

## Representationism and Presentationism

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In the late 1860s, the young Charles S. Peirce launched a crushing criticism of Cartesian thought in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. In a series of seminal essays, he advocated a semiotic theory of cognition that denied the privileged status of individual intuitions while affirming the dynamic and ultimately social nature of knowledge. Arguably, these texts set the scene for Peirce's subsequent philosophical labours. At least, Peirce clearly affirms some of the the basic principles of his early position in his mature writings, and he expresses the main upshot of this outlook in a letter to Victoria Lady Welby: with “the exception of knowledge, in the present instant, of the contents of consciousness in that instant (the existence of which knowledge is open to doubt) all our thought & knowledge is by signs” (SS 32 [1904]; cf. MS 8:1 [c. 1903?]).

Quite understandably, such remarks have sometimes been taken to imply a thoroughgoing semiotic stance, that is, a position according to which cognition, at least, is self-subsistent or autonomous in the sense of being an affair of signs exclusively. However, running parallel with Peirce's later reflections on signs and representation there is a different strand of thought that seems to qualify the radical semiotic position in certain respects – namely, his mature writings on perception. In these texts, Peirce often indicates that we have an unmediated contact with objects. In other words, he affirms a variant of the doctrine of *immediate perception*, apparently abandoning his youthful criticism of that very position.

Nonetheless, Peirce's persistent affirmation of an interpretative element in perception makes it difficult to see how his theories of direct awareness and mediated knowledge are linked – if, indeed, they are compatible at all. It is not surprising that leading commentators disagree on this issue; for some, Peirce's emphasis on the semiotic nature of knowledge and perceptual judgment leads to an idealist position, while for others, his observations on the immediacy of percepts support the argument for realism. As Richard Bernstein (1964) has noted, many of the tensions in Peirce's account of perception may be connected to his attempt to reconcile certain realist and idealist insights. In recent years, this debate has been framed as a

struggle between foundationalism and anti-foundationalism (see, e.g., Rosenthal, 2004; Short, 2000)

In this article, I propose to examine the problem of perceptual mediation from a somewhat unusual angle. I will frame the issue in terms of two isms, *representationism* and *presentationism*, which Peirce defined late in his philosophical career. These largely overlooked terms describe two different ways of conceiving the connection of perception with that which we might vaguely call “the external world”. However, they also display a tension in Peirce’s own thought regarding perceiving and objects. Examining certain key writings, I will argue that he moves from a predominantly representationist stance toward a position more sympathetic to presentationism, a development partly corresponding to changes in his theory of categories. This maturation seems to go hand in hand with his move from a nominalistic idealism toward a more realistic standpoint.<sup>1</sup> Granted, Peirce evidently felt that realism and idealism were reconcilable; but it remains notably difficult to get a firm grasp on the different idealistic and realistic strands in his philosophy. No doubt, this problem is partly attributable to the tangled history of the concepts involved. “Representationism” and “presentationism”, although directly related to some of the problems of idealism and realism, do not carry such a heavy load. Rather, I feel they have the virtue of helping us to focus on a more specific problem area in Peirce’s philosophy than the frequently overwhelming issue of “realism versus idealism”.

### *Defining the Dispute*

Peirce rarely uses the terms “representationism” and “presentationism”; the most extensive discussion of these points of view is located in an entry in the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. In fact, these isms may be unfamiliar to scholars otherwise knowledgeable about his philosophy. Nor do these terms seem to be common in philosophical parlance – neither in Peirce’s time nor now. As an aside, however, it might be of interest to note that some current philosophical dictionaries list “representationalism” among their entries; this is roughly characterised as the position that we have access only to our ideas of the world, not the world itself. It is also of some interest to note that Richard Rorty, in many respects an anti-Peircean philosopher, is widely known as a leading critic of representationalism.<sup>2</sup>

Turning to Peirce's dictionary definition of representationism, we find that he identifies it as the "doctrine that percepts stand for something behind them" (CP 5.607 [1902]). He then goes on to explicate that position by contrasting it to presentationism, which could simply be characterised as the school of thought according to which percepts do not, properly speaking, stand for or represent something behind them.

In a certain sense it must be admitted, even by presentationists, that percepts only perform the function of conveying knowledge of something else. That is to say, they have to be combined and generalized to become useful knowledge; so that they may be said to represent their own generalizations. In this, representationists and presentationists may agree. But the dispute between them consists in this, that the representationist regards the percept in the light of testimony or a picture, from which by inference, or a mental act analogous to inference, the hidden cause of the percept may become known; while the presentationist holds that perception is a two-sided consciousness in which the percept appears as forcibly acting upon us, so that in perception the consciousness of an active object and of a subject acted on are as indivisible as, in making a muscular effort, the sense of exertion is one with and inseparable from the sense of resistance. The representationist would not allow that there is any bilateral consciousness even in the latter sense, regarding the two-sidedness as a quasi-inference, or product of the mind's action; while the presentationist insists that there is nothing intellectual or intelligible in this duality. It is, he says, a hard fact experienced but never understood. A representationist will naturally regard the theory that everything in the outward world is atoms, their masses, motions, and energy, as a statement of the real fact which percepts represent. The presentationist, on the other hand, will more naturally regard it as a formula which is fitted to sum up and reconcile the percepts as the only ultimate facts. These are, however, merely different points of view in which neither ought to find anything absolutely contrary to his own doctrine. (CP 5.607 [1902])

Before moving on, it might be useful to form at least a rough idea of what Peirce means by a percept. One could simply say that it is what happens to be before the mind in the act of perceiving. If an example is needed, then perhaps a simple illustration used by Peirce will do: standing in a room, we see a number of objects, for instance chairs. In these acts, the chair, as a perceived object, is a percept.

Now, if we try to pick Peirce's dictionary entry to pieces, then we find that it involves at least five distinguishable characterisations of the relationship between representationism and presentationism. In rough summary, these are:

1. According to the representationists, percepts are representatives of some more fundamental reality. Presentationists, on the other hand, can admit that percepts are representational *in a certain sense*; they can be taken to represent their own generalisations. However, this does not amount to an acknowledgement that percepts stand for something behind them, that is, a reality hidden from view in the percept itself.
2. The crucial difference between the representationist and the presentationist is that the former views the percept as a kind of mental image or pictorial evidence, from which a *hidden cause* can be *inferentially* ascertained, while the latter holds that perception is a *direct consciousness of duality* in which the percept appears as an active force.
3. The representationist account of perception is based on an assumed division between subject and object;<sup>3</sup> the presentationist does not accept that there is any such division *in* perception.
4. The representationist holds that the experience of duality is a result of the mind's action, while the presentationist denies that there is anything intellectual in the duality. For the latter, it is a hard fact of experience that is essentially non-rational.
5. Representationists are inclined to accept realistic descriptions of the external world, but will also be drawn to materialistic or atomistic points of view. The percepts stand for the real facts in some manner. Presentationists tend to view such theories as formulas that bring unity to the percepts, but leaving the percepts as the only ultimate facts.

At the end of his dictionary definition, Peirce seems to suggest that the positions described are not contrary viewpoints. However, it is not clear whether this refers to the atomistic theory of reality or to the representationist and presentationist positions as wholes. The former option seems more plausible, because of the rather strong differences of opinion that separate the presentationist from the representationist.

Peirce's definition leaves many open questions, beginning with the actual identity of the disputing parties. Who are these presentationists and representationists, if they are not mere straw men constructed to make a point? Locke would seem to be natural candidate for a representationist, while Berkeley's theory of vision shows marked presentationist traits. In contemporary philosophy, Rorty might be described as a presentationist, although it is not certain that he would accept such a label, as he might reject the whole question as useless. Putnam's "direct realism" could perhaps more plausibly be construed as a presentationist position (see, e.g., Putnam, 1994). In general, it would seem that advocates of *immediate perception* would rank as presentationists. However, the more interesting question for our purposes concerns on what side of the fence Peirce belongs.

The definition is, in itself, non-committal; Peirce does not take a clear stand for either of the positions. Perhaps we can discern more than a touch of sympathy for presentationism between the lines. However, it may be that Peirce was somewhat undecided at this point in his development; in 1902, when the definition was published, Peirce was still struggling with his account of perception, and certain aspects of his theory of signs pointed strongly in the direction of representationism.

