

Developing Peirce's Semiotic

Reflections Inspired by Professor John Deely's Paper

'The Impact of Semiotics on Philosophy'

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Introduction

In his Oscar's Day paper, Professor Deely has presented an impressive and challenging vision of the history of semiotics, and its complex relationship with philosophy. The scope of Professor Deely's essay (actually more like a short monograph) is breathtaking, and its potential implications certainly provide us with much food for thought. Faced with such a panoramic view of our intellectual history and our contemporary situation, built on exceptional resources of learning, one may begin to feel uncertain about one's capacities – particularly if one happens to be a relatively young commentator of the paper in question. Luckily, my role here is, by definition, limited to that of representing the Peircean or pragmaticist point of view. That, as such, is of course more than enough.

Having said this, I must immediately add that I do not think that there is just one correct viewpoint that would single out *true* followers of Peirce from the false ones, but rather a number of different, even sometimes conflicting, perspectives that could justifiably be characterised as 'Peircean' (which is not to say that they would all be *equally* true to the letter of Peirce's writings or the spirit of his philosophy). As anyone who has ever taken more than just a fleeting glance at Peirce's production will know, we are dealing with a vast, multifaceted corpus, full of careful and detailed analyses as well as wild and sketchy views. Obviously, it leaves much work for interpreters to do, both for those who try to synthesise or explain Peirce's thought, and for those who strive to move on from Peirce, taking certain ideas of his as starting-points. Professor Deely's primary interest is not full-scale exegesis of Peirce. But I do not think that there is any doubt that his semiotic pursuits can, to a significant degree, be seen as an effort to build on the foundation laid by Peirce's theory of signs, in addition to other sources.

What I propose to do, in the space at my disposal, is to discuss some general points concerning the nature of Peircean semiotics, more or less connected to Professor Deely's view of Peirce. I will be talking more about Peirce than John Deely, but all the points I am going to make were inspired by Professor Deely's paper. I will first say a few words about Peirce's

semiotic project in relation to some historical issues, and then I shall briefly sketch a couple of possibilities for the future development of the Peircean point of view. For the most part, ignoring certain details, I believe that I am in agreement with Professor Deely; but there is one more substantial critical question concerning the scope of semiosis I wish to raise.

Peirce in the History of Semiotics

One of the most interesting aspects of Peirce as a figure in the history of thought is the way in which he on the one hand absorbs and synthesises the work of his predecessors, but on the other hand functions as an initiator of new intellectual movements – almost by accident, it would seem. As Professor Deely points out, Peirce can be seen as the father of contemporary semiotics, if we make a distinction between semiotics and semiology. Moreover, Peirce is of course a foundational figure in the movement known as pragmatism, not to mention his contributions to logic and several other fields. But then again, Peirce was definitely no leader of intellectual movements. His academic career ended in failure, and few (almost none) of his contemporaries were interested in his peculiar brand of philosophy. Peirce was also terrible at assessing what could be of interest in his own thought; he did not really understand the potential appeal of pragmatism, for instance, until others had picked up his almost abandoned ideas and transformed them in ways he did not always like.

Peirce was perhaps somewhat better at making prophecies. He certainly seems to have been able to divine the emergence of semiotics as a field of its own. Or perhaps his stubborn clinging to his esoteric pursuits is just a symptom of his belligerent and difficult character, one of the reasons for his professional and personal misfortunes. Well, be that as it may, it is interesting to note how he perceived his own role in philosophy and in semiotics.

Full of self-confidence, he once proclaimed that it was his intention to construct a new basis or frame for philosophy, in some sense equivalent to that of Aristotle (CP 1.1 [c. 1898]¹). But reflecting on his position in the development of *semiotic*, “the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of semiosis”, he characterised himself as a backwoodsman who attempts to clear up a path for others to follow (EP 2:413 [1907]). This is a relatively modest statement, because Peirce’s mature theory is an impressive achievement as it stands. Yet, Peirce could in this instance be accused of ignoring the fact that others had chopped down at least a couple of trees before he entered the forest of semiotics.

