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Dossier temático «La semiótica de C. S. Peirce en la intersección de información y comunicación»

The Availability of Peirce's Semeiotic: Re-Imagining the Function of Semiosis

La disponibilidad de la semiótica de Peirce: reimaginando la función de la semiosis

A disponibilidade da semiótica de Peirce: reimaginando a função da semiose

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Abstract

Peirce frequently identified his semeiotic (or comprehensive theory of signs) as a theory of *representation* and, in his dissertation (Columbia University, 1966) and often afterwards Joseph Ransdell explicated with unsurpassed depth and subtlety Peirce's theory from this perspective. But, as Ransdell appreciated, Peirce explicitly doubted whether representation was sufficiently broad to encompass the scope of his semeiotic. More than a few times, he proposed *mediation* as possibly a more accurate term than representation. On this occasion, I am proposing *availability* as a way of conceiving – or re-imagining – the function of semiosis, in Peirce's sense. This way of understanding his semeiotic might make the innermost character of his theoretical project – the comprehensive reach of his indefatigable effort to institute a truly general theory of sign-activity – more available than it otherwise would be. That is, it might enable to see more distinctly, more perspicuously, what is hiding in plain sight.

Keywords: Availability; mediation; representation.

Resumen

Peirce identificó frecuentemente su semiótica (o teoría integral de los signos) como una teoría de la representación y, en su disertación (Universidad de Columbia, 1966) y a menudo después, Joseph Ransdell explicó con profundidad y sutileza insuperables la teoría de Peirce desde esta perspectiva. Pero, como apreció Ransdell, Peirce dudaba explícitamente de que la representación fuera lo suficientemente amplia como para abarcar el alcance de su semiótica. Más de una vez propuso mediación como término posiblemente más preciso que

representación. En esta ocasión propongo la disponibilidad como una forma de concebir –o reimaginar– la función de la semiosis, en el sentido de Peirce. Esta forma de entender su semiótica podría hacer que el carácter más interno de su proyecto teórico –el alcance integral de su infatigable esfuerzo por instituir una teoría verdaderamente general de la actividad de los signos– esté más disponible de lo que estaría de otro modo. Es decir, podría permitir ver con mayor claridad y claridad lo que se esconde a simple vista.

Palabras clave: Disponibilidad; mediación; representación.

Resumo

Peirce identificou frequentemente a sua semiótica (ou teoria abrangente dos signos) como uma teoria da representação e, na sua dissertação (Columbia University, 1966) e muitas vezes posteriormente, Joseph Ransdell explicou com profundidade e subtileza insuperáveis a teoria de Peirce a partir desta perspectiva. Mas, como Ransdell percebeu, Peirce duvidava explicitamente de que a representação fosse suficientemente ampla para abranger o âmbito da sua semiótica. Mais do que algumas vezes, ele propôs mediação como um termo possivelmente mais preciso do que representação. Nesta ocasião, proponho a disponibilidade como forma de conceber – ou repensar – a função da semiose, no sentido de Peirce. Esta forma de compreender a sua semiótica pode tornar o carácter mais íntimo do seu projecto teórico – o alcance abrangente do seu esforço infatigável para instituir uma teoria verdadeiramente geral da actividade dos signos – mais disponível do que seria de outra forma. Isto é, pode permitir ver de forma mais distinta, mais perspicaz, o que está escondido à vista de todos.

Palavras-chave: Disponibilidade; mediação; representação.

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Introduction: The Ongoing Transfiguration of Our Happenstance Experience

Communication is far more than the transmission of information and, in turn, information itself is far more than coding and decoding a finite sequence of discrete units (or “atoms”). Of course, communication includes such processes of transmission and, for certain purposes, a science of communication might be possible (however see Nöe 2023). What a purely formal (or mathematical) theory of communication can identify, describe, and (in some fashion) however explain

leaves out as much as it encompasses. There are depths and dimensions of our communicative processes and practices eluding a purely formal, let alone a strictly mathematical, approach. In my judgment, only a comprehensive theory of signs, rooted in a painstaking phenomenology of signification, mediation, and allied processes can begin to do justice to communication. Accordingly, we are extremely fortunate to have, in the writings of C. S. Peirce, available to us nothing less than such an approach to signs. The dialectical relationship between a vast range of phenomena, on the one hand, and an intricately elaborated theory of signs, on the other, entails that the relevant phenomena and the heuristic framework are in dynamic conjunction. While the framework must be continually revised to do fuller and finer justice to these phenomena, the phenomena themselves come to be effectively identified and described only in terms of a systematically elaborated set of formal distinctions (Ransdell 1980).