If we look at Peirce's philosophical production, it is possible to identify at least two distinct phases in which he discusses matters directly related to the question of representationism versus presentationism. In both of these periods, Peirce gives a general account of perception and cognition and sets it in a semiotic framework; yet, there are somewhat confusing differences between the theories. These divergences can be partly explicated with the help of the notions of presentationism and representationism, which Peirce outlines in his dictionary entry. Doing so, we can begin to answer the question whether Peirce is a representationist or a presentationist. The two periods referred to are the end of the 1860s – Peirce's first sign-theoretical phase – and the years surrounding 1903, when Peirce's later semeiotic system truly begins to find its shape.

### *Perception as Inference*

The early theory of perception and cognition is most clearly presented in some articles and manuscripts from 1868, the papers known collectively as the "cognition series". In the

published essays, one crucial part of Peirce's anti-Cartesian strategy is to deny that there is such a thing as a *first* cognition (W 2:177 [1868]). This claim is intimately connected with his contention that all thought is in signs. Much simplified, the picture Peirce presents is one of thought being a chain or flow of cognitions, each cognition being a sign determined by previous cognitions and capable of determining further cognitions. In a process of such a nature, it is not possible to find a first cognition that would be the starting-point of the whole affair, because it is the nature of a sign to stand for or represent something else for a third.<sup>4</sup>

Now it may be asked how this early semiotic theory of thought can account for perception and the influence of an external world upon the process of cognition. Namely, the denunciation of first cognitions involves not only a rejection of the rationalistic view that knowledge could be built up from absolutely indubitable basic cognitions, such as *cogito, ergo sum*, but also a rejection of the empiricist view that perception would rest on a foundation provided by simple sense-data or impressions. Perception is not clearly distinct from other types of cognitive activity, except perhaps in the relative sense of placing the emphasis on attention.

As a mode of cognition, perception is not perfectly autonomous. Furthermore, Peirce maintains that the act of perception does not involve a *direct* consciousness of the object. Any seemingly self-sufficient or singular perception brought before the mind is on closer inspection dependent on previous cognitions. This series of cognitive determinations is infinite in the sense that we cannot bring before our minds a first representation – or more accurately, *presentation* – that would serve as a substantial starting-point or foundation for the thought. As Peirce states the matter, “our experience of any object is developed by a process continuous from the very first” (W 2:191 [1868]). Cognition is a process that takes time, and no matter how direct and simple the apprehension of the object of consciousness seems to be, it is always already a memory of a previous cognition by the time we contemplate it. In other words, every cognition is a judgment (W 2:179 [1868]).

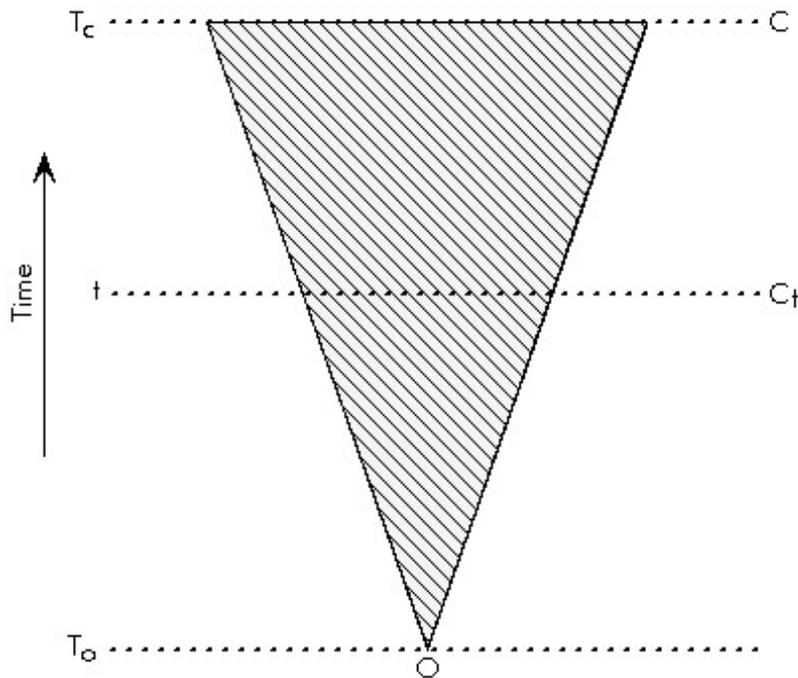
This is not an easy point to express clearly, but Peirce's contention may perhaps be restated as follows: We set out from a cognition of an object, say a chair. We know that there was a time when we were not aware of the chair in question; therefore, it must have entered our mind or consciousness at some point. Would it then be possible to identify some kind of first

perception of the object in question and single that out as a foundation for knowledge? Peirce's answer is no, because when we move backwards in time in our analysis, we will not be able to locate the *absolute* moment when we became cognitively aware of the object. Even if we focus of what seems to be a direct perception of the chair, here and now, the actual cognition is still not given to us immediately; it is something that emerges in time. Therefore Peirce claims that "although the act of perception cannot be represented as whole, by a series of cognitions determining one another, since it involves the necessity of an infinite series, yet there is no perception so near to the object that it is not determined by another which precedes it – for when we reach the point which no determining cognition precedes we find the degree of consciousness there to be just *zero*, and in short we have reached the external object itself, and not a representation of it" (W 2:179 [1868]). However, he then asserts that the object does not exist in itself; its being is relative to thought.

At any moment we are in possession of certain information, that is, of cognitions which have been logically derived by induction and hypothesis from previous cognitions which are less general, less distinct, and of which we have a less lively consciousness. These in their turn have been derived from others still less general, less distinct, and less vivid; and so on back to the ideal first, which is quite singular, and quite out of consciousness. This ideal first is the particular thing-in-itself. It does not exist *as such*. That is, there is no thing which is in-itself in the sense of not being relative to the mind, though things which are relative to the mind doubtless are, apart from that relation. (W 2:238-239 [1868])

Peirce illustrates his conception with a triangle standing on its apex (see fig. 1). Here, C stands for the perceptual cognition, which might *seem* to be perfectly simple and non-inferential. The external object is marked with an O.  $T_o$  stands for the moment when the object begins to affect us, and  $T_c$  for the time when we actually become cognitively aware of the object. Peirce's point is that there is always an interval of time between  $T_o$  and  $T_c$ . It may be so short – almost immediate – that we are not directly aware of it; but Peirce maintains that preceding the seemingly basic perceptual cognition there is actually an infinite series of perceptions, emanating from the external object. All this, of course, is based on the view that time is continuous and infinitely divisible, and that cognition is a temporal process. We can analytically approach the external object by increasing  $t$  in the expression  $T_c-t$ , but in doing so

we will never find a determinate moment, at which we would have a self-sufficient perception of the object – a perception that would not also be a representation. The object, in this theory, is just a limit that can be approached, but never absolutely had as something substantial; if we were to entertain the hypothesis that it could be reached, we would find that there would be no consciousness or representation of it left in our minds. Another way to express the same thing would be to say that the *first impression of sense* is not cognition, but merely the limit of cognition (W 2:191 [1868]).



**Figure 1. The Process of Perception**

Peirce states that “the process we have found to compose any step of perception, a process of the determination of one judgment by another, is one of *inference* in the strict sense. And it is, also, plain that hypothesis must enter into this process everywhere” (W 2:180 [1868]). Furthermore, this is equally true of both the subjects and the predicates of such judgments. The act of attention, which determines the subject of the thought, is determined by

previous acts of attention. From this, Peirce draws a rather far-reaching conclusion. He claims that

...inductions also take place in the process of perception. Hence every cognition we are in possession of is a judgment both whose subject and predicate are general terms. And, therefore, it is not merely the case, as we saw before, that universals have reality upon this theory, but also that there are nothing but universals which have an immediate reality. (W 2:180 [1868])

This is a logical outcome of Peirce's denial of first cognitions and his early inferentialist theory of perception. It also indicates a *nominalistic* aspect of his thought. The singular object, which is construed as the ideal boundary of cognition, is denied immediate reality. This, in its turn, amounts to an admission that nothing out of cognition (or, as we might say, *signification*) has any generality. In other words, thoughts, which are of the nature of signs, are the only true reality. This is a variant of idealism; it can be dubbed *semiotic idealism*, which in its strongest form entails the proposition that "whatever there is depends on its existence upon cognition" (Savan, 1983, p. 1). That is, radical semiotic idealism encompasses the representationist dictum "*all is representative*" (W 1:324 [1865]).