One of Professor Deely’s undeniable contributions to both semiotics and Peirce scholarship is that he, perhaps more than anyone else, has brought out the fact that Peirce was

not quite the first-comer in semiotics he made himself out to be. There is little doubt that Peirce's semiotic endeavour was influenced by medieval philosophy, or the Latins, as Professor Deely puts it. On the other hand, it is very difficult to assess the exact scope and relevance of this influence. Peirce frequently used medieval terminology and in his youth made explicit references to Latin philosophers of lesser fame (notably, to the so-called *Conimbricenses* in 1867 [see W 2:71; W 2:117]). He never stopped appreciating the scholastics, and of course singled out Duns Scotus as his favourite. Nevertheless, there appears to be some waning of the Latin influence in Peirce's later semiotic. Natural development, perhaps, as the ideas of earlier philosophers have been modified, even transformed, by the integration into Peirce's own system. But I would argue that we can distinguish an early, more scholastic and Kantian, period, and a later, more independent and future-oriented period in Peirce's semiotic.

This may be disputed, but if one looks at the article, in which Peirce for the first time in print announced his semiotic point of view – that is, 'On a New List of Categories' from 1867 (reprinted e.g. in EP 1 and CP 1) – one will note that something that is usually attributed to Peircean semiotics is missing: the emphasis on the action of signs, on *semiosis*. The well-known categorial principle, which gives us the famous (or infamous) triadic understanding of the sign, is there, but the analytic procedure Peirce follows ties the sign to propositional synthesis, or the unifying power of the conceptual mind. The picture is not exactly static, but it lacks the explicitly dynamic character of Peirce's later definitions of the sign.

In his studies of the history of semiotics and philosophy, Professor Deely has often stated that the Latin thinkers focused on the being proper to sign, and in fact established something similar to the triadic principle usually attributed to Peirce. Peirce's groundbreaking semiotic contribution, according to this story, is that he introduced a new focus on the action of signs. I think that this picture is largely accurate. But I would like to add that this is something that only slowly emerged in Peirce's thought, as he constantly redefined his conception of semiotic. It is, without doubt, accurate to identify Peirce's 'New List' as a landmark in semiotics. But I think that several important steps are taken in later texts. From my point of view, Peircean semiotics truly finds its focus about forty years after the article Professor Deely sees as the beginning of postmodern times.

There would of course be much more to be said about the different periods in Peirce's philosophy, but I cannot go into detailed Peirce scholarship here. I would like to stress, however, how important it is to consider the development of Peirce's thought, even when we are dealing with a seemingly limited topic, such as his theory of signs. If we do not, Peirce will often appear to be fatally inconsistent, and it will in fact be very difficult to form anything like an adequate

view of his semiotic thinking as a whole. It seems to me, anyway, that the historical approach to semiotics that Professor Deely so forcefully advances should also be applied on a much more limited level to Peirce the semiotician, whose intellectually active life after all spans about fifty years – a considerable period of time, if we consider that contemporary semiotics is a rather recent development.

Well, whether we approach Peirce from a developmental perspective or not, it still remains a fact that the ideas that are absorbed at the beginning of his philosophical career are modified, and come out in a transformed shape toward the end of his life, after a long hiatus in his semiotic interests. It is a change significant enough to be seen as the beginning of a new phase in semiotics. But should we view it as the beginning of the postmodern era, as Professor Deely suggests? I feel that it would be presumptuous of a beginner such as myself to try to answer that question; I gladly leave it to more competent commentators. But from a Peircean point of view, even if we choose to distinguish sharply between the modern and the postmodern era in philosophy, and give Peirce a major role in establishing the break, it still may be wise to keep in mind that Peirce was influenced by thinkers of *all* the preceding eras Professor Deely has identified – certainly also by philosophers of the modern period. I do not think that we would have semiotics of the Peircean kind, were it not for the influence of thinkers such as Berkeley and Kant on Peirce.

It is, of course, a well-known fact that Peirce was an opponent of nominalism, and a defender of something he called scholastic realism. But this does not mean that he would have found the nominalists totally condemnable. Perhaps one could say that Peirce thought that we cannot reach anything like a truly viable realism, which would be a semiotic realism, unless we first consider the nominalistic option. Peirce approved of many of the methods employed by philosophers he identified as nominalists (which in the end, by the way, included almost everybody except himself). It seems to me, anyway, that Peirce's semiotic development owes much to thinkers like Berkeley, in spite of their modern idealism. But then again, this does not in any way invalidate the claim that Peirce was heavily influenced by the Latins; it merely complicates the picture a bit. The relationship between the pre-modern and modern traits in Peirce's thought is a topic that would need more detailed investigation. It would give more depth to our understanding of Peirce as a historical figure and a philosopher in possession of an unusual historical sensibility.

