the face of the Demiurge? Phenomenology gains from treating pain as a privileged case study because it foregrounds questions of suffering, responsibility, and the limits of agency. Ethically, the immediacy and resistant character of pain justify special normative attention: pain diminishes practical autonomy and so creates distinctive moral demands on caretakers and institutions.[49] At the level of philosophy of mind, pain warns against simplistic objectivist programs and recommends plural methodological tools: conceptual analysis, first-person reports, and third-person science must be held in critical tension.[50] The correct philosophical posture is to treat pain as a revealing instance that sharpens conceptual distinctions. It is a lever for analysis, not a metaphysical crowbar that forces all of phenomenology into the shape of suffering. The analytic reconstruction above keeps your original insights while eliminating repetition, securing premise-conclusion relations, and showing what further evidence would be needed to press the case beyond the modest but informative claim that pain indexes structural limits of agency.

A MISTAKE IN METHOD?

If we were to synthesize the above parts, we can say that human experience is structured by pressures and resistances that are neither wholly reducible to rational analysis nor fully captured by ethical or metaphysical categorization. Pain and pleasure serve as immediate, unavoidable phenomena through which consciousness encounters limits, constraints, and relational dependencies. Within Peirce's semiotic and phenomenological framework, these qualities are treated as signs: they indicate states of the world, mediate action, and contribute to the development of experience without imposing a metaphysical hierarchy among phenomena. From this standpoint, Peirce's phenomenology can be schematized as follows: (1) Conscious experience consists of relational qualities that are irreducible to pure concepts. (2) These qualities function as signs within semiotic chains that structure understanding

48 De Waal, C., *Peirce: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury, Sydney 2013, p. 24-27.

49 Yamauchi, E. M., *Gnostic Ethics and Mandaean Origins*, Gorgias Press, Piscataway 2004, p. 18.

50 Scarry, E., *The Body in Pain,* p. 194.

and guide action. (3) Engagement with these qualities reveals the limits and affordances of embodied existence.

This formulation allows pain to serve as a paradigmatic instance of immediacy and relational constraint: it demonstrates the impossibility of fully mastering experience while simultaneously providing a framework for inference, reflection, and adaptive response. Crucially, Peirce's system maintains internal coherence only so long as it respects the equivalence of qualitative experience and the relational structuring of consciousness.[51] The question then arises of how far such immediacy can be relied upon to generate principles about experience without slipping into either abstraction or arbitrariness? In examining analogous attempts to ground knowledge in the conditions of experience, we can juxtapose the structure of Kant's critical philosophy, where experience is disciplined by the categories and forms of intuition.[52] By juxtaposing Peirce's treatment of pain and pleasure with Kantian limits on what experience alone can substantiate, the methodological stakes of Peirce's semiotic system become more apparent, since the relational and inferential character of consciousness is preserved precisely because it neither elevates nor reduces any single qualitative phenomenon to an unmediated foundation.

By contrast, Kant's epistemology emphasizes the *a priori* conditions of experience and the formal categories through which phenomena are intelligible.[53] If pain or pleasure were treated as a primary determinant of knowledge within a Kantian system, the result would be a category mistake: the immediacy of feeling cannot constitute the necessary conditions of experience without violating the logic of transcendental synthesis.[54] Thus, the juxtaposition of Peirce and Kant first reveals a methodological tension: Peirce privileges relational and experiential structuring, while Kant privileges formal, *a priori* constraints. The attempt to reconcile pain with post-Kantian or Peircean metaphysics encounters significant challenges. Pain cannot be treated as an „*a priori* sensation" without misrepresenting Kantian epistemology, nor can Peirce's rejection of innate intuitions be overridden without compromising the coherence of his system. Consequently, any claim that pain constitutes a privileged ontological category must remain circumscribed by the constraints of historical philosophical argumentation. The role of pain is to provide an

51 Champagne, M., *Consciousness and the Philosophy of Signs: How Peircean Semiotics Combines Phenomenal Qualia and Practical Effects*, Springer, Cham 2018, p. 4-7.

52 Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 103.

53 Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 137.