A condition befalling the full spectrum of human cognition is especially prominent in our attempts to identify the very subject of *this* systematic investigation. “It would, certainly, in one sense be extravagant to say that we can never tell what we are talking about; yet, in another sense, it is quite true” (Peirce CP 3.419). What is the subject of semeiotic? It is instructive to recall that, at various points, Peirce expressed doubts about having properly and precisely delineated this subject (cf. EP 2, 462). One telling instance of this radical doubt is encountered in MS 339 where Peirce reveals his self-dissatisfaction: “All my notions are too narrow. Instead of ‘Sign,’ ought I to say *Medium*?” (MS 339, 1906). We might add: Instead of ‘representation’ (cf. Ransdell 1966), might we not say ‘mediation’? Perhaps even mediation is too narrow. That at least is a possibility I want to explore in this essay. But first let us tarry a moment or two with the phenomenon of communication. A semeiotic such as that envisioned, elaborated, and revised by Peirce must be a phenomenology of semiosis (or sign-activity), but such a phenomenology must eventually give way to an explicitly normative account of sign use. The phenomena put unceasing pressure on the heuristic framework to become more supple and nuanced, while in turn this framework operates to make ever more fully available these phenomena. This is what, above all else, is meant by the *dialectical* relationship between salient phenomena and heuristic framework.

"Of all affairs, communication is," John Dewey (1925), a thoroughgoing naturalist, unabashedly proclaimed, "the most wonderful." He immediately adds: "That things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man, and thereby to themselves; and that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales" (LW 1, 132). In Peircean terms, dyadic processes stand in dramatically contrast to irreducibly triadic ones (Peirce CP 5.473; Fisch 1986, 331, 359). But let's tarry a moment or two longer with Dewey. When communication takes place, "all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision; they are re-adapted to meet the requirements of conversation, whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse term thinking" (LW 1, 132). For our purpose, the point regarding reconsideration and revision is especially salient. As an object of conversation, including that of the self with itself, a natural event becomes potentially indefinitely more than whatever it is directly encountered as. It avails itself of reconsideration and revision, redescription and renarration. Moreover, it is "liberated from local and accidental contexts," not infrequently subjected to "ideal experimentation" (or *Gedankenexperiment*).

Peirce's fallibilism was, like Dewey's, radical. Signs are the means by which we can detect and correct our mistakes (cf. Eco 1976). With their emergence, the possibility of error becomes ineradicable. But with their aid, the identification and overcoming of error also become possible. Every effort of ours to understand anything, perhaps especially our elves and activities, including communicative processes and practices, is shadowed by the possibility of misunderstanding (Nöe). Every engagement in a process of communication is entangled with the possibility, perhaps even the likelihood, of misunderstanding. Every attempt of ours to identify, describe, or explain events or objects within the field of our experience can go awry. The possibility of failure is woven into the very fabric of our thinking, talking, and even, perhaps especially, our most disciplined forms of "*structured* conversation" (Roth, 2023). Such at least is the counsel of pragmatism such as Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey.

John Durham Peters, a contemporary theorist, has written a history of the idea of communication in which the classical pragmatists play a significant role,