Conservatives and Radicals

Peirce, who had so little success during his lifetime, is now on his way to becoming a major figure in the history of thought – how important we really cannot yet say. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the contemporary potential of his philosophy and theory of signs. This is perhaps somewhat surprising, if we consider the fact that Peirce never produced any full-length book that could be seen as a classic of philosophy or semiotics. I think that even the most convinced Peircean must admit that Peirce's production is frustratingly fragmentary and difficult to grasp as a whole. At least, this lack of a self-evident basic text in his corpus helps to explain the variety of uses and disguises, in which Peirce can appear today. Oddly enough, Peirce's ideas – or perhaps we should say his signs – appear to live a life of their own, extending alarmingly over established intellectual boundaries, even pouring down to some practical applications.²

For Peirce scholars, on the other hand, the major task of the last fifty years or so has been to try to find the leading idea or perspective that would bring a tolerable degree of unity to Peirce's production. The opinion that the semiotic point of view provides us with the best means for this task is now widely, although by no means fully, accepted among interpreters of Peirce. I think that it is the most promising way to approach Peirce's philosophy, and I am certain that Professor Deely would agree. But to avoid certain misapprehensions, I would like to stress the fact that Peirce does not constantly work in an explicitly semiotic framework. The eminent Peirce scholar Joseph Ransdell (1977: 158) has claimed that about 90 % of Peirce's writings are directly related to semiotic. I suspect that is an exaggeration, although we can interpret many of Peirce's non-semiotic texts from a sign-theoretical point of view. I would say that it is only very early and rather late in his intellectual career that Peirce truly pursues a semiotic path.

This fragmentation in Peirce's vast corpus has at least two consequences. First of all, it remains a fact that philosophers (especially of the analytic stripe) and semioticians tend to have varying conceptions of what Peirce's thought is like; for the first group, he may primarily be a pragmatist or realist, for the second group, he is typically a sign-theorist through and through. Both positions can be defended – and criticised. Philosophers could be faulted (among other things) for ignoring the relevance of the fact that Peirce conceived of logic in the wide sense *as* semiotic, while semioticians can be rather selective in their appropriation of Peirce's ideas and concepts. Now I do *not* mean to say that the only way to move forward would be to take in Peirce as a whole, something I think is neither feasible nor desirable. But perhaps the argument could be made that there is room for complementation between an analytic and semiotic interpretation.

Another consequence of the fact that Peirce's semiotic effort is fragmentary and often tentative is that there are many obscure components in his theory, as well as outright omissions. In his paper, Professor Deely emphasises that semiotics is more than Peirce. That is very true, and a healthy reminder for those of us who work mainly with Peirce's semiotic. Peirce does *not* give us all the answers. In fact, it would be contrary to his spirit to take his texts as the gospel truth, and stop our studies of the world of signs there. For Peirce was also a fallibilist, who contended that one should not block the road of inquiry. It would be ironic, indeed, if his semiotic texts – mostly fragments and sketches – would act as such a barrier. I think that a balance must be found between trying to understand Peirce's meanings, as far as possible, and the further development of his ideas – even in areas he ignored or directions he did not foresee.

However, now I come to a point that I find somewhat problematic in Professor Deely's paper. This concerns the interpretation of Peirce from a contemporary semiotic perspective, in which various factions are identified. It is possible and relevant, if I have understood Professor Deely correctly, to distinguish between more conservative and more radical persuasions within semiotics. The conservative position would be that the action of signs is in some sense restricted to living nature, while the radicals, which include Professor Deely, would extend it to encompass the physical universe at large. But then the question of where Peirce belongs in this picture arises. Professor Deely sees him as one of the main proponents of the radical point of view; and indeed, there are indications that Peirce would have subscribed to such a position. As Professor Deely notes, Peirce once remarked that the universe is perfused with signs (EP 2:394 [c. 1906]). On the other hand, that very remark is preceded by an observation that signs require interpreters for their completion. It thus leaves open the possibility that Peirce means the universe as interpreted, rather than the universe as such. In any case, the perfusion of signs does not seem to establish, beyond doubt, the radical credentials of Peirce.

