

Introduction to Peircean Semiotics and the Philosophy of Inquiry

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Welcome back to the Peirce Section of *CSS*. We have good news for you. Due to popular demand, this section will be expanded to include more articles. We are very happy to satisfy your requests for more information about Peircean semiotics. The larger section will start with the next issue.

For this issue, we have no articles regarding applications of Peirce's semiotics. Instead, we concentrate on expanding and extending Peirce's theory of semiotics, and on developing an improved understanding of Peirce's work in the area of semiotics and his theory of inquiry.

We are now putting together final plans for a complete section devoted to an analysis of why Peirce thought that semiotics and his theory of inquiry were the same discipline. This will appear in the near future.

1. The Dialogical Sign

This issue starts off with my extension of Peirce's theory of the "*interpretant*", which yields a whole new theory of the dialogic sign. The "*interpretant*" has notoriously been the hardest Peircean concept to unravel and yet it is the very foundation of his theory of semiotics.

I wrestled with the concept of the "*interpretant*" for nearly 30 years until I finally realized that the interpretant must serve two totally different and complementary functions, and that it was the lack of a synthesis/analysis distinction in semiotic theory that made it so hard to understand the "*interpretant*".

It was Bakhtin's insistence, and Peirce's agreement, that every sign is a dialogical sign that pointed me in the right direction with a new theory as a result. A new theory of the dialogical sign—a double sign structure that recaptures all of the explanatory power of the standard theory, the USST-2000 and yet adds the ability to explain dialog.

In the essay, I outline this new theory of sign structure, which I call the “USST-2010”, pointing out the logical flow that makes it work, and analyzing two theories of perception using the new theory.

I close by referring to Bakhtin’s dialogic theory of semiosis as a good test case for the new theory. However, I think that the best test is the ease of understanding of the “*interpretant*” that this theory provides.

2. A Phenomenological Experience

Jeff Carreira describes his development of a better understanding of Peirce’s work by relating his initial experience reading one of Peirce’s essays. He was not a novice in Peirce studies when he happened upon Peirce’s “Design and Chance”, but reading this essay introduced him to a deeper understanding of Peirce’s thinking and to “contact with the world as Peirce saw it”.

Carreira describes phenomenologically his initial encounter with his new found understanding of Peirce’s thought and his discovery that it was based entirely on Peirce’s semeiotic. He then goes on to describe how Peirce is able to use this to question the fundamental categories of reality. Carreira concludes that Peirce’s semeiotic inquiry “gives us a glimpse of how much we take for granted as ‘real’ that, when considered more deeply, turn out to be unquestioned and unproven assumptions”.

In the final analysis of Carreira’s deeper understanding, he concludes that “Peirce identifies two absolutely essential and required characteristics” for answering the question of “What would have to exist in order to make any chance of evolution possible”. The first is spontaneous creation, pure chance, or absolute novelty, depending on one’s own terminology. The second is the ability of the universe of pure chance to form habits.

All of this, including Carreira’s own mind and his ability to experience this deeper feeling and understanding, Carreira takes to be a product of Peirce’s semeiotic.

3. Rhematic Analysis of Instincts

Aaron Massecar develops an improved understanding of Peirce’s concept of “*instinct*” by dividing his analysis of “*instinct*” into two parts. The first part explicates the traditional Peircean concept of “*instinct*”, freeing up the infamous theory/practice divide. He then tests this deeper understanding of “*instinct*” against Peirce’s other writings. In the second part, Massecar carries out a semiotic analysis of this new understanding that shows that the reason we can be right so often in our guesses about nature can be accounted for by developing a better understanding of “*rheme*”, one of Peirce’s semiotic categories formed by his theory of inquiry.

In the terminology introduced by Charles Morris, a rheme is a component of the pragmatic dimension of the sign. Adding Peirce's terminology, then, a rheme is a pragmatic first. We can combine these terminologies because Peirce's categories and Morris's dimensions refer to totally independent aspects of the sign. To complete the pragmatic dimension, Peirce called a pragmatic second, a pheme, and a pragmatic third, a delome^①.

This conclusion leads to a new question. Masecar uses Peirce's own writings to call into question the strict division between reason and instinct that is assumed by most Peirce scholars, and to show that they derive from the same source and exist on a continuum. Masecar suggests that Peirce himself thought that reason and instinct were positioned at the two ends of a continuous spectrum with habit in the middle between the two extremes.

Masecar then distinguishes between "*acting instinct*" and "*guessing instinct*" saying that both concepts rely on rhemes. He notices that neither of these two kinds of instincts can be expressed in propositions because in instincts the understanding is incomplete. This causes him to return to his analysis of rhemes because "a rheme is a proposition with certain parts erased from it"; but that the proposition still functions even without all of the missing parts. "The whole remains while the parts are removed."

He also notes that when those missing pieces are added back, the rheme becomes a pheme, a grammatical sentence when dealing with natural language, or a pragmatic second as noted above. But in Peirce's writings the rheme explains how humans can accurately guess and understand the general elements of nature without the ability to express those elements as propositions—the essence of instincts. Masecar then claims that "Understood in this way, the rheme helps tie Peirce's theory of inquiry in with his semeiotic", because inquiry is the movement from rhemes to phemes, i. e. to full propositions.

Peirce says that we have the ability to see the "objective reason embodied in the laws of nature", and it is this ability that allows us to guess right so much of the time (W 6.70). Masecar claims that this works in the other direction as well and can form instincts. He says "there are two forms of instinct growth here; one that takes place over generations and the other that takes place within one's lifetime. The first is the growth of the community; the second is the growth of the individual".

The growth of the individual takes place thru reason and the development of habits, i. e. the development of phemes. But this growth also takes place in

① Ed. Note: I use the more euphonious word "doleme" for the empirical categorization of a pragmatic third.

another way at the same time thru “the subordination of those habits to larger and larger habits”, i. e. the abstraction of the pHEME to a rHEME. This results in the growth of the community. The slower growth of the community is due to the time required for the abstraction process. This abstraction process is like a form of abduction conducted by the community.

This ability to modify a pattern of behavior consciously relies on rhemes. As Marsecar claims, “Rhemes are the transition point—either a step on the way to becoming a full proposition, the guessing instinct, or a step on the way to becoming an unconscious proposition, the acting instinct.”

This is enough talking about the essays. Now on to the essays themselves.