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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 capacities 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 life, 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—its own. 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;
they ought to be seen as parts of a system.

Yet, this also suggests a view of philosophy that, for many today, has been completely discredited. For perhaps the majority of intellectuals today, the will to a system represents, at best, "a lack of integrity" (Nietzsche 1889 [1968], 25) and, at worst, a will to dominate—indeed to terrify. In the words of Lyotard,

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, for the realization of the fantasy to seize reality. The answer is: Let us wage a war on totality... (Lyotard 1979 [1984], 81-82)

This deep distrust of all attempts to present a comprehensive vision is rooted in the conviction that there is an intrinsic connection between a theory of the totality and the practices of totalitarians. However, such a connection must be painstakingly established and not simply assumed.

But, insofar as such assumptions are made today, there is a contemporary obstacle to attaining an interior understanding of Peirce's philosophical project—for he desired to be both systematic and scientific. Peirce confessed in a letter to James: Pluralism "does not satisfy either my head or my heart" (8.262; 1905). Yet in another letter to this same person, he acknowledged his debt to Schelling, noting: "one thing I admire about him [Schelling] is his freedom from the trammels of system, and his holding himself uncommitted to any previous utterance. In that, he is like a scientific man" (Perry 1935, vol. 2, 415-16).

Finally, it is all too easy for those who have studied intensively the writings of Peirce to get so caught up in his "system" that they come to see it as a place in which to dwell rather than a point from which to proceed. Nevertheless, Peirce's outlines for a classification of the sciences were not intended as a shelter from either the rough and tumble of ordinary experience or the twists and turns of scientific discovery; they were intended as aids to inquiry. Just as Peirce thought that the most unpardonable intellectual sin was to block the road of inquiry (1.135), he thought that among the most profitable intellectual work was to map the paths of inquiry (cf. Kent 1987, 17-19). His outlines for a classification of the sciences are just this—attempts to map the paths of inquiry, with special attention being paid to the precise points of intersection among these paths. That is, their function is principally heuristic; they show the direction in which a path of inquiry might be pushed and the sources by which the footsteps of an inquirer might be illuminated. Thus, judging Peirce in terms of the criterion he most prized, we are obliged to say: If there is any value to what Peirce has written, it resides in the power of these writings to open fields of inquiry and, once having opened these fields, to offer assistance on how to cultivate the areas. As Peirce himself noted, his writings are "meant for people who want to find out; and people who want philosophy larded out to them can go elsewhere. There are philosophical soup shops at every corner, thank God!" (1.11).

Thinkers who above all else desire to find out how the truth of things stands are, by virtue of that desire, scientists. Such thinkers exhibit a form of eros, the love of discovering what is not yet known. However, this form of eros has been far too absent among philosophers. Not only did Peirce draw a very sharp distinction between thinkers trained in laboratories and those educated in seminaries; he claimed that the infantile condition of philosophical inquiry was due to the fact that philosophy "has been pursued by men who have not been nurtured in dissecting-rooms and other laboratories, and who consequently have not been animated by the true scientific Eros; but who have on the contrary come from theological seminaries, and have consequently been inflamed with a desire to amend the lives of themselves and others, a spirit no doubt more important than the love of science, for men in average situations, but radically unfitting them for the task of scientific investigation" (1620). Accordingly, the distinction between laboratory- and seminary-trained philosophers rests not so much on where a person is educated as on what a person loves. Thinkers who love only the truth already in their possession and, thus, conceive their task as a steadfast and uncompromising defense of their property would count for Peirce as seminary philosophers. In contrast, thinkers who love above all else the truth yet to be discovered and, hence, envision their role to be that of a painstaking and cooperative inquirer would count for Peirce as laboratory philosophers. It should be no surprise then (as Kenneth Laine Ketner points out) that "Persons who have had no actual significant experiences with laboratory methods have a handicap
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to overcome in achieving an understanding of Peirce’s work” (1985b, 81 n. 24).

So much, then, for those aspects of Peirce’s style that are likely to erect stumbling blocks for many contemporary readers. In addition to these general barriers to understanding, there are Peirce’s specific discussions of the self. A number of commentators appear to think that these discussions do not add up to a theory of the self, but even if they do, this theory is woefully inadequate. Indeed, Peirce is frequently taken to have expressed wildly inconsistent and simply wild views about the nature and status of the self. In fact, his treatment of this topic is taken to be, even by sympathetic and informed commentators (e.g., Manley Thompson and Richard Bernstein), the weakest part of his entire philosophy. In Chapter Four, I shall explicitly defend Peirce against the specific charges of these (and other) critics.

Somewhat late in his life, Peirce came to recognize the true significance of what he called the normative sciences (cf. Potter 1967, 3; Kent 1987, 15). Individually, these sciences are aesthetics, ethics, and logic. Collectively, the task of these sciences is to discover “how Feeling, Conduct, and Thought, ought to be controlled” (MS 655, 24; 1910). Part and parcel of Peirce’s eventual recognition of the central significance of the normative sciences is that any theory of signs truly committed to making its ideas clear must bring into prominence such topics as agency and autonomy. In the context of semiotics as a theory of reasoning (reasoning itself being the form of semiosis in which Peirce was most deeply interested), he argues that self-governance is rooted in self-observation and self-criticism. This position is perhaps most clearly formulated in MS 280 (“The Basis of Pragmaticism” c. 1905). Here, Peirce admits that “The conception of the functioning of a sign, as such, is a hard one to analyze” (MS 280, variant 30). Even so, one approach would be to analyze this functioning in terms of an exchange between a graphist and an interpreter, a producer of signs and a receiver of them. If the exchange between the two parties is to operate at the level of argumentation (cf. 6.456), then what must we assume about the character of both the graphist-mind and the interpreter-mind? In Peirce’s own words,

