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### **C. S. Peirce on Interpretation and Collateral Experience**

Over the years, the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce has come to mean widely different things to different people. In fact, it would be difficult to find another relatively recent philosopher who has attracted such a motley collection of friends and foes as Peirce. Pragmatists of various stripes have seen him as a worthy pioneer or a questionable expounder of outmoded ideas. Parts of his philosophy have been acceptable to logical positivists, others to poststructuralists; but his philosophical corpus has also been dismissed as too fragmentary and internally incoherent to serve as anything but a collection of disconnected insights.

At the same time, recent work by more specialised investigators of Peirce's thought has revealed that his philosophy may be more cohesive than has been claimed (see, e.g., Savan 1983; Hausman 1993; Parker 1998). Ever since Peirce's writings were rescued from philosophical oblivion about 70 years ago, a debate concerning the character and consistency of his corpus has flourished.<sup>1</sup> The fluctuations between extreme poles of interpretation in earlier readings of Peirce can at least partly be explained by the fact that his philosophy was rarely taken on its own terms. In particular, his peculiar *semiotic* approach was for a long time ignored or reduced to a relatively insignificant role in the explications of his philosophy, rather than being seen as a possible integrating framework for the understanding of his thought. While there is still no consensus regarding the precise character and contemporary relevance of Peirce's 'semiotic turn', the tendency is clear: Peirce's sign-theoretical writings are nowadays often assigned a central place in the expositions.

Although my general framework is Peirce's *semeiotic*,<sup>2</sup> and I believe that the semiotic approach is the most promising way to get to grips with his thought, I will nevertheless identify certain tensions in Peirce's sign-theoretical output in this paper. I intend to examine Peirce's claim that collateral experience of objects is a prerequisite for our grasp of significant relations, and how this affects his view of

the omnipresence of interpretation in cognition. This is by no means a completely ignored issue in Peirce studies, but one which nonetheless would merit more careful attention. Namely, the question of the role of collateral factors in our grasp of sign relations is one which bears on several crucial issues in Peirce studies, such as the character of Peirce's realism and its relation to his idealistic tendencies, and on the central semiotic and pragmatic issue of the possible limits of interpretation. Moreover, the problem of collateral experience is one that ought to be of some interest outside of Peirce scholarship, as it can be related to such issues as the context-dependence of speech acts and the relevance of a shared background for communication. I will not pursue possible connections between Peirce's ideas and those of other philosophers in this paper, though.

The primary question that I will try to answer is *What is Peirce's notion of collateral experience, and how does it relate to his account of interpretation?* However, before we turn to this issue, it is necessary to make a couple of preparatory surveys. I will first give a rough sketch of Peirce's semiotic approach, and its two main phases, and then note some problems associated with his general account of interpretation. The main topic, the collateral factors involved in the interpretation of signs, will be addressed in the third section. I will conclude the paper with a couple of reflections on Peirce's ambiguous use of the concept 'experience', and will offer some indications of how the identified tensions may be reduced.

### **From a Semiotic Point of View**

Peirce considers the question of collateral experience primarily in discussions of a certain kind of sign use, namely the functioning of signs in communicational interaction. The issue is especially likely to come up when the office of certain signs as identifiers of the subject-matter of speech acts is being explored. From this one might easily be led to conclude that the proper frame of reference for the topic is the philosophy of language, in one of its contemporary senses. This conclusion is perhaps not completely erroneous; but it is still somewhat misleading. A strictly linguistic understanding of Peirce's 'sign' and related concepts will quickly be seen to be untenable, or else his position will almost certainly appear unintelligible. According to Peirce, the sphere of signs is not exhausted by linguistic signs; nor does Peirce think (as many later semioticians have thought) that all signs should be

analysed using the concepts and methods of linguistics. While Peirce paid more attention to natural languages and other sign-systems than most of his predecessors, he did not make a full-scale 'linguistic turn' in the 20<sup>th</sup> century sense.<sup>3</sup>

If we ought not read Peirce as a philosopher of language, then it is reasonable to ask in what kind of a frame of understanding Peirce's discussions of signs actually operate? As has already been indicated, Peirce embraces something that could be dubbed a 'semiotic point of view' – that is, a philosophical perspective that stresses the relevance of signs and sign-actions in science, cognition, perception, and in almost any domain imaginable. Although it is not possible to explicate this approach in any detail here, some general remarks are in order, as they set the scene for the more specific problems to be discussed later.

First of all, we may note that Peirce's preoccupation with semiotic issues is something that covers most of his philosophical career. Joseph Ransdell (1977, p. 158) has claimed that as much as 90 % of Peirce's production is *directly* concerned with semiotic matters. This seems to be an exaggeration, unless we understand 'semiotic' in a very wide sense that would render almost any philosophy, no matter of what stripe, semiotic. Furthermore, Peirce's writings on explicitly sign-theoretical issues do not form a continuous and uninterrupted whole; in fact, there are at least two quite clearly separate semiotic periods in his philosophy, an early phase (c. 1862-1873) and a later one (beginning around the year 1885 and lasting till Peirce's death in 1914) (cf. Bergman, forthcoming). It is also worth noting that Peirce's semiotic outlook reaches something akin to maturity quite late; it is only by taking his late semeiotic as starting-point that a plausible semiotic reading of his philosophy can be achieved.