individually and jointly (1999). He is endeavoring to rethink in a radical way just what communication is. I am encouraged and indeed inspired by his efforts, though on this occasion I will for the most part not directly engage his work. At the conclusion of this essay, however, I *will* turn to how he uses Peirce to advance his own understanding of communication. But the focus of this essay is on Peirce's earlier efforts to understand sign-activity and, thereby, to provide us with the resources for illuminating the forms of sign-exchange on display in the efforts of rational agents to communicate with one another. In my effort, on this occasion, to understand his semeiotic (or comprehensive theory of signs), I want to shift the focus from representation and mediation to *availability*. This should not be taken as a rejection of the idea of either representation or mediation, though my shift in focus *to* availability is motivated by misgivings regarding certain forms of representationalism (cf. Rorty 1982) and certain occlusions of immediacy. Peirce was justified in rejecting the distinctive modern idea of 'idea', the conception of our ideas as inner or private representations allegedly possessing priority over out or public signs. Moreover, he was justified in insisting the acknowledgment of firstness, that is, immediacy, even with respect to inquiry, knowledge, and communication. The justified rejection of *cognitive* or epistemic immediacy (there is no immediate or intuitive knowledge) does not license the rejection of *qualitative* immediacy (cf. Bernstein 1967, 92). Inquiry, knowledge, and communication are instances of irreducible thirdness, but there is a firstness of thirdness no less than both a secondness and thirdness of thirdness (to be explained and illustrated later). In addition, experience is itself a phenomenon in which secondness is predominant (see Bernstein 1971, also 2010, especially Chapter 6), even if experience is an avenue through which thirdness – countless intimations of at least an inchoate intelligibility – pours in upon us (CP 5.157; also, in EP 2, 207, 211).

Experience as it just happens to take place is, in a sense, experience in its most basic form. Peirce stresses that, as far as experience goes, the quality of secondness is predominant (Bernstein 1971, 180): experience is, above all else, what befalls us willy-nilly, exerting a *majeure force*, unbidden and unforeseeable (see, however, EP 2, 370). It is "the influence of the world of fact" upon one's consciousness and mind. But the phenomenon of experience is hardly devoid of

either qualitative immediacy or boundless mediation, providing a basis for a felt sense of evolving intelligibility.

There is accordingly more to human experience than happenstance experience. To some extent, at least in some instances, experience approximates being a work of art. John Dewey's way of highlighting this aspect of experience deserves to be recalled here: "It all comes to experience personally conducted and personally consummated" (MW 3, 94). That is, while experience befalls us, that which befalls us with a force over which we have very limited control can nonetheless be intelligently anticipated and even aesthetically shaped.[1]

The history of experience, at the level of both the individual or a community, holds within itself the possibility of the transfiguration of that history. For example, the conception of experience as a dialogue between self and world not only reframes our understanding of this process but also transfigures how we comport ourselves toward otherness. Specifically, such an understanding virtually precludes the self-derogation entailed by taking ourselves to be, at bottom, a brute force caught up in the meaningless juxtapositions of countervailing forces. Signs are indeed "the only things with which a human being can, without derogation, consent to have a transaction, being a sign himself" (CP 6.344).

The growth of symbols (cf. Short 2007; also, 1988) goes some distance toward entailing the transformation of the possibilities of our encounters with, say, nature, art, or history and, in turn, such a transformation itself makes possible transfigurations of the qualities, force, and intelligibility of experience. Without question, human experience is always to some extent *happenstance* experience, the rough-and-tumble of what just happens to befall us. Our symbolic and indeed *symbolific* (see Langer 1951, 51) intelligence however ensures that our experience is hardly ever "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." In the case of an animal endowed with memory and foresight, experience is a series of intimations, ceaseless intimations of a largely uncharted intelligibility.

Such an intelligence is not utterly imprisoned in an *Umwelt*. It can, in principle, inhabit nothing less than *the* world, even if the narrow bounds of practical experience, in its given actuality at any historical moment (CP 5.536),[2] tends to confine this intelligence to *a* limited world. The boundaries of our world are

however not permanently fixed. They extend to the reach of conceivability. Put otherwise, they extend to what, by means of signs, can be made *available* to our minds. It is instructive to recall here Peirce's definition of the *phaneron*, what in his phaneroscopy corresponds to a phenomenon in traditional phenomenology: "the collective total of all that is in any way or in any sense present to the mind" (CP 1.284). His formulation is almost certainly minutely precise: he does not say *in* the mind but "present to the mind." (cf. CP 8.16; also, in EP 1, 91). Moreover, presence implies co-presence: in being present to the mind, the mind is in its way own manner present to the *phaneron.* To some degree, however slight, it stands to the mind as an other and, paradoxically, it does so even in the case of figments. These considerations prompt me to explore a possibility not previously identified.