Peirce notes that his position could be criticised for having the implication that we are not affected by a real external world; but this, he says, is not a consequence of the theory. Peirce argues as follows: If we examine any of our cognitions in particular, we find that it is wholly determined by previous cognitions. However, we also discover that if we take the sum of our cognitions at any given time, then at any determinate time before, we were not in possession of a set of cognitions sufficient completely to determine the present state of cognition (W 2:180 [1868]). In other words, our cognitive world displays signs of growth, and this growth cannot be explained by cognitions determining cognitions. Therefore, we *infer* the existence of objects that cause these changes in cognition. In this way, we can see that singular objects have a reality after all; but paradoxically, that reality is not properly singular, but general.

...a knowledge that cognition is not wholly determined by cognition is a knowledge of something external to the mind, that is the singulars. Singulars therefore have a reality. But singulars in general is not singular but general.

We can cognize any part of the singulars however determinate, but however determinate the part it is still general. And therefore what I maintain is that while singulars are real they are so only in their generality; but singulars in their absolute discrimination or singularity are mere ideals. Or in other words that the absolute determination which singularity supposes, can only take place by attribution, which is essentially significative or cognitive, and that therefore it cannot belong to what is wholly out of signification or cognition. In short, those things which we call singulars exist, but the character of singularity which we attribute to them is self-contradictory. (W 2:180-181 [1868])

It is by now sufficiently obvious that Peirce's early theory of perception constitutes a variant of representationism. Peirce postulates the singular object as a cause, which can be known only inferentially, as the initial limit of cognitive consciousness. What seems to be a direct consciousness or experience of the object is shown to be mediate. The pure doctrine of idealism, to which Peirce subscribes here, entails that all realities are nominal, significative, and cognitive (W 2:181 [1868]).

However, to strengthen the case for this reading it may be useful to turn to an even earlier text, a manuscript titled "On the Doctrine of Immediate Perception".<sup>5</sup> In this short essay, Peirce examines the "celebrated application" of common-sensism to the theory of perception, and offers a critique of the resulting doctrine of immediate perception.<sup>6</sup>

Peirce begins his analysis by identifying two contrary standpoints: the common-sensist view *CS*, according to which it is "a fact that consciousness testifies to our perceiving the non-ego" and the inferentialist position *I*, according to which "our knowledge of the non-ego is inferential" (W 1:154 [1864]). In other words, Peirce presents us with the alternative of accepting immediate perception or rejecting it. Next, he argues that if *CS* is right, then (a) the testimony must be given in the act of perception itself, or else (b) it must be an axiom concerning perception. Peirce rejects (a) on the grounds that every perception involves and contains a proposition; it is therefore an instance of predication (this he seems to hold to be self-evident). For somewhat unclear reasons this leads to the conclusion that the subject "is not *thought* but *thought of*", and that it therefore "does not enter into the field of consciousness" (W 1:154 [1864]). Alternative (b) is also found to be problematic, because the axiom would not explain anything; a genuine axiom is one that "arises in the mind in view of a manifold of phenomena, and which enables us to connect this manifold into a unity". According to Peirce,

holding the axiomatic version of the doctrine renders the connection of ego and non-ego inexplicable. Consequently, both “these alternatives [(a) and (b)] must be given up” (W 1:155 [1864]). We are thus left with *I*: the replacement of the common-sense doctrine of immediate perception with inferentialism – arguably a key component of representationism, as it holds that the percept is a kind of mental image or pictorial evidence. This does not mean that the object is directly given in the percept; the percept is a thought-sign from which a hidden cause can be inferentially ascertained. Peirce goes as far as to state that perception “is in fact a mere residuum of analysis”. The cognitions we experience are propositions, “in which the non-ego enters only as something to which certain predicates are referred” (W 1:155 [1864]). There is no direct experience of objects; they are only known in predication.

We should perhaps not make too much of such an early effort as “On the Doctrine of Immediate Perception”, with its unarticulated presuppositions and obscure argumentative leaps. Yet, the text provides hard evidence for the fact that Peirce at this phase of his development does not accept the doctrine of immediate perception, which is all we need here. As an inferentialist, Peirce must be a representationist that rejects presentationism.

Still, it may perhaps be asked how Peirce’s representationism can accommodate his well-known refusal to acknowledge any thing-in-itself; it would seem, after all, that the object is a *hidden* cause of cognition. So it would be, on Peirce’s terms, *if* it were singular. However, the object can be known in its generality; therefore, Peirce is led to state that singularity (consisting of perfect definiteness and individuality) is self-contradictory. In fact, in “Potentia ex Impotentia” Peirce describes this as a *radicalised* representationist strategy:

The representationists tell us that we can have no knowledge of things-in-themselves. But we go further and deny that we can so much as attach any consistent meaning to the “absolutely incognizable”. Hence if we mean anything by the very things themselves, they are cognizable. (W 2:191 [1868])

The only way that Peirce can consistently maintain this position is to hold that reality is what would be given in final cognition, if such a thing could be reached. This is what Peirce claims that we actually mean by reality: it is the general object as known in an ideal final state of cognition. Such knowledge is not properly speaking individual, but communal; it could only

be reached by a social and self-correcting process, in which individual errors are gradually eradicated. Here, then, we see how Peirce's early representationism fits in with his social conception of inquiry and what is often (albeit somewhat misleadingly) called his consensus-theory of reality.

The pieces of the puzzle seem to fit together; yet, there is something uncomfortable about Peirce's solution. His conclusion commits him to the curious claim that singulars, which are not general, are as such mere ideals and in possession of no immediate reality; yet, they are real as parts of our inferences, when in fact they are general. The upshot of this paradoxical point of view, which Peirce understandably avoids explicating in his published articles, seems to be a neglect of unique individuality or existence, or what Peirce later calls *hecceity* – that which makes the chair appear as a single object, as *this* or *that* chair, to a perceiver and not just as a representative of chairs in general. What seems to be missing, or at least very difficult to accommodate, is the direct clash between ego and non-ego that Peirce later pinpoints as a paradigmatic experience of secondness (see, e.g., PPM 146-147 [1903]; CP 8.266 [1903]). Furthermore, representationism leads to a variant of nominalism; in “Questions on Reality”, one of the manuscripts preceding the published cognition series, Peirce characterises his communal conception of reality as nominalistic, adding only the qualification that it is “quite opposed to that individualism which is often thought to be coextensive with nominalism” (W 2:175 [1868]). Here, individualism could mean a lack of respect for community, but it may also refer to the affirmation of cognitively significant individual objects.

However, when we move on from Peirce's 1868 writings we find that he quietly begins to turn away from certain representationist positions. In fact, already in the published cognition series articles we find Peirce disapproving of nominalism (W 2:239 [1868]), drawing instead realistic conclusions from the generality of the object; and in a 1871 review of the works of Berkeley, we can learn that he considers himself to be both a realist and a believer in immediate perception (see W 2:471). This tendency grows stronger as we move forward in time.

Yet, certain aspects of the representationist viewpoint are clearly present in Peirce's early pragmatism, as expressed in the manuscripts for a book on logic Peirce worked on in 1872 and 1873. In these writings, Peirce emphasises that any object of thought is a result of

interpretation, and sharply denies that we could have immediate perceptions of external things (W 3:33 [1872]).

All that we directly experience is our thought – what passes through our minds; and that only, at the moment at which it is passing through. We here see, thoughts determining and causing other thoughts, and a chain of reasoning or of association is produced. But the beginning and end of this chain, are not distinctly perceived. (W 3:29 [1872])

It is difficult to say precisely when Peirce truly discards this mentalistic account of perception; it is, most likely, a gradual process. Christopher Hookway (1985; 2000) has emphasised that Peirce makes a turn toward realism in the mid-1880s, when he criticises Hegel and other idealists for ignoring the so-called outward clash, and at the same time recognises that certain signs (indices) can have a special connection to the external world – a bond that cannot be accounted for by reference to thought alone. At the same time, Peirce more and more emphatically embraces the doctrine of immediate perception, at times in declared opposition to idealism (see, e.g., PPM 146 [1903]; cf. CP 1.38 [c. 1890]; CP 5.539 [c. 1902]). In effect, this constitutes a criticism of his own earlier position. However, it takes more than thirty years before he begins to formulate a viable alternative.

### *Double Awareness*

In several writings of the early 1900s, Peirce presents a new theory of perception. This later approach involves its own problems, primarily because Peirce offers a couple of seemingly contradictory accounts of the percept around the year 1903. However, let us first sketch Peirce's mature theory of perception, mainly following the outlines given in the manuscript "Telepathy".