Nonetheless, there is much that is of interest in Peirce's early sign-theoretical writings for the understanding of his outlook, and its subsequent problems and developments. In one of his earliest attempts to lay down some general semiotic principles, the unfinished and patchy essay "Logic of the Sciences" (1865), Peirce considers the question of the content or reference of representations. The argument runs as follows:

Whatever is immediately present to us, will be instances of *what is*. These instances, have then two characters

- 1 They are representations
- and 2 They are addressed to *us*

That they are addressed to *us*, is only the limitation of our selection, and therefore must be abstracted from. That they are representations, arises from their being *taken* as instances. They are not merely representations of instances, but are representations *as* instances. Hence, we presume that *whatever is* is a representation. This is confirmed by an indirect form of argument. If there were something which were not a representation it would not be represented, for an object represented is a representation of the same object in itself. But the supposition of anything unrepresented, is self-contradictory since that which is supposed is thereby represented. Hence *all is representative*. (W 1:324.)<sup>4</sup>

In its admittedly fragmentary form (and taken out of its broadly Kantian context), this argument may seem weak and implausible. However, the passage constitutes an important first statement of Peirce's early, radical semiotic point of view. Namely, it seems to involve the claim that we cannot have any contact with the objects (or references) of representation, except through the mediation of representations. Furthermore, Peirce states that an analysis of such objects will show that they are themselves of a representative character. Therefore he draws the bold conclusion that representations form the true fabric of reality. If we add the fact that 'representation' is a synonym for what Peirce later designates 'sign' to this picture, then we can see how the passage quoted indicates a strong and controversial philosophical programme.

Arguments pointing in the same direction can be found in the more carefully argued, but only slightly less far-reaching, anti-Cartesian (and partly anti-Kantian) position Peirce presents a couple of years later in a series of articles in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. In his discussion of the cognitive capacities of human beings, Peirce makes four famous denials:

1. We have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts.
2. We have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions.
3. We have no power of thinking without signs.

4. We have no conception of the absolutely incognizable. (EP 1:30. [1868].)

These assertions, taken together, form the core of Peirce's theory of cognition. It is a quite subtle and complex position, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note its semiotic implications. Namely, the content of the four denials can be further condensed into the pregnant claim that *all cognition and knowledge is by means of signs*.<sup>5</sup> By denying that human beings have special capacities of introspection and intuition, as well as holding that the 'thing-in-itself' (the *incognisable*) is a meaningless term, Peirce in effect paves the way for a view of mind as an inferential chain of signs. Consequently, what Peirce is saying is that human beings, as cognising creatures, are born into a world full of semiotic (or cognitive) processes; attempts to find a firm, non-representational foundation in the form of some kind of first cognition, immediately available self, or primary object will not be successful. They can, obviously, be considered in thought experiments, but closer inspection will reveal that they are, as such, empty of content.

The view sketched here adds up to a kind of semiotic idealism; the only meaningful things, with which human beings can be in contact, are thought-signs, which produce or determine other thought-signs, without end in sight. The view of *semiosis*<sup>6</sup> presented, then, is that of an endless flow of thoughts; the static 'ideas' of traditional idealism have been replaced by dynamic signs. Peirce's position retains the distinctive idealistic focus on thought, but does not ground meaning in plain ideational content. However, Peirce is even further distanced from traditional empiricism and its attempts to find a basis for knowledge in elementary experiences. Not surprisingly, Peirce declares that there is no such thing as an absolute empirical datum; an experience, no matter how simple, is always a sign rendered comprehensible by its position in a cognitive flow. There is no pure experience of something *as black*, because blackness is something that is associated with a thing in understanding; and such an attribution is a complex semiotic act, performed mostly without control, but always against the setting of a wider semiotic background.

According to this outline of the early semiotic stance, Peirce seems to be a thorough anti-foundationalist. However, it should be noted that he does not think that sign processes are blind or without direction; rather, he emphasises that it is through signs that we learn that there is such a thing as *reality*. This is discovered by *error*, i.e. when our signs fail us, when we are mistaken or surprised (see EP 1:52

[1868]). Still, this does not lead to the conclusion that knowledge can be secured by a simple, unmediated contact with the objects of reality. Instead, Peirce opts for a social and future-oriented view of reality: the 'real' is the ideal end-result of information and reasoning, and it can only be approached in a communal setting, such as the community of inquirers. The claim is stronger than the mere statement that reality somehow determines our thought; the upshot of Peirce's analysis is that the conception of reality "essentially involves the notion of COMMUNITY, without definite limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge" (ibid.). In other words, any reference to 'reality' here and now involves a virtual reference to the findings of future inquirers. In this sense, 'reality' is an ideal and normative concept.