54 Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 105.

exemplar of immediacy and relational imposition within experience, not to constitute an absolute metaphysical principle. Further, it can be argued that the ethical or existential significance of pain lies in its capacity to structure attention, effort, and awareness. But, recognizing the inevitability of suffering does not necessitate viewing the world as irredeemable; rather, it permits the cultivation of practices oriented toward endurance, adaptation, and selective engagement with the contingencies of life. Pain thereby operates as a guide to the limits of agency and the possibilities of skillful negotiation within the structures of embodiment.

LEVINAS AND *JOUISSANCE* AS PRIMACY OF BEING

Peirce's phenomenological categories, particularly his treatment of Firstness and the immediacy of quality, orient experience toward what may we described as a quasi-Gnostic structure: reality remains irreducibly opaque, partially mediated by signs, habits, and inference. Pain, within this framework, exemplifies the tension between immediacy and relationality: it is unmasterable yet generative of adaptation, revealing the body as a locus of resistance to completion. In Peirce, embodiment is inseparable from the semiotic economy, yet always marks the estrangement of consciousness from the fully accessible real. This structural resistance imbues Peirce's phenomenology with the tone of a negative theology of experience: reality can be approached only obliquely, through traces, signs, and mediated experience, never directly possessed. The quasi-Gnostic resonance lies in this acknowledgment of the limits of mastery and the inevitability of residual opacity, a condition that shapes both inference and practical adaptation.

Levinas, by contrast, situates embodiment at the heart of ethical encounter. While indebted to Husserlian intentionality and Heideggerian *Dasein*, his phenomenology is decisively shaped by Jewish and Christian ethical thought. In *Totalité et Infini* (1961), the body is neither primarily a burden nor a site of resistance but the medium of enjoyment, habitation, and nourishment. To possess a body is to live from the other, to be sustained materially, to taste, touch, and dwell. This „living from" (vivre de) establishes subjectivity as receptive and dependent: the self does not exist autonomously but through the gifts of sustenance received from outside itself.[55] In *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974), Levinas radicalizes this insight: the body becomes the site of exposure, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility. The

[55] Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity*, p. 110–117.

skin and the face figure a sensibility irreducibly implicated in obligation. Bodily existence is no longer merely a medium of habitation or sensibility; it is the very ground of substitution, the locus where one is already ethically enmeshed and exposed to the suffering of the other.[56] The body is exposed like „a nerve," Levinas writes, emphasizing the impossibility of retreat into sovereign consciousness.[57] Unlike Peirce, for whom embodiment participates in a semiotic field mediating the inaccessible real, Levinas grounds the immediacy of experience in ethical claim: the body is the locus of obligation, not merely a site of epistemic opacity.[58]

This contrast is philosophically instructive. In Peirce, pain exemplifies structural resistance: it cannot be fully mastered or anticipated, thereby highlighting the limits of direct signification and the semiotic mediation of experience. In Levinas, suffering reveals ethical demand: it discloses a passivity more fundamental than freedom, a being-for-the-other that precedes intentional consciousness. Peirce's phenomenology discloses the alienation and incompleteness of consciousness, while Levinas's situates embodiment as the condition for moral accountability and ethical exposure. In this sense, Peirce moves toward a quasi-Gnostic semiotics of reality, whereas Levinas develops a Judeo-Christian phenomenology of corporeal obligation.

Merleau-Ponty provides a mediating perspective. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), the body is neither purely passive nor exclusively ethical; it is the locus of intentionality, the living medium of perception and action. The lived body (*corps vécu*) mediates between the subject and the world, integrating perception and motor intentionality into a unified field of engagement. For Merleau-Ponty, ordinary enjoyment, skillful action, and perception are embedded in relational and intersubjective contexts. His account illuminates how embodiment simultaneously structures experience without collapsing semiotic opacity or ethical immediacy. The body is a site where experience, action, and relationality intersect, allowing a conceptual bridge between Peirce's quasi-Gnostic limitation and Levinas's ethical exposure.[59]

Contrasting these accounts clarifies the stakes of phenomenology of embodiment. Peirce emphasizes the inaccessibility of the real, ethical and epistemic constraints emerging from semiotic mediation, and the paradigmatic role of pain as structural resistance. Levinas foregrounds ethical immediacy,

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56 Levinas, E., *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (transl. A. Lingis), Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 2011, p. 74–79.