At first glance, it might seem that there is not a significant change after all. Peirce continues to deny that cognition would be built up from simple sensations or impressions. Moreover, perception is still approached from the point of view of cognition (see, e.g., MS 939:29 [1905]). However, a more thorough examination reveals that some substantial developments have indeed occurred. In particular, Peirce now makes a crucial distinction

between the *perceptual judgment* and the *percept*, the latter being the object of the former. Of course, Peirce could have made this distinction earlier; however, in that case he would have held that the percept, upon closer inspection, is of the nature of a sign or judgment as well. In the later theory of perception, the percept is not representational in that sense; it does not *stand for* anything, and it involves, as such, no purpose.

Let us say that, as I sit here writing, I see on the other side of my table, a yellow chair with a green cushion. That will be what psychologists term a “percept” (*res percepta*). They also frequently call it an “image”. With this term I shall pick no quarrel. Only one must be on one’s guard against a false impression that it might insinuate. Namely, an “image” usually means something intended to represent, – virtually professing to represent, – something else, real or ideal. So understood, the word “image” would be a misnomer for a percept. The chair I appear to see makes no professions of any kind, essentially embodies no intentions of any kind, does not stand for anything. It obtrudes itself upon my gaze; but not as a deputy for anything else, not “as” anything. It simply knocks at the portal of my soul and stands there in the doorway. (CP 7.619 [c. 1903])

According to Peirce, the percept is “a single event happening *hic et nunc*. It cannot be generalised without losing its essential character. For it is an actual passage at arms between the non-ego and the ego” (CP 2.146 [c. 1902]). Moreover, the percept cannot be described; one cannot adequately express in words what one sees, feels, hears, etc. (CP 2.141 [c. 1902]). We may have to settle for metaphorical characterisations; in one manuscript, Peirce notes that our percepts resemble moving pictures accompanied by feelings, sounds, etc. (MS 939:24 [1905]).

According to Peirce, the percept has three identifying traits: it (1) contributes something positive to knowledge and (2) compels the perceiver to acknowledge it; but it (3) offers no reason for its appearance nor makes any pretension of reasonableness (CP 7.622 [c. 1903]). It is as it is, without appealing to anything for support. In itself, the percept does not contain any positive assertion. It is silent, but insistent (CP 7.620 [c. 1903]). We cannot dismiss it by an act of will – it is present by brute force, a fact of secondness (cf. CP 1.253 [c. 1902]).<sup>7</sup> The chair is there, acting upon us. It cannot be rejected by make-belief doubts; we are forced to confess that it *appears*.

To avoid misunderstandings, it needs to be emphasised that the percept is not a first impression or a sense-datum (CP 2.141 [c. 1902]). The percept obtrudes on the perceiver in its

entirety; there is no accompanying awareness of how that object has been constructed. Peirce admits that a percept, such as the chair or a sudden yell, can be said to consist of distinct sense-perceptions, synthesised into an object by the mind; yet, we *experience* the percept as a whole. The hypothesis that the sense-qualities are “first disconnected and not objectified” is psychological theory, and does not affect Peirce’s logical (or perhaps better, phaneroscopic) point of view (CP 7.624 [c. 1903]).

A percept can be said to involve two different kinds of elements. On the one hand, “there are the qualities of feeling or sensation, each of which is something positive and *sui generis*, being such as it is quite regardless of how or what anything else is” (CP 7.625 [c. 1903]). The cushion of the chair has a certain colour, for instance. These are elements of *firstness*. On the other hand, we also immediately perceive certain relations in the percept; the perception of such connections is “a perception at once of two opposed objects, – a double awareness” (CP 7.625 [c. 1903]). These Peirce identifies as elements of *secondness*. They give the percept its characteristic singleness; in other words, the percept is a *singular* object, both definite and individual (cf. MS 515:24-25).<sup>8</sup> It is not general (in Peirce’s sense) because it leaves no gaps to be filled out by an interpreter. Nor is it vague in the sense of leaving something implicit or unstated. It is, naively, what it is. The percept, *as it appears*, cannot be further specified or explicated; it exhibits itself in full, and affords no range of interpretation (CP 7.625 [c. 1903]). Percepts do not contain implicit elements (CP 2.603 [1902]).

Although Peirce does not explicitly say so, the percept belongs to the category of secondness in two senses. Firstly, its singularity is directly perceived in the constellation of dyadic relations between its qualitative parts. Secondly, as something experienced as a brute force, the singular percept is in a dyadic relation to the self; in fact, the dichotomy of ego and non-ego is constituted through relations of this kind. Appearing as an other, the percept is whole and undivided, albeit upon reflection, it can be said to contain a multitude of different parts, discernible through the connections between its firstnesses (CP 7.625 [c. 1903]).

From this brief sketch, it should be evident that the percept is not a rational or cognitive entity in the proper sense of the term. However, perception is not strictly restricted to percepts. According to Peirce, in addition to perception proper, wherein the percept is forced upon the perceiver without any reason or pretension to reason, there “will be a wider genus of things

*partaking* of the character of perception, if there be any matter of cognition which exerts a force upon us *tending* to make us acknowledge it without any *adequate* reason” (CP 7.623 [c. 1903]). The percept does not involve any description, but it is apt to bring forth a judgment of the type “that appears to be a plastic chair”. Such a *perceptual judgment* is a mental description of a percept, in language or other symbols (MS 939:25 [1905]). The perceptual assertion is almost as compelling as the percept itself; there is very little power, if any, that the perceiver can exert on such judgments; “the propositions which, though entirely unlike percepts, [a man] deliberately finds himself forced to admit as truly representing elements of his percepts, are beyond criticism, since they are beyond control” (MS 693:152 [1904]; cf. CP 4.540 [1906]). As Peirce states, the difference in forcefulness between the percept and the perceptual judgment is practically negligible (CP 7.627 [c. 1903]).

What, then, is the crucial difference between the percept and the perceptual judgment? It is that the perceptual judgment is a *sign* of the percept; this brings Peirce’s third category – thirdness, the category of representation, mediation, and thought – into the picture (CP 7.630 [c. 1903]). As a sign, the perceptual judgment is representational; its object is the percept. In other words, the perceptual judgment *professes* to represent the percept. Thus, it contains an element of purposiveness or rationality, albeit very slight.

According to Peirce, the perceptual judgment cannot represent the percept logically, because as non-rational the percept has no logical consequences; nor is the representative relation iconic, because the perceptual judgment does not resemble the percept in any significant manner (see PPM 160 [1903]).

There remains but one way in which it can represent the percept; namely, as an index, or true symptom, just as a weather-cock indicates the direction of the wind or a thermometer the temperature. There is no warrant for saying that the perceptual judgment actually is such an index of the percept, other than the *ipse dixit* of the perceptual judgment itself. And even if it be so, what is an index, or true symptom? It is something which, without any rational necessitation, is forced by blind fact to correspond to its object. To say, then, that the perceptual judgment is an infallible symptom of the character of the percept means only that in some unaccountable manner we find ourselves impotent to refuse our assent to it in the presence of the percept, and that there is no appeal from it. (CP 7.628 [1903])

As a sign that professes to represent its object, the perceptual judgment does represent *something*, whether truly or falsely (CP 7.630 [c. 1903]). Peirce describes the perceptual judgments as “stenographic reports” of the evidence of the senses; and as such, they may be erroneous (CP 2.141 [c. 1902]). This dichotomy of reliability and deceptiveness is not applicable to the percept. Furthermore, a perceptual judgment – in a sense the most private sign there is – involves a communicative element. According to Peirce, perceptual judgments can be characterised as utterances directed to a future self, called forth by the percept that in itself states nothing. Such judgments need not employ the syntax of speech – they may be diagrammatic – but they are still propositional and of the character of an *assertion* (MS 642:18 [1909]).

Another important difference between the percept and the perceptual judgment is that the percept is definite and explicit, while the perceptual judgment is to some extent indeterminate (CP 7.632-633 [c. 1903]). This means that the latter leaves certain latitudes of interpretation. Take, for instance, the perceptual judgment “the chair appears to be brown”. This gives a certain freedom to the interpreter; he or she is invited, metaphorically speaking, to take any brown thing he or she likes, and see if it agrees in colour with the table. In other words, the perceptual judgment involves *generality* (cf. EP 2:394 [c. 1906]). Moreover, the perceptual judgment lacks specificity; it does not say what particular hue or shade of brown it is predicating of the chair. It is, in this sense, essentially *indefinite* or *vague*.