Peirce's quasi-idealistic stance leaves many questions unanswered – at least in the simplified and streamlined form it has been presented here. Peirce seems to have felt somewhat uneasy about some of the logical consequences of his position, although he never explicitly abandons the early semiotic standpoint. Instead he moves in quite different directions in the years that follow, occupying himself with the logic of relations and questions related to the philosophy of science and pragmatism, writing little, if anything, on the theory of signs. However, it should be noted that the earlier semeiotic serves as a kind of background of Peirce's pragmatistic writings of the 1870s; some of the most controversial aspects of pragmatism, such as its emphasis on long-run opinion and the so-called consensus theory of truth and reality, can be directly traced back to Peirce's early semiotic position.

When Peirce turns anew to explicitly semiotic questions around the year 1885, much has changed. Equipped with a new logical outlook, and a stronger belief in realism, Peirce begins to emphasise the relevance of other kinds of signs besides thought-signs, and attempts to break the hermetic tendency of his earlier theory of signs by calling attention to the role of non-semiotic experience as a forceful factor in semiosis. Also, Peirce begins to move away from the rather abstract Kantian setting of his first semiotic period, and eventually claims that philosophical analysis should set out from familiar communicational situations, i.e., sign use in a common dialogical setting, such as a conversation (see CP 8.112 [c. 1900]) – a move that goes hand in hand with his fresh understanding of the intimate connections between semeiotic, pragmatism, and common-sense philosophy. This is not to say that Peirce's semeiotic turns into some kind of ordinary language philosophy; he in fact underlines that one of his aims is to move beyond the ordinary understanding of

what signs are (see EP 2:388 f. [1906]; EP 2:402 f. [1907]). That is, Peirce does not just want to give an account of how the word 'sign' is *de facto* used, although he now takes it to be an acceptable starting-point for analysis. Peirce still wants to draw attention to the semiotic character of phenomena that are not usually viewed as signs; but he is now more sensitive to the varieties and complexities of significant relations. One respect in which Peirce's later approach actually calls for an expansion of the sphere of semeiotic is that the generalised concept of sign (sometimes called *representamen* to mark the distinction) is no longer exclusively associated with cognition (see, e.g., CP 2.242 [1903]).<sup>7</sup>

### The Ubiquity of Interpretation

One thing that is carried over from the early semeiotic of the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* series to the later approach is the opinion that signs are not static entities. Although Peirce is fond of schematic analyses of the general sign relation and of quite intricate accounts of sign classification, he continues to affirm the active character of signs. The action of signs is characterised as an interpretational or translational process, in which the sign stands for an *object* to an *interpretant*.

Setting the object-pole of the relation aside for the moment, we may note that the interpretant seems to be a genuinely Peircean concept, although it has been suggested that certain late scholastic philosophers anticipated this discovery (see, e.g., Deely 1986). The interpretant should not be confused with an interpreter; Peirce is adamant on this point, although he sometimes says that the sign produces an effect on a person or a mind to make the notion easier to grasp (see, e.g., SS 81 [1908]). To simplify matters, we might characterise the interpretant as an interpretational or semiotic effect brought on by the sign. Whether Peirce's interpretant is necessarily an effect on a human person or not is a problem much discussed in Peirce studies and philosophical semiotics, but here it may suffice to remark that whatever else Peirce's interpretant may be, it at least covers the characteristic effects that signs may have on human beings. The important question concerns the limits of the semiotic process.

As noted, in his early writings Peirce emphasises the open-ended character of the action of signs. It is not possible to set concrete limits to the process by finding first objects or final interpretations, except in as ideal points of termination, which are never reached in real life. To some extent, the later Peirce agrees with this

point of view; he emphasises that it is characteristic of developed signs that they grow (EP 2:10 [c. 1894]), and offers general definitions of the sign as

[a]nything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum* (2.303 [1902]; cf. CP 2.92 [1902]).

Obviously, this definition offers only a bare skeleton of the sign relation, and thus leaves much to be desired in terms of explication; but we need only note the characterisation of the sign activity involved. Namely, Peirce suggests that it is a genuinely continuous process, in which the interpretant of one sign in its turn becomes a sign, which will have an interpretant of its own, which will then act as a sign, and so on. Peirce even explicitly states that if "the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least" (CP 2.303 [1902]; cf. CP 2.92 [1903]).

Now it would seem to follow from these rather sparse statements that Peirce holds that the interpretant must always be a sign, and that the flow of signs and interpretants will never terminate. This idea is nowadays known as *unlimited semiosis*, an expression coined by Umberto Eco (1977, p. 71). Now this process is, quite naturally, closely connected to interpretation; as Peirce states, "a sign only functions as a sign when it is interpreted" (MS 7:2 [c. 1903?]). This does not mean that a sign ceases to be a sign, if it is not constantly interpreted; the interpretant may be potential, as in the case of words in a book that no one reads or ancient inscriptions that have not been interpreted for centuries (cf. W 1:326 [1865]). In other words, it is crucial for the being of the sign that it should be *capable* of determining an interpretant. The interpretant does not need to exist; a "being *in futuro* will suffice" (EP 2.92 [1902]).