I have an unusual suggestion to make. Rather than being principally a theory of representation or even of mediation (Parmentier, 1985, 23), I would like to suggest that Peirce's semeiotic is a theory of *availability*. What signs *do* is make what is other than themselves available. What prompts me to make this suggestion is, in part, that availability as I understand it is the more general term and, in part, that it can be conceived in such a way as to capture in an illuminating manner what is distinctive in both representation and mediation.

To take the most obvious cases, signs can make elsewhere (somewhere else) available in the here and now, the past available to the present (cf. Kenny 1989), the merely imaginable can be actually imagined (what is not actual available, sometimes to the point of having an importance equal to, or even greater than, present actuality). What is *not* here or what *no* longer exists are unquestionably available to us and they are available to us by virtue of the agency of signs (see Peirce). Signs can *mediate* between past and present in such a way as to make the past present to and in the present. They can also mediate between a star light years away and some present locale in such a way that that unimaginably remote object can attain, in the here and now, the status of an object, not least of all an object into which various forms of investigation become possible. In a sense, availability is at least a rough synonym for presentation or presencing (cf. Ransdell 1966): To make available is to present in some manner and measure some object (though part of the paradoxical nature of signs as instruments of availability is that the

object rendered available by signs need not be an object and, arguably in most instances, is not an object, but rather one or another form of process).

As mysterious as this might make the *process* of semiosis itself sound, there are incontrovertible experiential warrants for espousing this claim (signs are, in their utmost generality, instruments of availability). What is presenced or made present by signs carries, insofar as it is minimally recognizable, echoes of what has been encountered or imagined before. In brief, it cannot avoid being a representation. There is no knowledge without acknowledgment (Wittgenstein 1958), no presentation without hints or traces of representation (cf. Bergman 2007), no cognition, as Plato insisted, without at least a background of recognition.

Signs make what is formally other than themselves available, from some angle and thus in some respect (they are inescapably aspectual – they make this or that aspect or constellation of aspects available to those who possess merely the lowest grade of conceptual clarity, that of tacit familiarity (Colapietro 2023). Two apparent problems are readily handled. First, some signs are of course self-referential or self-indicative. The adjective *formally* was inserted to handle this facet of signs: The object of a self-indicative sign is formally distinct from that sign, while being substantially or materially identical with itself. Second, an object might be "immediately" or, more precisely, directly available to us and nonetheless benefit from being made available to us by some sign. For example, the signs used to highlight certain features of a painting, exhibited directly before us, can make that painting more fully or finely available to us. We can imagine a scene in which the painting is located somewhere else, and the verbal description is made for the very purpose of rendering present what is absent. In the case highlighted before, however, the available is rendered more available. The failure to perceive what we are directly engaged in perceiving is a commonplace. Perception is always to some degree an achievement. The visual signs of a directly perceived object or event are a complex form of semiosis in which iconic, indexical, and symbolic functions are fused into a dynamic unity, serving one or more immanent purposes (cf. Nöe 2023). There is often a need or desire to make the manifestly available more *perspicuously* present. Art in its way and philosophy in its attempt to address this need or desire (again, cf. Nöe 2023).

The process of semiosis however is more complex than anything suggested so far. Not only do signs render what is other than themselves available to *us*, but *we* can seize scenes of such availability to make ourselves available to what is disclosed by signs. Such signs are, at their best, playgrounds (cf. Lear 2022, pp. 54-56), spaces in which we can play with possibilities beyond anything yet conjured. The seemingly tyrannical force of brute secondness does not preclude either the possibility of playfulness nor playing with possibility (Colapietro 2023). In *availing* ourselves of signs and consequently of what they almost magically make available to us, we are availing *ourselves* of their power to transform and transfigure our lives and indeed our forms of life. Put otherwise, *we* are made available to the gentle intimations of their iconicity, the brute force of their indexicality, and the suasive *power* of their symbolicity (Peirce). In being made available in these ways, we are rendered susceptible to transformation. The operation or exercise of our habits is at risk of being arrested, thus, the fluency of our agency is in danger of being arrested – and the disconcerting experience of actual doubt can force us to realize that we do not know what we are doing (that we no longer know our way around (Wittgenstein 1958; Nöe, 2023)).