The two minds must be capable of coming to an understanding and of observing when it is reached. This supposes a power of deliberate self-controlled thinking. Now nothing can be controlled that cannot be observed while it is in action. It is there requisite that both minds[,] but especially the Graphist-mind[,] should have a power of self-observation. Moreover, control supposes a capacity in that which is to be controlled of acting in accordance with definite general tendencies of a tolerably stable nature, which implies a reality in this governing principle. But these habits... must be capable of being modified according to some ideal in the mind of the controlling agent; and this controlling agent is to be the very same as the agent controlled, the control extending even to the modes of control themselves, since we suppose that the interpreter-mind under the guidance of the Graphist-mind discusses the rationale of logic itself. Taking all these factors into account, we should come to the same conclusion that common-sense would have jumped to at the outset; namely, that the Graphist-mind and interpreter-mind must have all the characters of personal intellects possessed of moral natures. (MS 280, variant 31-32)

Accordingly, Peirce’s general theory of signs, insofar as it is a normative account of reasoning, entails a commonsensical understanding of human agency. In light of this understanding, agents are beings who possess the power to exercise real, although limited, control over the course of their conduct. At the conclusion of Chapter Four and at the center of Chapter Five, Peirce’s semiotic portrait of human agency is examined in detail. His refusal to eliminate the acting subject along with the Cartesian cægo is one of the important respects in which Peirce’s semiotic vision is superior to the antihumanist orientation of Saussure’s structuralist and poststructuralist offspring. For these offspring, the decentering of the subject amounts to nothing less than the liquidation of the agent; for Peirce, the repudiation of the Cartesian starting point means the recovery of flesh-and-blood actors who are continuously defining themselves through their give-and-take relationships with both the natural world and each other. Here is a difference that surely makes a difference (cf. 5.404).

Let me conclude this Introduction by revealing more fully than I have thus far the character and the course of the following discussion. This study of Peirce is neither strictly systematic nor straightforwardly chronological, though it is deeply informed by both a desire to be faithful to Peirce’s architectonic concep-
tion of scientific inquiry and an awareness of how his views evolved. The third chapter takes the most explicit account of Peirce's system of the sciences, while the fourth and fifth chapters are most explicit about the way in which his understanding of semiosis and, thus, of subjectivity developed over the course of his career as an investigator of the signs of the self.

The first chapter considers Peirce's general theory of signs as such, whereas the following four examine specific applications of this theory (in particular, Peirce's semiotic approach to self and mind). In Chapter One ("Is Peirce's Theory of Signs Truly General?"), a fundamental conceptual revolution is noted. In opposition to the dominant mentalist tradition that has defined signs as the expressions of minds, Peirce proposed a thoroughly going semiotic perspective in which the reality of mind is seen as essentially the development of a system of signs. The mind is a species of semiosis. Accordingly, signs are not to be explained by reference to some occult and intrinsically private power called 'mind'; but the mind itself is to be explained in terms of those manifest and inherently intersubjective processes called semioses. (However, as I argue in the concluding chapter, this conceptual revolution does not entail a reductionistic view of human consciousness; the semiotic approach to mind and subjectivity does not commit one to an epiphenomenalist position.) Although this conceptual revolution in how to investigate the mind is noted in the opening chapter, the focus of the chapter is Peirce's general theory of signs rather than any specific application of this theory. More specifically, the focus is a correct understanding of the central concept of Peircean semiotics, namely, semiosis or sign-activity.

In Chapter Two ("Semiosis and Subjectivity"), I examine the validity of a position defended by Umberto Eco in *A Theory of Semiotics*. In this work, Eco contends that a general theory of signs cannot, in principle, consider the concrete user of signs. In other words, what Peirce called semiotic and Eco calls semiotics cannot deal with subjectivity. In arguing for this position, Eco appeals for support to the writings of Peirce. One of my objectives in this chapter is to show that, although a general, formal theory of signs necessarily abstracts from the concrete, historical participants in semiosis, such a theory nonetheless yields an array of concepts that are indispensable for an understanding of subjectivity. Another goal is to demonstrate that a faithful interpretation of Peircean semiotics points in exactly the opposite direction of Eco's insistence that the sign-user falls outside the scope of sign-theory.

In the context of this critique, a semiotic account of human subjectivity (and a distinctively Peircean account at that) is outlined.

In Chapter Three ("The Relevance of Peirce's Semiotics to Psychology"), a theme hinted at in the previous chapter is explored more fully; namely, how Peirce himself conceived the relationship between the general theory of signs and the experimental study of the mind. In Chapter Four ("Peirce's Account of the Self"), I trace the stages in the evolution of Peirce's semiotic account of human selfhood; and in the final chapter ("Inwardness and Autonomy"), I investigate the way in which Peirce, within his uncompromisingly semiotic framework, accounts for the inwardness and autonomy characteristic of human agents.

This book draws upon not only Peirce's published writings but also his unpublished manuscripts. Moreover, it does not discuss Peirce in isolation from other figures either in the history of semiotics or the philosophy of the mind but rather compares and contrasts him with such figures. The hope underlying this book is to show that Peirce's study of signs is powerful in a way that has been little appreciated. It provides an important and, I believe, indispensable means to realize more deeply the Socratic ideal of knowing ourselves.