All this seems to point in the direction of an almost autonomous semiotic domain of limitless interpretation, without firm grounds which could give us the true meaning of the sign. At any given instant, the meaning of the sign is always conferred to the future. (It is perhaps now easier to see why poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida find certain Peircean ideas attractive.) However, as several commentators have stressed (see, e.g., Gentry 1952; Short 1996), Peirce modifies his position as he develops his view of the interpretant. This modification advances

in two stages, both of which may undermine the thesis of unlimited semiosis. First, Peirce acknowledges that signs may have effects – i.e., interpretants – that do not possess the character of a sign or cognition. A piece of music may produce an emotion and a command a specific action; and such effects may constitute the actual end of the semiotic process (see CP 5.475 [1907]). Yet, these may be instances of highly successful semiotic interactions. It would appear, then, that there are signs that can fulfil a semiotic function quite well, without thereby involving an endless process of interpretation. Of course, it can be argued that this applies to less developed signs, but that more evolved signs involve a potentially infinite series of interpretations. However, Peirce's second major modification of his theory of interpretants puts further restrictions on the free play of interpretation. Connecting his semeiotic to his pragmatism, Peirce states that the meaningful development of a sign relation cannot consist of mere interpretation for interpretation's sake; the sign must also have a potential or actual effect on our habits of action (see, e.g., EP 2:388 [1906]; CP 5.476 [1907]). That is, an interpretation of a sign that would not, under any circumstances, affect the way we would act is not properly meaningful; and it is possible to say that the interpretation of a sign comes to a halt when it achieves a true alteration of our conduct.

It seems, then, that there are significant ruptures in the semiotic process; in fact, Peirce's pragmatistic analysis suggests that such stops are what interpretation ultimately aims for. On the other hand, it can be argued that habit-changes are temporary breaches in the flow of interpretation, and do not signal an absolute end to semiotic development through interpretation; the signs connected to the habits can grow by connection to other signs, which in turn will affect the habits involved. The ultimate habit of action may be as much an unreachable ideal as the final interpretation.

Since it is difficult to find a steadfast limit to semiosis in the interpretant, it seems natural to turn to the object of the sign for a firm ground on which to build a proper semantics. Peirce often characterises the object as something that *determines* the sign; this would indicate that the true basis of semiosis is to be found in the referential end of the sign. That is, it seems natural to think that Peirce's 'object' denotes the objective content of semiosis, something that is *not* touched by interpretation.

However, as we already saw in our brief discussion of the early account of signs in the context of Peirce's criticism of Cartesian philosophy, Peirce did not

accept any conception of a substantial thing-as-such, which could serve any meaningful function in the account of cognition. The absolute object is an ideal limit, which we may come to know better and better, but never in some kind of perfectly immediate relation. Moreover, Peirce states that the knowledge of the object will always include an interpretative element. If we could have knowledge of the final object, it would still be accompanied by interpretation; only, one may surmise, in such a case the object and the interpretation would be so intimately interconnected, and further fused with a habit of action, that no relevant distinction between the two could be made.

The view that the object-pole of the sign relation is not free from representation and interpretation is expressed in an undated fragment, which could belong to the later as well as to the earlier theory of signs.

The object of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first representation is the interpretant. But an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object at its limit. The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. (CP 1.339.)

This may be seen as a re-statement of Peirce's early denial that we have some kind of direct cognitive access to objects, apart from the mediation of signs. However, the quote is of particular interest as it suggests that we never really come into contact with anything but representations. Depending on its position in the semiotic flow or web, a representation may act as a sign, an object, or an interpretant; but there is no way to confer the *ontological* status of object on certain things. In other words, the object would appear to be a purely relational – not to say *relative* – concept. If this is so, it is difficult to see how we could avoid the conclusion that the character of our objects is ultimately determined by interpretation – whether the interpretation under consideration is actual or ideal.

All this seems to go against Peirce's later attempts to establish a *realist* framework for his semiotic philosophy. Of course, Peirce's realism is qualified by his pragmatism, which means that it is primarily concerned with potential future

consequences rather than with the ontological standing of objects. Still, given that Peirce often characterises the object as something that logically precedes the sign and in some sense determines the direction of the semiotic process, one may feel quite uneasy about the conclusion that the being of objects is so intimately dependent on interpretation. To put it bluntly, Peirce's semiotic position seems to imply that human beings have no concrete contact with the world "out there"; we are only acquainted with the objects of our interpretations.

There are a several ways in which this picture should be modified; one of them will be considered in the next section, when we turn to Peirce's account of collateral experience. Before that, however, we need to establish that Peirce did not simply abandon the semiotic stance in his later texts, as some of his positive remarks about realism might suggest. In an example reminiscent of later philosophical debates, Peirce discusses the cognitive being of a chair (MS 1334: 44 [1905]). Obviously, the word 'chair' is a sign, and so is the idea or *Vorstellung* of a chair according to him. Attempts to break down the sign into elementary impressions will fail, because when we get down to the very impressions of sense, we will not find any chair. The reason, in Peirce's words, is that "the life we lead is a life of signs. Sign under sign endlessly". Peirce's metaphorical conclusion sums up this point of view nicely: "To try to strip off the signs and get down to the very meaning itself is like trying to peel an onion and get down to the very onion itself" (ibid.). By the time we reach the core of the onion, we have very little in our hands; the bare object, freed from the layers of interpretations, would be of little or no use for us – if such a thing is even conceivable.