Accordingly, availability is inextricably tied to vulnerability. We are exposed to a greater range of hazards than we otherwise would be – humans as symbol-creating animals (as agents possessing, in Langer's (1951) apt term, *symbolific* minds) can fail in indefinitely more ways than animals lacking such resources). At the same time, we can anticipate and guard ourselves against otherwise unimaginable dangers. Part of the paradox of our symbolific minds is that they are ever operating factories for constructing fantastic dangers but no less indispensable means for confronting our most realistically ground fears.

"Peirce's argument," as John Durham Peters (1999) suggests,

> is not only a critique of Cartesian high-handedness, or a semiotic animism, that ascribes objective reality to meanings, but also an effort to invite us to join the beloved community, one that includes all forms of intelligence as our partners in some way, at least in some future horizon. (1999, 258)

As "a sentimental conservative," Peirce is unlikely to have been embarrassed by such an interpretation of the invitation at the heart of his semeiotic. Nothing less than an infinite community of companionable antagonists is needed.

The forms of intelligibility presently transcending even our minimal appreciation or awareness are, in their way, also partners in the ongoing, open-ended task of making sense of ourselves and our world. The *forms of intelligence* with which we can, in principle, communicate and the *forms of intelligibility* beyond the narrow scope of contemporary comprehension with which we can become familiar are, in their different ways, our partners – our conspirators (breath). One critical shape of the secondness of thirdness is disclosed in the *fact* that there are forms of intelligibility *other than* anything yet comprehended and these forms, precisely in their otherness, expose the limits of our understanding, to date. A no less critical shape of the thirdness of thirdness is intimated at in the possibility of communicating with alien forms of intelligent life (e.g., the distributed intelligence of an octopus, with whom a diver becomes entangled in a complex and mysterious give-and-take of signs). In such an instance, it is not only the case of "life answering life" (William James, 1979 (1997), p. 149) but also one of intelligence addressing intelligence, albeit intelligence of one form addressing that of a radically different form. The sign-exchange between human and mollusca makes the intelligence of the one *available* to the other, and presumably, also that of the octopus in its natural habitat available to the intelligence of a human sign-user.

My hope is, in presenting Peirce's semeiotic as a theory of availability, I have made it available in ways it otherwise would not have been. The *reflexivity* in evidence in this expression of my hope is integral to the kind of theory which Peirce was inaugurating and developing. Conceived as a theory of representation (hardly an erroneous or sterile approach to his semeiotic), Peirce's theory of semiosis would be incomplete if it did not provide the resources for representing itself as a theory of representation. Analogously, cast as an account of mediation (again, hardly a misguided or wrong-head approach), Peirce's semiotic would be deficient, if not fatally flawed, if it did not mediate between itself and other accounts of mediation in such a way as to *show*, in depth and detail, its advantages over those other accounts of mediation. Moreover, and more simply, his account of mediation would have to *account for itself* in the terms laid out in the theory. So, too, my construal of Peirce's semeiotic as a theory of availability drives

toward being self-luminous, that is, toward making itself perspicuously available precisely as a theory of availability.

It is however best to turn back, at the end of our exploration, to the commonplace examples of sign uses by which I have been inspired to offer my suggestion. Signs are the means by which the absent can be made present, *there* can in some fashion be rendered *here*, ineffability named, silence sounded, even the contradictory and meaningless be given an intelligible meaning. To take but one such example, the *no* longer and the *not* yet can become constitutive features of the ever fleeting now (Peirce) or perhaps even be recognized as such features (the *now* being conceived to incorporate within itself the *no longer* and the *not yet*). This cannot be gainsaid. Such a commonplace carries far more momentous and profound implications than we habitually appreciate.

Part of C. S. Peirce's genius was to make available to us, in perspicuous form, some of the more important the presuppositions and implications of our commonplace utterances, competencies, and achievements, including the capacity of reality to avail itself to us through the agency of signs. The whole of my endeavor, on this occasion, has been to make Peirce's own endeavor available, *in this light*. The reflexive power of his comprehensive semeiotic is indeed one of its defining features. Only a theory of signs having the resources of making itself available would be sufficiently general and fecund for a theorist such as Peirce.

