The purpose of this seminar (PHIL619B/2022) will be to explore the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839—1914), perhaps the most important pioneer of American Pragmatism. I propose the following programme as a way to guide our exploration: namely that we try to understand Peirce’s uneasy uptake of ideas both Kantian and anti-Kantian – in epistemology. Here’s what I have in mind.

Peirce was in some respects Kantian in his epistemological outlook. There are a couple signs of this. The first is his idea that the world intrudes on us in ways that we cannot control – as, for example, when we are startled by a sudden loud noise – and that these intrusions put us in immediate contact with reality. Enquiry often takes its point of departure from such intrusions: we want to make sense of them, as when we catch ourselves, in the nano-second after the sudden loud noise, trying out hypotheses about what might have caused it: was it the back-firing of a car; was it the sound of gun-shot; was it the bursting of a big balloon? Peirce’s idea here is akin to Kant’s idea that our sensibility is a capacity to be affected by objects: the effect of objects acting on our sensibility is not up to us and our contact with reality beyond ourselves depends on it. It is, in some sense, the foundation of all our knowledge. The second sign of a kinship with Kant is Peirce’s idea that we cannot account for knowledge – not even in the ideal case, as we shall imagine, when enquiry has reached its final outcome (assuming that it ever does) – by appealing to some kind of correspondence between knowledge and a thing in itself taken to be something completely independent of the conditions under which knowledge is possible for us. Kant would characterize such a thing as being ‘as good as nothing for us’. If something is as good as nothing for us, he would ask, how could enquiry ever lead us to knowledge of it? Peirce is largely in agreement with Kant on this point; thus we note a twist of idealism in his epistemology.

But Peirce also has a rock-solid commitment to a view he calls ‘tychism’, from the Greek word ‘tychē’, which means ‘chance’. Tychism is the view according to which chance gives rise to the laws of nature. Peirce is thinking here of Darwin’s law of natural selection: species are not fixed, but are, as it were, naturally selected because of random ‘individual differences’, as Darwin himself would say, or because of random ‘genetic mutations’, as we would say today, that give a living organism an advantage in the ‘struggle for existence’. Peirce is also thinking of the application of the theory of probabilities by Clausius and Maxwell to develop the theory of gases. Nothing could be more foreign to Kant’s theoretical philosophy than ‘tychism’: the laws of nature are not an accident; they are, if Kant gets his way in the Transcendental Deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the means by which our understanding asserts its epistemological authority over nature; and, its epistemological authority over nature would prove to be a sham if these laws turn out to be a fluke.

The question I propose to help guide our exploration of Peirce’s epistemology is how, on earth, did Peirce think he could reconcile ‘tychism’ with the Kantian elements of his philosophy?