### **Objects of Acquaintance**

So far, our discussion has shown that at least as far as human cognition is concerned, interpretation is an irreducible factor in Peirce's account of semiotic relations. In a sense, this is already expressed by the fact that his view of the sign is *triadic*, i.e., that a sign relation is not merely constituted by a representational relation between sign and object, but always also includes a third factor, theoretically articulated as the interpretant. However, this outlook, combined with Peirce's anti-foundationalist theory of cognition and emphasis on the process of semiosis, seems to leave human agents afloat in an autonomous semiotic sphere.

The position is in danger of sinking into an uncomfortable semiotic hermeticism (cf. Short 1994).

Already in the first phase of semeiotic, one can detect a certain ambiguity with regard to questions pertaining to the status of signs and objects. As Peirce's philosophy develops, a number of problems begin to crop up. In particular, he has difficulties to account for reference; the solution suggested by the early approach is to explain reference in terms of relations between thought-signs (cf. Hookway 2000, p. 117). This entails that the identification of individual objects must be performed by thought-signs, through descriptions. Yet, at the same time Peirce recognises that certain signs have a 'pure demonstrative application'; that is, that their semiotic power is based on a real existential relation between sign and object, as in the case of a weathercock that serves as a sign of the wind. Such signs would appear to bring us into contact with an extra-semiotic reality – the actual wind, in this case. However, this conclusion does not fit into the framework of Peirce's early semeiotic; and on closer inspection we will find that the demonstrative function does not really cause a breach in the semiotic stronghold. As Christopher Hookway (2000, p. 130) notes, Peirce's demonstrative application of a thought-sign is always to *another* thought-sign of the same object; the existential relations utilised in cognition are in fact relations between judgments.

All this changes dramatically in the mid-1880s, when Peirce returns to semiotic issues after a longish break. It is not perfectly clear what causes the alteration in Peirce's outlook, but it seems reasonably clear that the move is connected to his work on logical quantifiers, and his view of their crucial *indexical* function. The change of mind is also linked to Peirce's rejection of absolute idealism, as it is presented by Josiah Royce in his *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*.<sup>8</sup> In the same context, Peirce criticises Hegel (and Hegelian philosophers) for ignoring the 'outward clash', which is a "direct consciousness of hitting and getting hit" that "enters into all cognition and serves to make it mean something real" (EP 1:233 [1885]). This indicates a realisation on Peirce's part: a philosophical theory cannot leave *brute fact* out of account; it is how we come to be aware of the other – an undeniable force. Peirce gives an example of a man walking down Wall Street pursuing an internal dialogue on the existence of the external world (CP 1.431 [c. 1896]). If the man, lost in his world of thought-signs, bumps into another man who knocks him down, little real doubt about the existence of something beyond signs will be left in his mind.

Peirce's firmer acknowledgement of the 'brute' aspect of reality, which is affiliated with the category of *Secondness*,<sup>9</sup> has discernible consequences for his semeiotic. It is marked by the fact that Peirce pays more attention to the semiotic role on the object, and simultaneously re-considers the semiotic status of the demonstrative application – now named *index*.

Comparing the status of the object in early and late semeiotic, one may discern a clear (although not perfectly consistent) pattern; the object is given a more central and even somewhat autonomous status in the mature semeiotic. This is not to say that Peirce would now consider the sign relation to consist of three perfectly sovereign components; nothing functions as a sign, object, or interpretant except within such a relation. In other words, an object is not an object in the proper sense apart from the sign. However, Peirce now emphasises that the object determines the sign, while remaining unaffected by the sign.

At first blush, Peirce's new standpoint may seem to amount to a rather naïve kind of realism, or else to re-introduce the banished thing-in-itself into the theory. Not surprisingly, the picture is much more complex than that. Namely, it is important to note that Peirce makes a distinction between two *aspects* of the object, usually called the *immediate* and *dynamical* (or *real*) object. The immediate object is the object as it is represented in the sign; it is, in a sense, the meaningful referential content of the sign, and as such partakes of the nature of a sign. In a sign that would have the current president of the United States as its object, the immediate object would be the impression or conception of George Bush held by the interpreter, previous to the interpretation. The immediate object might not correspond to the real George Bush, who in this case would serve as the dynamical object of the relation. Yet, it would be a mistake to simply identify the dynamical object with a reality in a strict sense. The dynamical object may in fact be completely fictive. It is, however, characterised by three traits that distinguish it from the immediate object: (1) it is determinative, (2) it is unexpressed in the sign itself, and (3) it must be known by so-called *collateral experience* (also called 'collateral observation' or 'extraneous experience'<sup>10</sup>).

We must distinguish between the Immediate Object, - i.e. the Object as represented in the sign, - and the Real (no, because perhaps the Object is altogether fictive, I must choose a different term, therefore), say rather the Dynamical Object, which, from the nature of things, the Sign cannot

express, which it can only indicate and leave the interpreter to find out by collateral experience. For instance, I point my finger to what I mean, but I can't make my companion know what I mean, if he can't see it, or if seeing it, it does not, to his mind, separate itself from the surrounding objects in the field of vision. It is useless to attempt to discuss the genuineness and possession of a personality beneath the histrionic presentation of Theodore Roosevelt with a person who recently has come from Mars and never heard of Theodore before. (CP 8.314 [1909].)