Fundamental questions regarding a Peircean approach to our understanding of signs or, more precisely, *semiosis* (sign-processes, practices, and not least of all improvisations) animate this inquiry (Fisch 1986; Short 2007). At bottom, I am animated on this occasion above all by the question, What is the *object* of such a theory or "doctrine" (Deely 1982)? My thesis is that mediation rather than representation is possibly a more accurate term by which to identify this object. In proposing this, it would be a mistake to take me to be an anti-representationalist (Nöth 2003; Santaella 2003). In his doctoral dissertation, Joseph Ransdell (1966) compellingly argued that Peirce's theory of signs *is* a theory of representation and, ever afterwards, he attempted to draw out the most important implications of this bold claim. He made clear that this made Peirce's theory of representation nothing less than a theory of communication (Ransdell 1966) and, beyond this, nothing

less than a normative account of communicative rationality (or optimally dialogic reason (Bernstein 2010)). Following the lead of C. S. Peirce, Ransdell (2000) was engaged in the process of reconstructing – radically re-imagining – logic ("Peirce and the Socratic Tradition"). Logic for Ransdell not less than for Peirce is a *normative* discipline in which the identification of the ideals, norms, and procedures of the responsible agents engaged in objective inquiry defines the very discipline of logic, radically re-imagined. So understood, logic is not reducible to, though it is inclusive of, a formal discipline preoccupied with symbolic operations, enhanced by explicit codifications, formalizations, and simply stipulations. It is however important to recall that Peirce stressed he was in, but not of, the world of purely formal (or symbolic) logic. There was more – *far* more – to his logic than the formalization of the processes of inference and whatever serves the task of such formalization. Peirce was arguably even more of a contextualist than he was a formalist, though he was enough of a formalist to be tempted to formalize the kinds of context in which inference plays a role but, in turn, to contextualize our practices of formalization. On the one side, he respects, even apart from formalization, the irreducible heterogeneity of our signifying practices (the fundamentally different "language-games" we play). For example, the practices of religious worship are irreducibly different from those of experimental inquiry and those of moral deliberation are no less different from with those of religious worship or experimental inquiry. The utterance in one context that "God is love" functions differently from the utterance in another context that "Water is H_2O" (cf. Putnam 1981, 23-24) and the illocutionary force of an utterance (Austin 1962) such as "One *ought* to take into account the interests of others, not only for purely strategic reasons pertaining to personal welfare, narrowly conceived, but because those interests merit one's attention *in their own right*, apart from how they bear on one's own interests," functions different from the utterance of "God is love" in context of religious worship and that of "Water is H_2O" in context of scientific investigation. What might be easily missed is that Peirce was not a champion of scientism as much as he was a tireless defender of, and brilliant inquirer into, the intricacies and, of no less significance, the *spirit* of scientific investigation (CP 6.430). It is extremely hard to articulate this point in a sufficiently nuanced and accurate manner. On the one hand, he conceives religious

worship to be an experiential process (the emphasis has to fall on both terms – an *experiential* process and an experiential *process*). On the other, he takes experimental inquiry to be nothing less than a paradigmatic instance of religious investigation, though many scientists might interpret their activity in this light. Religious worship turns out to be a distinctive from of religious query (Buchler 1961), while experimental inquiry is, in Peirce's judgment, following the orientation of his father Benjamin Peirce, ultimately best envisaged as a distinctive form of religious worship. Even so, neither is religion reducible to science nor science to religion. If scientific investigation can be conceived as a distinctive form of religious worship, this does not collapse the distinction between the religious and the scientific. The experiential and experimental character of each practice and discourse are akin but far from identical (cf. Smith 1995). The religious or spiritual dimension of experimental inquiries does not preclude them from being secular undertakings of a distinctively *modern* cast, only intimates the possibility of them being more than their militantly practitioners would grant (cf. Rorty 1982). Peirce was incomparable in terms of an interior understanding of both science as an experimental practice and religion as an experiential affair (CP 6.433), on the one hand, and a philosophical sensitivity to the irreducible differences among different human practices (say, experimental inquiry and religious worship), hence, different "language-games" or heterogenous discourses, on the other. Kinship and difference, categoreal affinities and specific differentiations …

Religious discourse is not reducible to experimental discourse: religious discourse is, however deeply experiential it is, something other than scientific investigation, strictly conceived, and the illocutionary features of religious utterances are, for the most part, different from those of strictly scientific statements (cf. Dewey 1925).