57 Levinas, E., *Otherwise Than Being,* p. 18.

58 Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity,* p. 45.

59 Marleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 141–150.

vulnerability, and the asymmetry of responsibility, demonstrating that the body is the locus where obligation is encountered and enacted.[60] Merleau-Ponty highlights the integrative functions of embodiment, showing that perception, action, and relationality are inseparable from lived experience.[61] Together, these perspectives reveal that the phenomenology of embodiment is not monolithic, instead it is orientation, toward epistemic opacity, ethical demand, or integrated perception, shapes both the conceptualization of pain and the broader metaphysical assumptions about consciousness and being.

Pain, within Peirce's framework, instructs us regarding the non-consensual thrust of experience and the relational structure of consciousness; yet Levinas reminds us that embodiment is simultaneously ethical and vulnerable.[62] The Gnostic extrapolation, which we argued stands in the background of Peirce's work, reduces experience to opacity and resistance, neglecting the irreducible moral, relational, and receptive dimensions revealed by ethical embodiment. The body is not merely a site of limitation; it is the locus where suffering, enjoyment, and ethical obligation converge. Recognizing this convergence refines the analytic method: pain is a critical heuristic, but it is embedded within a broader phenomenology in which embodiment, relationality, and ethical responsibility co-constitute consciousness and experience.

Peirce's phenomenology of pain establishes a foundation for a cosmology in which experience is structured by relational constraints and semiotic mediation. Pain is immediate, unavoidable, and resistant to rational modulation, and exemplifies the non-consensual character of experience: consciousness cannot simply will it away, and the subject is compelled to negotiate the conditions imposed by material and existential reality.[63] From this emerges a quasi-Gnostic cosmology, for the structuring of consciousness through pain implicitly acknowledges a world that is partially inaccessible and resistant to human mastery. The real, mediated through signs and habits, remains opaque, generating a persistent tension between the subject and the cosmos. Its Gnostic resonance lies in recognition of an imperfect, contingent, and, in some sense, hostile environment, where consciousness must interpret, adapt, and act within the semiotic and existential limits of experience. Pain functions as a paradigmatic example of these conditions, elevated to a template for under-

60 Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity,* p. 45-46.

61 Marleau-Ponty, M. *The Structure of Behavior,* Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1983, p. xiv.

62 Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity,* p. 47.

63 Peirce, C. S., *The Philosophy of Peirce: Selected Writings,* p. 33

standing the cosmos itself, echoing Gnostic motifs of suffering, limitation, and the necessity of interpretive gnosis.

In contrast, Levinas constructs a cosmos that is fundamentally ethical rather than semiotically opaque. Bodily sensibility and vulnerability situate consciousness not merely within relational constraints but within an ethical horizon structured by the presence of the Other.[64] Pain and suffering are not primarily epistemic obstacles; they are the loci of ethical demand. For Levinas, the body mediates nourishment, dwelling, and engagement with the world, establishing receptivity rather than confrontation with an inaccessible or hostile cosmos.[65] In his later works, the ethical stakes of embodiment are intensified: the body becomes the site of substitution and exposure, where the self is summoned to responsibility by the Other.[66] Suffering, inscribed in corporeality, functions as a medium of responsiveness and accountability rather than evidence of cosmic opacity or malevolence. Unlike Peirce's quasi-Gnostic trajectory, Levinas does not posit a cosmos fundamentally resistant or morally ambiguous; rather, he posits a relational ontology in which the presence of the Other grounds the meaning and structure of experience, including pain and pleasure.[67] Suffering is formative but does not denote imperfection or hostility; it constitutes the necessary condition for ethical engagement and the enactment of responsibility within a Judeo-Christian moral horizon.