Before taking a closer look at collateral experience, it is necessary to say a few preliminary words about semiotic determination. This should not be confused with straightforward efficient causation; the determination in question is best grasped as a *delimitation* of the field of signification or semiosis, something which constrains the semiotic process (Joswick 1996, p. 98; Liszka 1996, p. 23). Put differently, the dynamical object does not determine the sign absolutely, so as to always produce a given interpretant or set of interpretants. However, the determination of the sign by the dynamical object does place limitations on how the sign can be grasped. I, for example, have an idea of George Bush which constitutes my immediate object of the president. It is a kind of composite picture, formed by numerous news broadcasts, articles, discussions, etc. It is obviously full of interpretative elements, my attempts to form as coherent picture of the man in question as possible. It is bound to be at least partly erroneous. I have never met George Bush, nor seen him in real life. Yet, there is a sense in which my sign 'George Bush' is determined by the real man. It is indicated by the fact that I am not able to interpret the sign in any way I like. I cannot, for example, genuinely take 'George Bush' to stand for 'person who recently has come from Mars', although it might prove to be an entertaining thought experiment. I will also modify my view of the president, if experience so dictates.

Peirce claims that the basis of the objects dynamical, determinative power lies in the fact that the interpreter must have had his or her mind determined by collateral experience of the object, apart from his or her encounter with signs that represent, or claim to represent, the object in question. This is a strong claim, which seems to indicate a major change of mind in Peirce's semiotic philosophy. It would appear that the earlier primacy of the semiotic sphere has been replaced by a more

basic layer of raw experience. This impression is strengthened by the fact that Peirce emphasises that collateral experience does *not* mean knowledge of signs.

I do not mean by “collateral observation” acquaintance with the system of signs. What is so gathered is *not* COLLATERAL. It is on the contrary the prerequisite for getting any idea signified by the sign. But by collateral observation, I mean previous acquaintance with what the sign denotes. Thus if the Sign be the sentence “Hamlet was mad,” to understand what this means one must know that men are sometimes in that strange state; one must have seen madmen or read about them; and it will be all the better if one specifically knows (and need not be driven to *presume*) what Shakespeare’s notion of insanity was. All that is collateral observation and is no part of the Interpretant. (CP 8.179; cf. CP 8.181.)

Consequently, there seems to be two distinct preconditions for interpretation. One must be acquainted with the system of signs in question (for instance know the language used) *and* have some collateral experience of the objects involved. The first condition is probably relatively uncontroversial. The second, on the contrary, calls for explication.

It is perhaps easier to get to grips with the question of collateral experience if we turn to the kind of setting in which Peirce typically discusses the matter: a simple communicational situation, in which two people discuss some subject, or an utterer tries to convey some information to an interpreter.

One of the arguments on which Peirce bases his requirement for collateral experience is that no description in itself suffices to indicate the object of a communicational exchange. If person A says “George Bush is an idiot” to person B, the sentence will be close to senseless unless B has some previous experience of the objects involved. That is, if B does not know who George Bush is, or has never met an idiot, the objects of the sentence will not be sufficiently fixed to function determinatively in the semiotic process. If B asks “Who?”, A can try to specify the reference by offering a description along the lines of “The acting president of the United States”; but then again, the understanding of that phrase depends on experience of such objects as presidents and the United States. The descriptions can be made more and more elaborate, but unless A somehow manages to refer to an object of B’s experience, no communication can take place. According to Peirce,

such a reference cannot be achieved with pure descriptions, but requires indices, signs which in some sense indicate or call the attention to their objects, without thereby giving any substantial information about them.

A couple of things need to be pointed out here. First of all, it is important to see that the experience in question need not be directly of the object in question; it is sufficient that the interpreter can make a connection between the object referred to and his or her collateral experience. If B is familiar with the president of Finland, then his or her acquaintance with presidents can probably serve as a good starting-point for the identification of the sign ‘George Bush’. The claim, thus, is merely that *some* experiential background is needed – it may be quite insignificant in itself, but it must be able to serve as a starting-point for the specification of the object.

Another thing that should be noted is that in communication the object need not be wholly determinate. Peirce gives several examples of this, such as two Englishmen who meet on the train and begin to discuss Charles the Second (CP 5.448 n. 1 [1906]). The shared collateral experience of the travellers – the fact that they are English, for example – ensures that they are talking about the same object, although they may have quite different images of the king in their mind (their immediate objects). It is not necessary that the objects should be identical in every sense; the common reference is actually ensured by the fact that much is left vague (cf. EP 2:409 [1907]). Too much specification might lead to communicational failure; if, for instance, one of the men would point out that Charles the Second was a different man on different days, and demanded that the other say precisely what Charles he meant, the process might come to a grinding halt. Similarly, I suppose that when I write ‘George Bush’ at this moment in history, my readers will have the required collateral experience to begin to understand what I am trying to say. We need not agree about the character of the man; that can be left unstated. All that is required is some notion of who George Bush is, based on some relevant experience. Strictly speaking, the subject employed in communications about George Bush is an immediate object; but its semiotic power is based on the communicants understanding that such an object approaches, however distantly, the dynamical object.