In sum, the percept is, as an object, distinguished from the perceptual judgment in that it is determinate and self-sufficient. However, there is a twist to this story. Our knowledge of the percept is mediated by perceptual judgments; strictly speaking, we do not have any direct *knowledge* of the perceptual object, apart from the fact that it exerts a force on us.

We know nothing about the percept otherwise than by testimony of the perceptual judgment, excepting that we feel the blow of it, the reaction of it against us, and we see the contents of it arranged into an object, in its totality, – excepting also, of course, what the psychologists are able to make out inferentially. But the moment we fix our minds upon it and *think* the least thing about the percept, it is the perceptual judgment that tells us what we so “perceive”. For this and other reasons, I propose to consider the percept as it is immediately interpreted in the perceptual judgment, under the name of the “percipuum”. The percipuum, then, is what forces itself upon your

acknowledgment, without any why or wherefore, so that if anybody asks you why you should regard it as appearing so and so, all you can say is, “I can’t help it. That is how I see it.” (CP 7.643 [c. 1903])

The percipuum could be characterised as a quasi-inference from or a composite photograph of percepts (cf. EP 2:62 [1901]; Hookway, 2002). It is like an interpretation that is forced upon us, but for which no reason can be given (CP 7.677 [c. 1903]). Here, we may detect a well-known semeiotic distinction: within the context of perception, the percept is equivalent to the *dynamical* object, while the percipuum is practically the same as Peirce’s *immediate* object.

Peirce notes that we ought not to refuse the name of perception to many things that are rightly rejected as unreal, such as dreams and hallucinations. Strictly speaking, they are not *existent* percepts; but *as* appearing, they display all the important characteristics of percepts. On the most basic level of perception, we do not encounter facts in the full sense of the word, but the appearances of facts, without any analysis (MS 12:3 [1912]). The percepts can be described as experience proper, but they afford no certainty (CP 2.142 [c. 1902]). Moreover, the perceptual judgments do not declare that certain percepts are illusory; we have no other means of finding out whether a manifestation is real or not than to test it by trying to suppress it, asking others, or experimenting on the percipuum (cf. EP 2:65 [1901]; MS 641:16 [1909]; CP 6.334 [c. 1909]).<sup>9</sup> This is a fallible process; there is no percipuum so absolute as not to be subject to possible error (CP 7.676 [c. 1903]). While our percepts may be taken to be beyond doubt *as* seconds, perception nevertheless does not provide even a weak foundation for knowledge (cf. CP 2.143 [c. 1902]; CP 6.497 [c. 1906]; Short, 2000).<sup>10</sup> In this later theory of perception, there is no appeal to impressions or other simple epistemological building blocks; this much, at least, it shares with the early representationist position.

...perceptual facts are a very imperfect report of the percepts; but I cannot go behind that record. As for going back to the first impressions of sense, as some logicians recommend me to do, that would be the most chimerical of undertakings. (CP 2.141 [c. 1902]; cf. MS 939:29 [1905])<sup>11</sup>

This view of the relation between the percept and the perceptual judgment forms the core of Peirce’s criticism of the positivists (see CP 8.144 [1901]; CP 5.597 [1903]) – a

standpoint that can be found in his earlier as well as in his later theory of perception. In his mature philosophy, it is further explicated as an anti-nominalistic stance; according to Peirce, the “‘first impressions of sense’ are hypothetical creations of nominalistic metaphysics” (MS 860:15 [c. 1896]). As a part of his rejection of the “nominalistic heresy”, he denies their existence.<sup>12</sup>

By now, it ought to be sufficiently evident that Peirce explicitly subscribes to the central tenet of presentationism – that is, to the doctrine of immediate perception of the external world – in his later philosophy. Peirce’s acceptance of the doctrine is shown by the fact that we supposedly directly recognise relations in the percept (see PPM 161 [1903]). Occasionally, Peirce suggests – quite reasonably – that it might be better to speak of *direct consciousness of duplicity*, rather than of immediate perception as Kant and Reid do (PPM 145 [1903]). On the other hand, this is merely a matter of words; the important thing for our purposes is the entailed denial of full-scale semiotic idealism. The 1860s theory leads Peirce into representationism, because it does not allow for objects that are not signs – or, to be more precise, for any non-semiotic but substantial aspect of the perceptual object. This is precisely what percepts are in Peirce’s later theory.

### *Problematic Percepts*

Almost inevitably, certain objections will be raised against the above reading of Peirce’s mature theory of perception and its relation to semeiotic. “Presentationism” may be felt to be entirely inappropriate as a description of his thought, for surely Peirce – the father of a whole “philosophy of representation” – must be a representationist. However, here we should keep in mind the Peircean definition of the term. Peirce’s philosophy may well be classifiable as representationalist in some sense, without thereby being committed to representationism regarding perception.

However, quite apart from this somewhat contrived play with isms, the presentationist interpretation of Peirce could be challenged on strong grounds. To begin with, there is a complication in Peirce’s later theory of perception that has so far been ignored in our discussion; namely, he does at times write as if the percept were of the nature of a sign after all (see, e.g., CP 4.539 [1906]; MS 641:19 [1909]). Obviously, this casts serious doubts on the

claim that Peirce would have developed from a representationist to a presentationist. The discrepancy is so conspicuous that it cannot simply be ignored. Only two paths are possible: either we contend that Peirce's assertion that the percept is not a sign is confused, or else we must explain how the percept can be said to be both semiotic and non-semiotic.

If the first course were chosen, it would be necessary to account for Peirce's adherence to the doctrine of immediate perception in purely semiotic terms. The most promising option would then be to follow Joseph Ransdell (1979; 1986), and argue that perceptual representation and immediacy are reconcilable through *iconicity*. That is, as the most important function of the iconic sign is to display in itself some relevant feature of the object, the icon is simultaneously representative and perceptually immediate (Ransdell, 1986, p. 69). In other words, the icon would *reveal* its object partially or wholly – not inferentially, but directly *and* representationally. In Ransdell's (1979) words, there “is iconic representation in *every* case of sensory perception in virtue of the fact that a form (content of consciousness, “Firstness”) is referred to some object as the form (quality, character, phenomenal structure) of that object” (p. 57). He then suggests that the “constitutive or definitive intent” of the perception is that the conscious form (intentional or immediate object) should in relevant respects be equivalent to the form of the real (or dynamical) object. Somewhat cryptically, Ransdell (1979, p. 57) contends that the doctrine of immediate perception entails that immediate object and dynamical object are *formally and* materially identical in veridical perception.

Ransdell's viewpoint possesses considerable appeal, as it seems to lead to a wholly semiotic solution to the dilemma of Peirce's apparent wavering between representationism and presentationism. Because of iconicity the percept can simultaneously be a representation and a presentation. To use Ransdell's (1979, p. 58) example, an accurate map (sign) can be said to offer an immediate perception of a territory (object) since the relevant geographical features are immediately present to the consciousness that grasps the form of the map. That is, in reading a correct map we simultaneously perceive certain features of the territory; yet the map is obviously a representation of its object. In general, an object can be said to be iconically *in* a complex representational relation, which consists of various symbolic, indexical, and iconic functions; but as a logical part of the representation, it is not identical with the relation itself (cf. Ransdell, 1986, p. 74).

Yet, Ransdell's account can be criticised on three grounds. Firstly, it does not seem to accord with Peirce's contention that the characteristic immediacy of perception is primarily attributable to awareness or experience of secondness. Ransdell's conception of immediacy seems to be restricted to firstness. To be fair, Ransdell does not claim to give a full account of Peirce's theory of perception, which in his view would at least involve an account of the function of indices in cognition. Nonetheless, Ransdell seems to identify the relevant immediacy of perception with the percept-icon (pure firstness) – and this does not seem to be Peirce's view. Even in his early writings, Peirce explicitly denies that we have self-sufficient images in perception (see W 2:235-237 [1868]); it is not clear how Ransdell's perceptual icons differ from intuitions, the alleged self-evident cognitions for which Peirce leaves no role in philosophy. Of course, as such this does not invalidate Ransdell's account; it merely suggests that his point of view may differ from that of Peirce.