To repeat, Ransdell took Peirce's theory of signs or semiosis to be an account of semiosis or sign-activity (again, Fisch 1986; Short 2007). On this occasion, I have no desire to contest this thesis or indeed other claims closely allied to this thesis (e.g., a normative account of our *communicative* practices or of our putatively rational endeavors). But at this moment I do want to explore a possibility proposed by Richard Parmentier (1985) and others – Peirce's semeiotic is

principally an exploration of *mediation* – and the topic (the *topos*) of mediation is hardly opposed to representation.

This essay is more than anything else a meditation on mediation, an exploration of *betweenness* (Peirce CP 5.104; Buber 1965). It is undertaken in light of Peirce's reflections on this topic and, while I endeavor to be faithful to both the spirit and letter of Peirce's texts, I am not offering an explication of any specific text or even an overview of the general import of his monumental contributions. Rather I am striving *to think with* him, hence *against* him and *beyond* him (cf. Stengers 2011), with an acute awareness that I stand little chance of going beyond him, of either substantively or methodologically advancing beyond what he has argued. But the challenge of being a Peircean is that of being a co-inquirer, not a. disciple, a member of a community of inquirers called upon to push beyond the conclusions, insights, distinctions, frameworks, and arguments of figures such as Peirce's own his principal exemplars (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Scotus, Kant, Hegel, Whewell, and Benjamin Peirce). The paradox of being a Peircean is that we cannot catch up to him without endeavoring to go beyond him, while the presumption to go beyond him needs to be tempered by the appreciation that our efforts in this regard are almost certainly futile. Catching up to Peirce and going beyond him are of a piece, while accepting the challenge of decisively moving beyond him *and* the virtual inevitability of falling short in this aspiration is central to the creative tension at the heart of a critical engagement with Peirce's project.

Peirce was a radical experimentalist. This implies that he was never entirely satisfied with most, perhaps any, of his formulations, also to some degree, however slight, dubious about the very subject of his inquiry.

He never *finally* settled on a terminology, names for his categories, or a self-understanding of his all-encompassing theory of sign-activity or -process, thought his thought decisively drifted toward preferred terms, settled names for his three categories, and a nuanced self-articulation of his all-inclusive study of semiosis. This emboldens me to suggest the possibility that *mediation* might be the most accurate identification of the proper object of sign theory. Peirce's semeiotic is an account of mediation and, as such, is an account of representation and communication *and* much else.

Conclusion

Stanley Cavell (1969/2015) wrote a famous essay entitled “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy.” A readily accessible and widely discussed text or body of writings might nonetheless be unavailable in ways difficult to discern and even identify. A philosopher such as Wittgenstein is condemned to be misunderstood if we approach his writings wedded to traditional forms of philosophical interpretation. The very point of his endeavor was to deconstruct these forms of understanding.

Something analogous can (must?) be said of Peirce. In his case, however, the issue of availability is complicated by the fact that his manuscripts are still not fully available to us, if they ever become so. Even if they were available, his thought almost certainly would still elude us, to a degree hard to appreciate, impossible to measure. No less than Wittgenstein, though in a very different way, Peirce was committed to the reform of philosophy, also to the point perhaps where it would be unclear whether the rupture entailed by the success of his efforts would make his “philosophy” for the most part “one of the heirs of the subject which used to be called ‘philosophy’” (Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 1958, p. 28).

In the essay I have tried to think *with* Peirce (cf. Stengers’ (2011) efforts to think with Whitehead). While the tension at the heart of his semeiotic – his drive to fashion a truly comprehensive theory of signs, though one primarily adaptable to the exacting demands of providing resources for a normative theory of objective inquiry – can work to compromise the generality of his semeiotic, his thoroughgoing fallibilism (inseparable from his radical experimentalism) tends go some distance toward reclaiming that generality. Without reducing other spheres of human endeavor to experimental inquiry in a strict or narrow sense, Peirce does make experimental intelligence in its irreducibly different forms the central figure in a historical drama, still in process of unfolding.