Now, as noted, Peirce emphasises the role of indices in situations where the reference of communication (i.e., the identity of the object) needs to be established. What, then, are these indices? They are basically of two kinds: words, which have been given an indexical function, and contextual<sup>11</sup> factors. The first

group includes words such as ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘I’, as well as quantifiers. They do not, by themselves, pinpoint the object, but they give indications or hints of how the relevant experience of the object can be obtained. The second kind of indices is indices proper, which involves almost no symbolic elements.<sup>12</sup> The indices of this type are intimately connected to the situation and context of occurrence, and cannot be properly expressed by words. They are whatever in the circumstances of the communication, apart from the explicit verbal utterance itself, make the identification of the object possible. An example adopted from Peirce (cf. CP 2.357 [1902]) may help to clarify the point. Suppose, for instance, that someone comes into the room and shouts “Fire!” In itself, the word in question is hardly informative. If that was all we had to go on, we would probably calmly ask for more specific information. However, if we note that the utterer’s tone is panicky, and that his or her expression is worried, we will probably start to look for a way out. Add a smell of smoke to the setting, and there should be no doubt about the object of the sign – although we actually know very little about the object, and the whole thing *might* be a rather boorish prank. There are many indices at play in such a situation: the tone and the expression, for instance, but also less obvious contextual elements such as the room we are located in. Furthermore, some wild interpretations, which the signs alone would render possible, are excluded by common sense. Much is based on an unspecified understanding of things shared by the communicants.

[I]f the utterer says “Fine day!” he does not dream of any possibility of the interpreter’s thinking of any mere *desire* for a fine day that a Finn of the North Cape might have entertained on April 19, 1776. He means, of course, to refer to the actual weather, then and there, where he and the interpreter are alike influenced by the fine weather, and have it near the surface of their common consciousness. (EP 2:407 [1907].)

Thus, indices need not be verbal or ostentatious, but can operate almost invisibly within a context of habits. On a broader scale, such signs help to specify in what *universe of discourse* communication takes place. That is, they indicate in what domain the objects referred to are to be found; or, to express the point differently, what kind of experience is required for the proper grasping of the objects. In an entry in *The Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology* Peirce and his student Christine Ladd-Franklin state the matter as follows:

In every proposition the circumstances of its enunciation show that it refers to some collection of individuals or of possibilities, which cannot be adequately described, but can only be indicated as something familiar to both speaker and auditor. At one time it may be the physical universe, at another it may be the imaginary ‘world’ of some play or novel, at another a range of possibilities. (CP 2.536 [1901].)

Enough has now been said to establish the relevance of the notion of collateral experience in Peirce’s mature theory of signs. It serves a kind of double function, on the one hand showing us some limits of the semiotic domain, while on the other reminding us of the relevance of situational and contextual factors. In fact, the crucial recognition of reality is achieved through indexical and experiential means. According to Peirce, we cannot distinguish fact from fiction by any description (CP 2.337 [c. 1895]).

But how does this account fit in with Peirce’s view of the ubiquity of interpretation? Does collateral experience constitute a sphere untouched by interpretative elements? In a certain sense it does; it is something that is outside of the flow of thought-signs – a possible irritant, but also something that gives direction to interpretation. On the other hand, collateral experience is not absolutely beyond the reach of signs, although a special kind of signs, indices, are required to establish the contact. Words alone will not do.

### **Concluding Remarks: The Common Grounds of Experience**

The purpose of this paper was to show what role collateral experience plays in Peirce’s later semeiotic, and how it acts as a kind of antidote to his most radical semiotic claims. In doing so, I have certainly simplified matters, and ignored many twists and turns in the story. Little has been said, for instance, about Peirce’s understanding of triadic relations and his theory of categories, or the position of indices in his larger scheme of signs. I will not go further into these matters here, but will instead conclude with a couple of general observations on Peirce’s understanding of the relation between interpretation and experience.

Given that Peirce emphasises the role of collateral experience in his later philosophy, one might surmise that he discards his earlier view of the omnipresence

of interpretation. Through his distinction between the immediate and the dynamical object, Peirce seems to signal that at least one aspect of the object is of a non-representational nature. However, this impression needs to be qualified. True, Peirce does make it clear that collateral experience is not of the character of a representation, but of another mode of being (Secondness). Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind how threadbare this experience is as such. It is only when it is interpreted and brought within the domain of signs that it can play a truly meaningful role.

Furthermore, it may be of interest to note that Peirce's use of the concept of 'experience' is somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, 'experience' is understood in the sense of collateral experience, as something closely connected to brute fact. On the other hand, Peirce also uses 'experience' to denote a more substantial cognitive content in the life of human beings.

[E]xperience can only mean the total cognitive result of living, and includes interpretations quite as truly as it does the matter of sense. Even more truly, since this matter of sense is a hypothetical something which we never can seize as such, free from all interpretive working over. (CP 7.538; cf. CP 4.172 [1897].)

