

Peirce's Approach to the Self  
A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity

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## Introduction

In the words of Charles Sanders Peirce, “The man who puts pen to paper to produce anything like a treatise should, for his readers’ sake, and for his own, begin by defining what his book is intended to tell” (CN, vol. 2, 277; 1900). Indeed, it is nothing less than “the primary rule of the ethics of rhetoric that every prose composition should begin by informing the reader what its aim is, with sufficient precision to enable him to decide whether to read it or not. If the title can do this, all the better” (CN, vol. 2, 276). My hope is that the title of this study sufficiently conveys my intention. If not, let me add here that my aim is to present the innovative approach to the self that is implied by Peirce’s general theory of signs. To some extent, Peirce himself articulated the view of the self implied in this theory; however, to a significant degree, he left this view implicit. Even so, what he has written points out the direction in which he would have developed his portrait of the person. In addition, there has been some effort on the part of several commentators to trace the direction of Peirce’s thought in this context.

Nonetheless, the exposition of Peirce’s views regarding the self is no easy task. Part of the difficulty here stems from Peirce’s style, taking this term in a broad sense to include both the way he wrote and the way he thought (including, of course, the way he philosophized). Yet, this is only part of the difficulty; for what Peirce specifically said about the self has appeared even to deeply sympathetic commentators as a largely unsatisfactory account. Hence, while the writings of Peirce, in general, pose a number of challenges for any expositor of his thought, his view of the self, in particular, presents difficulties of its own. Let me comment on both sources of difficulty, beginning with the more general ones.

The first of these is the density of Peirce's prose. Many intelligent persons of good will have experienced great difficulty in reading his writings. He himself claimed: "One of the most extreme and most lamentable of my incapacities is my incapacity for linguistic expression" (MS 632, 5-6). This is, in my estimation, too harsh an assessment of his own linguistic facility; he could write with clarity and even grace. However, he was, on principle, committed to sacrificing literary elegance for scientific precision (see, e.g., 5.13). Moreover, although he insisted that all thinking necessarily relies upon symbols, he admitted that his own thinking only infrequently depended upon words (but one species of symbol). In fact, in MS 619 ("Studies in Meaning"), Peirce acknowledged that visual diagrams constituted his "natural language of self-communion" (MS 619, 8).

We get, in effect, an interesting explanation of this personal propensity when Peirce attempts to capture the cast of Alfred Russell Wallace's mind. Because of Wallace's disposition to express himself in maps and diagrams, Peirce felt inclined to classify him as a mathematical thinker. But, to think in any manner (mathematical or otherwise) is to participate in a process analogous to the give-and-take of conversation. Early in his career, he noted: "Thought, says Plato, is a silent speech of the soul with itself. If this be admitted immense consequences follow; quite unrecognized, I believe, hitherto" (W 2: 172; 1868). Then, late in his life, he wrote: "It cannot be too often repeated that all thought is dialogue" (MS 283, 56 [variant]; 1905). And, in fact, he did not hesitate to repeat this assertion countless times. One such occasion was a review of a biography of Wallace. Here, he stated:

Meditation is dialogue. "I says to myself, says I," is the vernacular account of it; and the most minute and tireless study of logic only fortifies this conception. The majority of men commune with themselves in words. The physicist, however, thinks of experimenting, of doing something and awaiting the result. The artist, again, thinks about pictures and visual images, and largely in pictured bits; while the musician thinks about, and in, tones. Finally, the mathematician clothes his thought in mental diagrams, which exhibit regularities and analogies of abstract forms almost quite free from the feelings that would accompany real perceptions. A person who from childhood has habitually made his reflections by experimenting upon mental diagrams, will ordinarily lack the readiness in conversation that belongs to one who always thought in words, and will

naturally infer that he lacks talent for speech when he only lacks practice. (CN, vol. III, 258-59)

Whether it be due to a lack of talent or a lack of practice, Peirce felt himself deficient in his ability to use language. In addition, his writings occasion enough difficulty for intelligent and benevolent readers to think that his sense of deficiency was, in some measure, justified.

However, Peirce is far less difficult and far more accessible than many of his critics maintain. What most likely stands in the way of appreciating him is not so much his style of writing as his style of philosophizing. Peirce's way of philosophizing is at once intensely challenging and currently unfashionable. Even so, it is possible that his distinctive conception of philosophical inquiry more clearly reveals the way to a recovery of philosophy than any other contemporary conception. As Alfred North Whitehead recognized, "philosophy is not—or at least, should not be—a ferocious debate between irritable professors" (1937, 125). However, this is precisely what it still too often is. Perhaps, if we as philosophers can move toward a Peircean ideal of cooperative inquiry, philosophy will recover—rather than deconstruct—itself. No doubt, strong historical and cultural factors contribute to the individualistic and antagonistic character of philosophical discourse; even so, historical and cultural forces also prompt philosophy to become a more communal and cooperative endeavor.

I noted earlier that Peirce was, in principle, committed to sacrificing literary elegance for scientific precision. In practice, this meant that he felt the necessity to coin technical terms where ordinary language was unduly imprecise. Thus, his writings are strewn with neologisms. Many of his linguistic inventions have forbidding visages.

Peirce's need to coin new words was rooted in his conception of philosophy as a science. However, this very conception is in our time likely to pose an obstacle to an appreciation of Peirce's contributions, for the view that philosophy ought to aspire to the status of a science is taken by many to have been thoroughly exploded (e.g., Rorty 1979; also 1982). To make matters even more difficult, Peirce conceived philosophy to be systematic as well as scientific; indeed, in his own mind, these were inseparable aspects of an adequate notion of philosophical inquiry. The various sciences are not simply a random collection of separate pursuits;

