Ubiquitous Mediation and Critical Interventions: Reflections on the Function of Signs and the Purposes of Peirce’s Semeiotic

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ABSTRACT

From a pragmatist perspective, the inaugural concern of Peirce’s formal theory (mediation? representation? translation?) cannot be separated from the eventual form in which this theory ought to be cast. Moreover, it cannot be severed from the emerging goals of an evolving process of theoretical elaboration. Peirce’s semeiotic culminates in methodeutic. The form in which the theory of signs is most appropriately cast is arguably a reflexive, normative inquiry into the conditions and forms of inquiry. It is, however, possibly something wider – a rhetoric inclusive of more than the discourses and disciplines of the experimental sciences (i.e., a rhetoric inclusive of artistic works no less than practical communication). An account of the most rudimentary and pervasive form of semiosis (grammar in Peirce’s sense being one of the names for this account) must ultimately give way to a nuanced understanding of historical practices such as experimental inquiry, artistic innovation, practical discourse, and possibly much else.

Keywords: Collateral Experience, Generalization, Hypostatic Abstraction, Mediation, Methodeutic, Phenomenology, Representation, Semiosis, Speculative Rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

“All my notions are too narrow. Instead of Sign, ought I not to say Medium?” – C. S. Peirce (Hartshorne, Weiss, & Burke, 1998).

Time and again, C. S. Peirce returned to the most fundamental questions regarding those topics to which he had devoted his must sustained attention, trying thereby to think afresh about matters in danger of becoming too familiar to him. What he wrote of a teacher trying to impart something of “the logic of mathematics” is worth recalling here: “… not having conquered the difficulty [of a question or problem regarding this logic], but only having worn out the sense of difficulty by familiarity, he simply cannot understand why the boy should feel any difficulty; and all he can do is to exclaim, ‘Oh, these stupid, stupid boys!’ As if a physician should exclaim, ‘Oh, these horrid patients, they won’t get well!’” (Hartshorne, Weiss, & Burke, 1998). Just as Peirce deliberately tried to learn new tricks for the purpose of retaining “possession
of the childish trait as long as possible” (Peirce, 1904; Brent, 1998, p. 324, p. 331), so Peirce strove to retain his sense of the disconcerting difficulty of the most fundamental questions (e.g., what is time?) for the purpose of keeping alive his consciousness of not having fathomed their depths simply because of long familiarity with these basic matters. It accordingly seems only appropriate to seize this occasion as an opportunity to address, once again, some truly fundamental questions (not least of all, ones concerning the function of semiosis). These questions concern what is possibly Peirce’s own most famous doctrine (thus, one about which as much has been written as any other part of his philosophy).

Early in life Peirce came to the conclusion that we cannot think without signs. He advocated this thesis from virtually the very beginning to the end of his intellectual life. While we cannot think without signs, we do not necessarily or even ordinarily think about them. Even so, our use of signs tends to drive toward reflection about our various practices and their indispensable instruments (all of these practices being semiotic and all of these implements being, in one form or another, signs). In reflecting about signs, it is often advantageous (especially at the outset) to abstract signs from the more familiar contexts of human usage. It is also advantageous to abstract signs from any reference whatsoever to humans or other mindful beings. Such is the experiment by which Peirce’s study of signs was inaugurated. He proposed to give a definition of sign “which no more refers to human thought than does the definition of a line as the place which a particle occupies, part by part, during a lapse of time” refer to temporality (Peirce, 1976). Just as we can abstract a line from the act of inscribing it by a continuous motion of determinate duration, so we can abstract a sign from the acts by which they are recognized, instituted, and otherwise realized through our agency.

Reflection upon signs might be undertaken for a variety of distinct purposes. In addition, it may be undertaken in a number of different ways. On this occasion, I want to explore some tensions in Peirce’s efforts “to institute a cooperative cenoscopic attack upon the problems of the nature, properties, and varieties of Signs, in the spirit of twentieth-century science” (Peirce, 1998, p. 462). In one way or another, most of these tensions can be related to the contrast or, at least, the difference between mediation and representation. In the course of noting these tensions, I will make a number of suggestions. None is more important than this one: to attain the desired generality of semeiotic, semiosis is best understood in terms of mediation (rather than representation or any other conception).

But of equal importance is another suggestion: Peirce’s semeiotic is more than anything else an effort to assist the growth of symbols, such growth being understood as the result not so much of a wild proliferation as a deliberate cultivation. Even so, the unintended and unruly growth of meaning is an important phenomenon (Colapietro, 2004).

**TENSIONS IN P**EIRCE’S EFFORTS TO INSTITUTE A THEORY OF SIGNS

Just what are the tensions in Peirce’s reflections on signs calling for our attention? First of all, there is the tension between his efforts to articulate a truly general theory of signs and his endeavor to deploy this general theory for a specific purpose – that of offering a normative account of objective inquiry. For a truly comprehensive theory, defining semiosis in terms of mediation seems the only way to obtain the desired generality. For such a specific application, however, conceiving semiosis in terms of representation appears to be the most promising way to develop an illuminating account. The desirable and appropriate level of generality is determined by the purpose governing an inquiry or interpretation. Something at least analogous to Paul Grice’s rules of conversation is operative here: the degree of specificity is determined by the purpose of the investigation or exchange (1989, pp. 22-40). A high degree of generality and also of vagueness need not thwart the at-
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