The second criticism is perhaps more substantial. Having put forth the icon as the solution to the problem of immediate versus mediate perception, Ransdell (1979) notes that there is actually no logical immediacy because “all perception is mediated in the sense of being representative” (p. 59). Therefore he advocates replacing the misleading term “immediate perception” with the more accurate concept of “direct perception”.<sup>13</sup> Ransdell further suggests that the directness of perception is closely connected to – if not identical with – *self*-representation, as opposed to the kind of *other*-representation characteristic of iconic signs such as maps – although he rightly notes that the distinction between other-representing and self-representing iconic sign is not clear-cut. A clarification of this would supposedly require an account of the reference of the icon and the introduction of the notion of indexical sign. It is unfortunate that Ransdell does not pursue this path much further, for here his position gets rather puzzling. Evidently, he wants to connect his view of the epistemic function of the icon with his idealistic interpretation of the final object of the inquiry. Ransdell (1986) states that “all objects without exception, are directly perceivable in principle, and of course many of them are in fact directly perceived, in the sense given to them here through the notion of iconic self-representation” (p. 74). This involves a reference to a *possible* true opinion, in which the object is iconically self-represented or directly present, and which needs no indexical reference to anything outside of the object. Although Ransdell does not say so, the final opinion is evidently

a state without genuine secondness, perhaps befitting a Berkeleyan idealist (cf. PPM 190 [1903]).

What does it entail to make the direct perception of objects entirely dependent on the ideal final opinion in this manner? Is it plausible to say that person *A*'s perception of object *x* at a given time and place is direct if and only if it accords with the ideal iconic self-representation of the final opinion where all objects would be revealed? The direct awareness of a table or chair seems rather distant from such concerns – not to speak of a direct punch in the face (cf. CP 5.539 [c. 1902]). The trouble with the idealistic interpretation lies in its almost hermetic view of the self-sufficiency of semiosis; the process seems to be reducible to the self-revelation of objects. Ransdell would probably dispute this, but the view of perception that emerges from his account seems curiously disconnected from the concreteness of experience.

Finally, it is not at all clear how Ransdell could account for Peirce's contention that the percept is not a sign. Keeping in mind Peirce's view that anything whatever has its qualitative “flavour *sui generis*”, and that firstness is the category of possibility and feeling rather than of actuality and experiential contact, we see that this reading ignores the *experience* of otherness that is the key feature of perception according to Peirce. In other words, an account of direct perception only in terms of iconicity will fail to capture Peirce's affirmation of the bruteness of experiential acquaintance. The hypothesis that the percept is an icon or an iconic sign tries to escape this recognition of an existential aspect of reality that, in a pertinent sense, is *not* semiotic. Within the framework of Peirce's mature semeiotic, this conclusion is difficult to avoid; and possibly for this very reason, Ransdell (1986, p. 70) is led to maintain that iconicity presupposes a relation that is *not* intrinsically semiotic, namely that of *likeness*. However, as an attempt to explicate Peirce's point of view, this is less than satisfactory. The object would be in contact with the world of signs through primary non-semiotic relations of likeness. Then, either there should be some kind of direct experience of this relation, something an icon cannot provide of itself, or else the object is merely a result of inference, in which we conclude that our percepts are caused by something similar to those percepts. Neither option seems to be compatible with Ransdell's (1976) claim that all experience is of a semiotic character, and that the sign-relation is “omnipresent in all phenomena” (p. 98).

Bernstein (1964) provides a quite different solution to the dilemma of the semiotic character of the percept: Peirce is simply careless in his use of terms. Sometimes when Peirce says “percept”, he means the percept as interpreted, that is, as percipuum. In “What Pragmatism Is”, Peirce maintains “that our very percepts are the results of cognitive elaboration” (EP 2:336 [1905]). Furthermore, in his criticism of Pearson’s *The Grammar of Science*, he states that the percepts, our “logically initial data”, are of the nature of thought, and further maintains that they contain three kinds of psychical ingredients: their qualities of feeling, their reaction against the will, and their generalising or associating element (EP 2:62 [1901]). Ostensibly, these statements conflict with the basic ideas of Peirce’s mature theory of perception, as they have been reconstructed above. However, if we accept Bernstein’s solution, and in place of “percept” read “percipuum”, then it is possible to preserve a tolerable level of consistency in Peirce’s account of perception.

This analysis could be sharpened and expanded in various ways. Rosenthal, for instance, has argued for what could be called a double-level theory of perception, in which all of the central perceptual components – that is, percept, percipuum, and perceptual judgment – may be taken in a narrow or broad sense. Roughly, the narrow sense is an analytical stopping point devoid of reference to the future, and as such focused on the secondness aspect of perception; while the broader sense refers to perception as fully temporal and permeated by interpretative elements (see Rosenthal, 2004). The ensuing conceptual apparatus is perhaps somewhat cumbersome, but it does possess the advantage of being able to accommodate Peirce’s peculiar temporal-perceptual concepts of *antecept/antecipuum* and *ponecept/ponecipuum*, which refer to the recent memory and near anticipation connected to the percept/percipuum (see CP 7.648 [c. 1903]; cf. CP 8.123 n. 20 [c. 1902]). Still, one could argue that this can be accomplished by taking the percept as the narrow and the percipuum as the broad sense of the same perceptual element.

Be that as it may, here it is sufficient to note that Bernstein’s explanation could be complemented by the observation that the percept may be viewed differently on different levels of inquiry. Peirce suggests as much when he states that “percepts are signs for psychology; but they are not so for phenomenology” (CP 8.300 [1904]). In other words, it is possible to inquire into the underlying causes of percepts in psychology, and probably in other special sciences, as

when we find that a certain object appears in a certain way because of the constitution of the brain or our sensory organs. However, what is so investigated is not a percept for the philosophical science of phaneroscopy. We could add that semeiotic involves both perspectives; as a dynamical object, the percept is not of the nature of a representation, but as an immediate object – that is, a percipuum – of a perceptual judgment, it displays a certain representational character, and is so far like a sign. Admittedly, not all of Peirce’s later comments on perception are fully compatible with this reconstruction;<sup>14</sup> but overall, it seems to provide the most credible frame for connecting Peirce’s reflections on perception with his semeiotic.

In two articles that in many respects accord with the proposed interpretation, Carl Hausman suggests that we ought to distinguish percept<sub>1</sub>, the percept as dynamical object, from percept<sub>2</sub>, the percept as a result of cognitive elaboration – the latter being a *generalisation* of the former (see Hausman, 1990; 1997). While Hausman also holds that the percipuum can be understood as an immediate object, he distinguishes it from both percept<sub>1</sub> and percept<sub>2</sub> (Hausman, 1990, p. 284; 1997, pp. 188-189). Furthermore, he argues that the percept as interpreted is properly speaking a perceptual judgment, not a percipuum. The role of the percipuum is supposedly to “play a mediating role by which judgments originate initially from the prompting of percepts(1) and are terminated by the resistance of percepts(2)” (Hausman, 1990, p. 283).

Hausman is on the right track in drawing attention to the fact that percepts tend to be generalised. Only in this way can they act as substantial objects in cognition, since a percept<sub>1</sub> is a direct and non-continuous presence. However, his solution, which involves four elements ordered as percept<sub>1</sub>-percipuum-judgment-percept<sub>2</sub>, is somewhat contrived. At any rate, it is difficult to see what the precise role of the percipuum is, especially as Hausman presents it as an interpretation *preceding* judgment in his illustrations (see Hausman, 1997, p. 192).<sup>15</sup> It would be more natural to say that the percipuum is an embryonic generalisation, arising *in* the act of judgment caused by the percept, but susceptible of being contrasted and combined with other percipuums in further interpretations – that is, in more developed generalisations. Moreover, Peirce’s references to the mental or cognitive character of the percept may be understood as an acknowledgement of the fact that any seemingly direct percept is a product

influenced by previous habits, inherent or acquired. To take an almost too obvious example, the perception of colours may be partly determined by culture. Yet, the fact that inquiry may reveal that the “given” percept – or percept<sub>1</sub>, if Hausman’s terms are employed – is actually a construct does not eradicate the immediate duality of the percept. In other words, the assertion that the percept is a product of cognitive operations is not so much a matter of separating two senses of the percept, as it is of adopting a non-phaneroscopic – principally psychological – perspective on the matter.

In sum, then, it can be argued that some of the most blatant contradictions in Peirce's mature account of perception can be resolved by acknowledging a distinction between percept and percipuum as well as identifying the relevant level of investigation. Admittedly, this solution should be worked out in more detail, in particular the relationship between the different modes of inquiry; but it seems to provide the most plausible way forward at this stage of the study.