Semiosis is the process by which whatever is formally other than such intelligence can be made *available* to this intelligence, for the sake of staging confrontations and encounters with the salient phenomena in these diverse spheres. This way of re-imagining Peirce’s semeiotic might make *it* available in ways worthy of the

community of inquirers, ones who are accustomed to conceiving semiosis in terms of representation or mediation. Peirce once suggested, “any analogy, however fanciful, which serves to focus attention upon matters which otherwise might escape observation is valuable” (CP 3.470). The same might be claimed regarding even a seemingly fanciful redescription of the function of semiosis. This is, at least, my animating hope in this hermeneutic and indeed heuristic experiment, an endeavor in which I am trying to join Peirce’s own herculean efforts as a radical experimentalist. Peirce’s incredible “peirce-everence” and “peirce-sistence” (Brent 1998, 16) are nowhere quietly expressed than in these simple words: “I try again” (MS 339).[3] And we most honor him in the spirit of his efforts when we take up anew his project and try again. In this essay, I have tried to do nothing more – but also nothing less – than to re-imagine that to which so much of his life was devoted, the effort “to institute a cooperative *coenoscopic*[4] attack upon the problems of the nature, properties, and varieties of Signs,” (EP2, 462) in the spirit of experimental science. In doing so, my hope is to have made more available than otherwise would be the case what is hidden in plain sight.

Arguably, the availability of Peirce’s thought, perhaps especially his semeiotic, is a more delicate and difficult affair than is generally appreciated. Peirce once observed how a teacher of mathematics thinks he completely understands a proof or piece of reasoning, “owing to long familiarity, (but) he has lost that sense of coming up against an invisible barrier that the boy (his student) feels” (CP 1.657). Familiarity is indeed more likely to breed credulity than contempt (Dewey MW 10, 23). We are ever exposed to the possibility of some especially salient feature of an extremely familiar phenomenon. Those features which elude our “own fagged understanding on account of their very obviousness” (EP 2, 462) are, by definition, unknown, but fanciful analogies and unusual formulations might provide hints about what we have, to this point, neglected entirely or failed to accord proper significance.

Being, including the being of signs, might very well be defined as “that which manifests itself, that is (,) that which produces effects” (CP 2.116), but we miss, to a startling degree, what stares us in the face (see, e.g., EP 2, 147), what *is* all too glaringly manifest.

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Notes

[1] Patricia Hampl insists, “we do not simply have experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something – make something – with it. A story, we sense, is the only possible habitation for the burden of our witnessing” (2000, 18). Whether or not it is specifically a narrative, the burden – and blessing –of our occasions of witnessing almost always call for an aesthetically shaped articulation.

[2] It is crucial to draw a distinction between our actual practical experience and our *possible* practical experience (see, e.g., CP 5.402n2).

[3] “Peirce’s philosophy is,” Isabell Stearns suggests, “above all a philosophy of the incomplete, of growth, and of development. Every statement of it is avowedly fallible, and corrigible in light of further discovery. On its own terms we can expect no final revelation of the truth. Its greatness lies in the fact that. It illuminates the ground in our experience for our rational questioning.” A such, it Is “able again and again to transcend its own limited results” (1952, 208).

[4] Deriving terms coined by Jeremy Bentham (see, e.g., CP 1.2411-42), Peirce distinguished *idioscopic* and *coenosopic* disciplines. Philosophical inquiry was in his judgment a coenoscopic investigation, that is, observations and experiments falling within the scope of our everyday experience. The business of philosophy is “to find out all that can be found out from those universal experiences which confront every man (or woman) in every waking hour of his (or her) life” (CP 1.246). The results of such an inquiry “must necessarily have application in every other science” (ibid.), including the special (or idioscopic) sciences (i.e., those disciplines “depending on special observation, which travel or other exploration, or some assistance to the senses, either instrumental (as in the case of microscopes or telescopes) or given by training, together with unusual diligence has put within the power of its students” (CP 1.242) or practitioners.

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The editor responsible for the publication of this article is Fernando Andacht.

Contribution's note

I am solely responsible for this essay.

Data availability note

Data for this article is not available.