In addition, we may observe that certain cognitive products, such as Shakespeare's Hamlet, may function dynamically, once they have established themselves. Obviously, we may form our first acquaintance with this object through the mediation of signs – as we do when we read about real people in newspapers, for instance. What the signs must do, then, is relate the sign 'Hamlet' to objects with which we are already familiar (kings, Denmark, the universe of drama...). After a while, 'Hamlet' takes on a reality of its own, and therefore acts as an object that can delimit interpretation. The reins may be looser than in the case of existent objects; but as an object 'Hamlet' prescribes a certain domain of possible interpretations. It acts as a dynamical object; but its content-bearing being is nonetheless interpretational. Socially established signs may create objects with real dynamical power. Although "no phoenix really exists, real descriptions of the phoenix are well known to the speaker and his auditor; and thus the word is really affected by the Object denoted" (CP 2.261 [c. 1903]).

What these examples show, then, is that the dynamical aspect of objects is primarily associated with the influence or action of objects on signs. The recognition of the dynamical force of certain objects does not mean that the experiential object could not, upon analysis, be found to carry representational content. Therefore, it would appear at least feasible to assume that Peirce's emphasis on the ubiquity of interpretation and his account of the role of collateral experience can be reconciled. After all, the recognition of something *as* real in a meaningful sense can only be achieved within a developed system – or rather, a complex flow – of signs; and such a semiotic process will be irreducibly interpretational.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The serious re-evaluation of Peirce's thought began with the publication of the first volume of the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* in 1931. In the debates that followed, scholars such as Paul Weiss (1940) and James Feibleman (1946) interpreted Peirce's philosophy as a unity, while Justus Buchler (1940), Thomas Goudge (1953), and Murray Murphey (1961) judged, on varying grounds, that it was either inconsistent or at least consisted of partly incompatible phases.

<sup>2</sup> 'Semeiotic' is one of Peirce's names for his theory of signs. I will use it occasionally to mark that I am talking about Peirce's position, not about semiotics in general. I use the adjective 'semiotic' when referring to the subject-matters of such theories.

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<sup>3</sup> In one of his critical remarks on Peirce's relevance, Richard Rorty claims that one reason for the "undeserved apotheosis" of Peirce has been that his theory of signs has been wrongly judged to be an important precursor of the so-called linguistic turn in philosophy. Rorty is correct in emphasising the difference between Peirce's perspective and later linguistic approaches; the interesting question, of course, is whether this renders Peirce's philosophical outlook simply indefensible. This question lies beyond the scope of this article; but it should perhaps be pointed out that the paper has been written in the belief that there is something valuable in the Peircean point of view, in spite of its alleged shortcomings.

<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the customs of Peirce scholarship, I will refer to Peirce's texts using abbreviations. *CP* *x.y* refers to *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*; *v* indicates volume number, *p* paragraph number. *EP* *v:p* refers to *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*; *v* indicates volume number, *p* page number. *MS* *m* refers to an original manuscript; *m* indicates manuscript number according to Robin's catalogue. *SS* *p* refers to *Semiotics and Significts: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*; *p* indicates page number. *W* *v:p* refers to *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*; *v* indicates volume number, *p* page number. Where known, the year of writing or publication will be given.

<sup>5</sup> The reference to 'external facts' in the first denial may seem to contradict this conclusion. However, it is possible to interpret this externality as the claim that signs must be public, and that there are, in fact, no such things as private signs, which would belong exclusively to the individual. Peirce expresses this somewhat cryptically by stating that it is as plausible to say that we are products of signs, as it is to say that human beings are the makers of signs.

<sup>6</sup> 'Semiosis' is Peirce's term – culled from the old Greek – for the action of signs. It is contrasted to dyadic or dynamical action, such as the mechanical action between physical bodies (see EP 2:411 [1907]).

<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Peirce abandons the distinction between sign and representamen some years later, stating that the ordinary word sign will do well, as long as it is understood that the cognitive or mind-like character of semiotic relations is not necessarily due to the conscious activity of a human mind (see SS 193 [1905]; SS 81[1908]).

<sup>8</sup> For an illuminating account of the relevance of Royce's idealism on the evolution of Peirce's philosophy, see Hookway 2000, p. 108 ff. Peirce begins to develop the new semiotic position in an unpublished critical review, titled "An American Plato", of the aforementioned book.

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<sup>9</sup> Peirce's categories are not discussed in this paper, although they are rarely absent from his philosophy. Suffice it to say here that Firstness is the category of quality and immediacy, Secondness the category of fact and reaction, and Thirdness the category of thought and signs. Peirce recognises the reality of Thirdness in his early philosophy, but later affirms realism with regard to Secondness, and eventually to Firstness as well.

<sup>10</sup> There may be differences in Peirce's usage of these terms; but as it seems to be at most a question of rather fine nuances, I will not discuss the matter here. I will just note that Helmut Pape (1999, p. 609) has criticised Peirce's use of the term 'collateral observation' as misleading, claiming that it suggests that all experiential observation takes place in the same situation of utterance. I think that the concept of 'collateral experience' is not touched by this judgment.

<sup>11</sup> Peirce appears to use the word 'context' in a different sense than the one employed here. For Peirce, the semiotic context seems to be provided by a system of signs, not by the broader situation (see EP 2:407 [1907]).

<sup>12</sup> Indices and symbols are two important classes of sign identified by Peirce; the latter group consists of conventional signs, or signs based on habit.