### *Ultimate Realities*

Next, let us consider a different, perhaps even more serious, problem facing the proposed reading of Peirce as a presentationist. Namely, it may be asked how Peirce’s later account of perception can be reconciled with his oft-repeated claim that the object of a sign is also a sign. Although a characteristic feature of his early semeiotic, this position can also be found in several later writings, perhaps most clearly in the following excerpt from “Reason’s Rules”:

...the object of a sign, that to which it, virtually at least, professes to be applicable, can itself be only a sign. For example, the object of an ordinary proposition is [a] generalization from a group of perceptual facts. It represents those facts. These perceptual facts are themselves abstract representatives, through we know not precisely what intermediaries, of the percepts themselves; and these are themselves viewed, and are, – if the judgment has any truth, – representations, primarily of impressions of sense, ultimately of a dark underlying something, which cannot be specified without its manifesting itself as a sign of something below. There is, we think, and reasonably think, a limit to this, an ultimate reality like a *zero* of temperature. But in the nature of things, it can only be approached, it can only be represented. The immediate object which any sign seeks to represent is itself a sign. (MS 599:36-37 [c. 1902]; cf. NEM 4:309-310 [c. 1894?])

The final sentence of this quote causes no problem for our interpretation of the relationship between perception and semiosis; in the context of perception, the immediate object Peirce mentions can be conceptualised as the percipuum, that is, as the percept as interpreted in the perceptual judgment. However, the rest of the excerpt is nothing short of a complete denial of the presentationist position. Particularly damaging is the reference to a “dark underlying something”, which can be known only through representation or inferentially.

One possibility would be to treat the representationist stance of “Reason’s Rules” as a problematic residue from the early semeiotic, and the theory of perception presented approximately one year later as the solution. The dates of the relevant texts would seem to support such a manoeuvre. However, in the Adirondack lectures of 1905, Peirce repeats some of the arguments of the cognition essays of 1868. In these later texts, we find that Peirce again describes the first cognition as a limiting concept. Using the metaphor of dipping an object into water, where the lines made by the surface of the water on the object represent cognitive awareness, he states that no matter how early in the disappearance of the object we snap our “mental camera”, there will always be preceding lines; if a stage without any preceding lines could be captured, it would not be a line, but a point (MS 1334:45 [1905]; cf. fig. 1). This is, of course, a figurative argument for the impossibility of a first cognition. Further, Peirce notes that thinkers such as William James find this absurd, protesting that there must be a first line. According to Peirce, their position is an instance of the kind of thought that leads to useless paradoxes of the Achilles and the tortoise type (MS 1334:46 [1905]).

However, does this invalidate presentationism? It does not have to; in fact, the presentationist position involves no acceptance of intuitions in the sense of first cognition. Rather, the point is that there is a relevant distinction between a percept and a cognition drawn along categorial lines.

Let us consider another metaphorical argument from the Adirondack lectures, which at first blush appears to defy the presentationist point of view. According to Peirce, the attempt to strip off signs and get down to the bare meaning is like “trying to peel an onion and get down to the very onion itself” (MS 1334:44 [1905]). This is a very suggestive metaphor. The principal thrust of Peirce’s argument is that signs are not mere superfluous extras that can somehow be eradicated, leaving only a pure object or meaning, untainted by interpretation (cf.

NEM 4:310 [c. 1894?]).<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Peirce asserts that to “try to peel off signs & get down to the real thing is like trying to peel an onion and get down to onion itself, the onion per se, the onion an sich” (MS L387 [1905]); “a pure idea without metaphor or other significant clothing is an onion without a peel” (EP 2:392 [c. 1906]).<sup>17</sup> In the Adirondack lectures, Peirce adds a more concrete example, that of “chair”. As a word, this is obviously a sign, and so is the idea it might produce or represent. However, if we attempt to get down to “the very impressions of sense” – the atomic sensations that allegedly constitute the object of understanding – then we will find that there is no chair there. Provocatively, Peirce concludes that “the life we lead is a life of signs. Sign under sign endlessly.” (MS 1334:44 [1905])

Now, it is easy to understand how such proclamations, in conjunction with Peirce’s claim that the semiotic object is also a sign, could be taken to affirm a strong representationist stance. However, the onion metaphor is merely an argument against the notion that we could ever have a cognitively simple, yet meaningful, notion of a first object. Any object taken up for cognitive inspection will partake of the character of a sign. An attempt to break it down into basic constituents will fail. The seemingly simple elements are always signs, and even if we were, by some Herculean effort, able to discern its simple qualities as such, these firsts would no longer add up to an everyday object. Anything of which we can take cognisance as an object – such as an inkstand or a computer monitor – can be judged, upon analysis of the percipuum, to be a psychical product involving inferential elements (cf. EP 2:62 [1901]). This does not mean that it is not external as an immediate percept. Nor does the recognition of the semiotic character of cognitive perception entail that the percipuum could not possess reality as a thing of a certain persistent character.

Here, it is important to recall that the percept is primarily of the nature of a second. Its reality is that of an existent, or perhaps better, an *ultimate reality*, which is real in the sense that it cannot be reversed permanently by a direct effort, but which differs from a *positive reality* as it is something real that “can never be overthrown or rendered clearer by any reasoning, and upon which alone no predictions can be based” (NEM 3:773 [1900]).<sup>18</sup> Rather than describing an ultimate reality as a “dark underlying something”, it is more adequately characterised as the object as it is directly experienced, as in an outward clash.<sup>19</sup> Strictly speaking, it is instantaneous. It is just a brute fact, unreasonable and in a sense absolute, like the physical

reaction caused by a punch in the face; no amount of discussion or experimentation can change the fact that pain was felt when the hit landed. Of course, there is an inevitable difficulty, common to any discussion of secondness, that plagues attempts to describe such a fact. According to Peirce, not even an observation provides a “pure” contact with ultimate reality; what “is called an ‘observation’, or *perceptual judgment*, is a proposition which shows certain marked symptoms of being backed by the universe, although it sometimes happens that these symptoms are deceptive, and that the observation is nothing but an illusion or perhaps a hallucination” (MS 326:12-13 [late] - *emphasis added*).

To avoid further misunderstandings, it should be emphasised how narrow and restricted in effect an ultimate reality is by itself – although such a fact may very well be the cause of death. A percept cannot be denied, but from the point of view of cognition, it is an isolated fact that leads to no growth of knowledge. Although it is not known in the full sense of the term, it is not an unknowable object; it is something directly experienced. Any cognitively substantial thing is, to some extent at least, of the character of a sign; but this does not mean that there is not something more in reality than mere representation or semiosis (MS 7:3 [c. 1903?]). In other words, Peirce can retain the sound insight of his early representationist denial of intuitions – that “whatever we know, we know only by its relations” (W 2:164 [1868] – without thereby being committed to the view that the apprehension of relations is wholly cognitive. Albeit any philosophical attempt to analyse knowledge into absolute perceptual atoms will fail, there is a pregnant sense in which the percept can be said to be a positive contribution to knowledge. In other words, the brute element of experience cannot be ignored or “aufgehoben” by encasing it in semiotic webs.

Above, we noted that the young Peirce’s rejection of first cognitions was intimately connected to his future-oriented social theory of reality, in which the real is defined in terms of an ideal final representation. Thus, it is natural to enquire how Peirce’s mature theory of perception fits this picture. Is not the percept now the most likely candidate for the real? Peirce should not accept such a line of thought. He proclaims that the percept does not possess “fully developed reality”; it is an existent, which in Peircean terms means that it reacts (MS L427:20-21 [1904]). The percepts constitute the domain of experience (CP 2.142 [c. 1902]).<sup>20</sup> They have a kind of “imperfect reality”, but according to Peirce, proper reality belongs only to signs (CP

8.300 [1904]). The real object – if we wish to speak in these terms – is not actually a percept, but a percipuum, which has been developed in interpretations under the influence of reacting percepts. It is a generalisation of percepts (cf. EP 2:65 [1901]). In this manner, we can make sense of Peirce’s statement that the “Immediate Object of all knowledge and all thought is, in the last analysis, the Percept” (CP 4.539 [1906]), and reconcile it with his notion that “the highest grade of reality is only reached by signs” (SS 23 [1904]). The result is not a “furniture realism” that postulates a world of cognitively self-sufficient objects that are just waiting to be discovered, but what be called a pragmatic realism, in which perceptual objects are taken to be inherently connected to intelligent and creative activity (cf. Rosenthal, 2004). Although experientially brute, perceptual facts can nonetheless be said to emerge as the result of the interaction between interpreting mind and dynamic reality (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 207). The ultimate realities are not “dark underlying somethings”, but nor can they as brute percepts be simply explained as elements within the rational order of signs – or, to use Peirce’s terms, we might say that “what is required for the idea of a genuine Thirdness is an independent solid Secondness and not a Secondness that is a mere corollary of an unfounded and inconceivable Thirdness” (CP 5.91 [1903]).