CONCLUSION

The examination of pain, pleasure, and existential resistance reveals that human experience cannot be fully captured through conventional ontic or ethical categories alone. Pain manifests not as an accidental occurrence but as an inherent pressure of existence, a structural condition that shapes embodiment, cognition, and action. Its immediacy resists reduction to either moral evaluation or instrumental understanding, compelling the subject to confront the limits of control and mastery. Pleasure, by contrast, is neither entirely separable from pain nor a simple counterpoint; its significance emerges relationally, as a contingent product of engagement with the world and as a marker of the capacities through which life is sustained. Phenomenology thus

64 Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity,* p. 47.
65 Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity,* p. 64
66 Levinas, E., *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 126
67 Levinas, E., *Totality and Infinity,* p. 68, 74.

shows that the interplay of these experiences constitutes the medium through which consciousness both encounters and negotiates reality.

Pragmatic reflection further complicates the picture. Experience is irreducibly relational: pain and pleasure acquire their meaning not merely through intrinsic qualities but through their role in structuring adaptive behavior, social interaction, and the continuous calibration of expectation and response. They are simultaneously constraints and affordances, prompting deliberation, inference, and practical negotiation within the contingencies of existence. In this sense, the experiential field itself is partially interpretive, shaped by habits, semiotic mediation, and the relational environment of the subject. The significance of pain is thus inseparable from its interpretive and pragmatic context, just as pleasure is constituted through its contingent reliance on what sustains and enables life.

Theological and metaphysical perspectives overlay additional dimensions. Gnostic frameworks, by positing the divine spark within humanity and the illusory character of material reality, foreground a radical immanence that renders the empirical world suspect and emphasizes suffering as structurally inevitable. Christian and Neoplatonic readings, by contrast, situate imperfection within a morally intelligible cosmos: evil is framed as privation, the cosmos as ordered, and the divine as fundamentally good. Across these accounts, the persistent motif is resistance: the friction between desire and limitation, between consciousness and the constraints of embodiment, between the finite subject and the contingent world. Resistance functions not merely as opposition but as the medium through which understanding, moral discernment, and ethical engagement are realized. It is the condition in which human insight emerges, shaping both the capacities and obligations of the self.

Ultimately, the synthesis of phenomenology, pragmatism, and metaphysical reflection underscores that human being is defined less by the attainment of particular states, pleasure, knowledge, or divine favor, than by the continual negotiation with the pressures, contingencies, and resistances that constitute existence. Pain and pleasure are not accidental features but essential loci where subjectivity, moral judgment, and existential comprehension converge. They are simultaneously disruptions and instruments: they reveal the limits of mastery, the necessary dependence on circumstance, and the relational grounding of human insight. By attending to these phenomena, philosophy illuminates not only what we experience but the very conditions under which experience, understanding, and ethical responsibility arise.

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BOL, ZADOVOLJSTVO I LJUDSKO STANJE KOD PEIRCEA I LEVINASA: KOMPARATIVNO ISTRAŽIVANJE FENOMENOLOGIJE, GNOSTICIZMA I ETIKE

Sažetak: Ovaj rad nudi analizu Peirceove fenomenologije u odnosu na klasične metafizičke i religijske tradicije, kao i savremene filozofske perspektive, poput Kanta, Heideggera i Levinasa. Povezujući gnostička, hrišćanska i platonska tumačenja božanskog i zla, studija smešta Peirceove kategorije u širi metafizički kontekst. Posebna pažnja posvećena je fenomenima bola i zadovoljstva, shvaćenim kao elementarne strukture Prvosti (Firstness) koje, kada se razvijaju u iskustvenom životu, otkrivaju viziju ljudskog stanja koja pokazuje zapanjujuće sličnosti sa gnostičkim interpretacijama. Kroz ovo čitanje, Peirce se pojavljuje kao mislilac čija fenomenologija, iako pragmatistički orijentisana, otvara gotovo gnostičko shvatanje ljudske patnje, prolaznosti i mogućnosti transcendencije.
Ključne reči: fenomenologija, pragmatizam, gnosticizam, hrišćanstvo, bol, zadovoljstvo, zlo, neoplatonizam, metafizika, Charles Sanders Peirce

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