Stronger evidence for the radical reading of Peirce is given by his contention that thought can be discerned in such phenomena as the formation of crystals and throughout the purely physical world (CP 4.551 [1906]); because thought, according to Peirce, *always* involves signs. But again there is some ambiguity here, as Peirce does not explicitly say that the physical world as such involves *semiosis*. For there to be semiosis, Peirce thought that there must at least be something capable of 'catching on' involved (MS 318: 181 f. [1907]; cf. Deely 1994: 190). Moreover, he claimed that what is caught is not merely a physical or psychical dose of energy, but rather a *significant meaning*. This is quite obscure, since Peirce does not specify what 'something capable of catching on' is; in fact, it may be that Peirce deliberately left this point vague, as he was struggling to find his bearings regarding this question. But it would seem to be

something that is, in some sense, able to apprehend significant meaning – whatever *that* may be.

The question, then, concerns the scope of Peirce's 'Grand Vision', as Professor Deely calls it. How far does the action of signs stretch? I have not been able to find conclusive evidence that Peirce would hold that semiosis is found in physical processes as such; in fact, when he talks of such things, he seems to characterise them as dyadic or dynamical as opposed to triadic or intelligent (see, e.g., CP 5.473 [1907]; EP 2:411 [1907]). On the other hand, Peirce *did* claim that there are signs without interpreters in the full sense; that was one of the reasons for introducing the conception of *interpretant*, that which virtually fulfills the function of an interpreter. Moreover, Peirce noted that there are certain physical processes that tend toward end-states, which is one of the characteristics of semiosis according to him. This leaves us with two important questions, to which we do not find adequate answers in Peirce's writings: namely, (a) is every sign necessarily active in semiosis, and (b) is every process that tends toward an end-state, by definition, a semiosis in Peirce's sense?

These are issues that I think Peircean semioticians should consider, taking Peirce's words as starting-points, but perhaps ultimately moving beyond Peirce. My intuitive and less than well-founded point of view, which I suspect is not quite in line with that of Professor Deely, is that we *can* hold that there are signs that are not actively involved in semiosis, and that there are goal-directed processes that are *not* semiotic processes, at least not in the full sense of the term. I cannot go into detail here, but it seems plausible to me to say that an old inscription that no-one reads and that no-one in fact can read anymore, is a sign, although it becomes involved in semiosis *only* as someone begins to interpret it. Before it enters in actual semiosis, its interpretant is merely potential, or as Peirce sometimes says, a 'would-be'. We could thus say that signs of the weather, for instance, are signs regardless of actual interpretation, but that there is not actual semiosis before an interpretation of the signs is made. A goal-directed process, in its turn, may be of the kind we have when gasses tend toward an equilibrium. It is law-governed, for certain; yet I cannot help feeling reluctant to call it a sign-process in the full sense. Peirce once claimed that semiosis is an idea completely opposite to that of automatic regulation of the kind that is found in thermometers, for instance (CP 5.473 [1907]); and I tend to agree. Certain laws of nature seem to act very much like such regulators, and it is at least feasible that evolution is more like regulation than semiosis proper. But here I am on very shaky ground, and I do not want to make too much of such poorly grounded speculation.

In any case, all this would seem to place Peirce – or, rather, *my* interpretation of Peirce – somewhere in the conservative camp Professor Deely talks about. However, I must admit that the evidence concerning Peirce's position is inconclusive. I do not think that Peirce ever got to

the point where he really made up his mind. At least, he did not formulate his position satisfactorily. He certainly did not restrict semiosis to the human sphere; but neither did he, beyond any shadow of a doubt, extend it to the physical world. I would argue, then, that Professor Deely's claim that Peirce clearly belongs to the radical faction of semiotics is at least contestable. However, having said this, I want to emphasise that this does *not* entail that Peircean semiotics could not move in that direction. In other words, Peircean semiotics could be developed along the lines of Professor Deely's Grand Vision. But from my point of view, it is not the only way to proceed from Peirce.

Final Comment

In my comments on Professor Deely's paper, which I have viewed from the relatively narrow Peircean perspective, I have consciously ignored the broader vistas of Professor Deely's essay. But perhaps I dare here, at the end, suggest that as philosophy may have something to learn from semiotics, so semiotics perhaps also can benefit from certain aspects of contemporary philosophy. Peirce, who was simultaneously a philosopher working in the tradition of Kant and a semiotician making a break with that tradition, could be used as a bridge-builder in this important pursuit of wider understanding.

Notes

1. References to collections of Peirce's writings are given as abbreviations. *CP* refers to the *Collected Papers*, *EP* to the *Essential Peirce*, *W* to the *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*, and *MS* to an original manuscript.
2. As an example of such an application one could mention *Harry Gendel Architects*, who claim to operate according to Peircean semiotic principles. (See <http://www.hgarch.com/frameset.html>)

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