However, one may reasonably ask, what becomes of the dynamical object? Is there no knowledge of the object *as agent*? In the strictest sense, there is not; we have only acquaintance with such objects, or what Peirce in other contexts calls “collateral experience”. Still, this does not mean that the object, as a whole, would be unknowable. The aim of inquiry is to find such a generalised immediate object that would account for the action in a satisfactory manner; in the ideal end of such a process, the distinction between the two aspects would be practically negligible, if not non-existent. Short of such an ideal state, there is no meaningful conception of the dynamical object, except through the development of the immediate object. The jabbing of the percepts cannot be avoided by pretending not to notice; all but automatically, we will adjust our habits and seek appropriate generalisations. In this, we will never be alone; indeed, the precariousness of the process will almost inevitably lead to social inquiry. In sum, the aim is not to eliminate interpretations from cognition, but to develop them.

In conclusion, let us note that the preceding reflections can help us make sense of a perplexing part of Peirce’s definition of representationism and presentationism. Namely, at the

end of his entry, Peirce states that the representationist will “naturally regard the theory that everything in the outward world is atoms, their masses, motions, and energy, as a statement of the real fact which percepts represent”, while the presentationist, in contrast, “will more naturally regard it as a formula which is fitted to sum up and reconcile the percepts as the only ultimate facts” (CP 5.607 [1902]). This seems to render the presentationist a nominalist, and add another counterargument to the claim that Peirce is a presentationist. However, if we in place of “reconciled percepts” read “generalised percipuums”, and replace “formula” with “system of signs”, we will have a description that may accommodate the realist intuition of the representationist. It may be precisely for this reason that Peirce suggests that representationism and presentationism are more like different points of view than complete opposites with regard to this particular question.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This progress has been documented by Max Fisch in a landmark article, originally published in 1967 (see Fisch, 1986, pp. 184-200).

<sup>2</sup> Rorty’s criticism of representationalism is far more sweeping than the Peircean rejection of certain representationist theses that we will be discussing. In “Putnam and the Relativist Menace”, Rorty (1993) proclaims that he follows Donald Davidson in thinking that it “is good to be rid of representations, and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking that there are representations which engenders thoughts of relativism” (p. 448). Although it is not clear what Rorty precisely means by “representation”, it is evident that Peirce could never subscribe to the view that there are no representations, or think that they are something that can be removed by fiat. He must remain a representationalist of some grade, even if he accepts some presentationist positions.

<sup>3</sup> Here, the terms “subject” and “object” are evidently used in the “German” sense that Peirce mostly finds objectionable (see, e.g., SS 69 [1908]).

<sup>4</sup> In view of the later semeiotic, this is a partial picture of the function of the sign; but we may let it pass here to avoid unnecessary complications.

<sup>5</sup> I was made aware of this need in a debate on the electronic forum *Peirce-List* in January 2005. I want to thank the participants of that discussion – in particular Joseph Ransdell – for forcing me to review my claims, although the evidence I will present will probably not convince those who disapprove of a developmental approach to Peirce's thought .

<sup>6</sup> This critical stance is primarily directed against the common sense philosophy of Thomas Reid and William Hamilton. It is worth noting that Peirce later advocates a variant of this approach that he dubs “critical common-sensism” (see EP 2:346 [1905]).

<sup>7</sup> Consistently, Peirce notes that the second category of *binarity* is not really a conception, “for it can be given in direct perception antecedent to thought” (CP 2.84 [c. 1902]).

<sup>8</sup> A full account of this matter would require a detailed analysis of the the varieties of indeterminacy Peirce identifies as generality and vagueness, a far too vast task for this essay. Here, it is sufficient to note that a perfectly determinate or singular percept is neither vague (indefinite) nor general (non-individual) (cf. MS 9:2-3 [c. 1903?]; EP 2:351 [1905]).

<sup>9</sup> “Our percepts approach closely to the character of pictures, moving pictures accompanied by feelings and sounds etc. It appears to me to be clearly open to doubt whether those appearances are real or not. But we find that all the ‘willing’ we can do won’t affect them. We call upon others. Those others may not be real. Still, it is remarkable that their testimony is such as we might ourselves give. A camera (again perhaps not real) agrees. All this is a strong inductive argument that those percepts are real.” (MS 939:24 [1905])

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Rosenthal (2004) has explicated the Peircean position by drawing a distinction between a narrow and broad sense of perceptual judgment. In its narrow application, a perceptual judgment is infallible although it is not free from a hypothetical element; it is not subject to testing, for it makes no references to future experiences. It is the fact of judgment that something appears in a certain way. In contrast, the perceptual judgment in the wide sense is fallible; it is beyond criticism in its formation, but not in its results. Rosenthal's (2004, p. 204) contention that the world of perception is a purposive reality – a “hard” world of facts of which we have a direct pragmatic grasp (as opposed to an immediate spectator grasp) – is certainly appealing, and merits a more thorough discussion than can be pursued here.

<sup>11</sup> Peirce’s use of “first impression of sense” (and of “sense-perception”) is not wholly consistent. While the quoted passage suggests a clear distinction between “percept” and “impression”, Peirce occasionally uses the latter for the former. If one wants to find a proper Peircean meaning for the “first impression of sense”, it ought to be the phaneron (phenomenon) in its firstness. Peirce suggests something along these lines when he states that the “Feeling of light without any attribution to it of extension or position exemplifies [...] a First Impression of Sense. One need not necessarily suppose that we are conscious of it at all. I think, myself, that one is not conscious of it as an Object before one, (or, as we say, ‘before one’s mind’), since it is pure Feeling, and as such involves no idea of Relation, while what we mean by an Object seems to be something over against the person (or the Soul, or the ‘mind’, or the ‘ego’), for whom it is an Object. But no more is one conscious of grief as an Object, though [one]

may be only too intensely conscious of it.” (MS 609:5-6 [1908])

<sup>12</sup> In the *Carnegie Application*, Peirce states that he finds first impressions of sense and immediate consciousness dubious (MS L75c:110-118 [1902]). This should not be taken to mean that percepts are open to doubt as they are directly experienced; rather, the purport is that there are no simple constituents – whether external or internal – that can act as foundations for knowledge.

<sup>13</sup> Ransdell is apparently unaware of the fact that Peirce at times uses the term “direct perception” (see, e.g., CP 5.539 [c. 1902]).

<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most troublesome text is “Significs and Logic”, where Peirce explicitly states that the percept is a “plain sign” or indication of the existence of matter (MS 641:19 [1909]). Obviously, if this is understood as an assertion to the effect that the percept simply stands for a primary physical world of inscrutable matter, it cannot be reconciled with the proposed interpretation of Peirce’s conception of perception. However, the statement is also problematic from the point of view of Peirce’s earlier representationism, as he seems to postulate a straightforward dualism between the sign-percept and matter, rather than a genuine semiotic continuum pointing toward an inferred object. This latter problem is not solved by a charitable reading, in which “percept” is taken to mean “percipuum”; nor can the situation be saved by an appeal to different levels of inquiry, if we are not prepared to submit to a rather coarse form of metaphysical realism. As far as I can see, there is no other recourse but to admit that Peirce is inconsistent on this point.

<sup>15</sup> The term “percipuum” would suggest that it is of the nature of a continuum. As Hausman notes, Peirce characterises the percipuum as encompassing both percept and perceptual judgment. This would indicate that the percipuum is nothing but a reminder that the percept and the perceptual judgment are not cleanly separable by cognitive means. However, the definition of the percipuum as an interpreted percept gives the concept a more substantial theoretical role.

<sup>16</sup> Peirce’s position seems to be qualified by his assertion that the particular signs employed are not the thought “no whit more than the skins of an onion are the onion” (CP 4.6 [1906]). Peirce adds that the languages used are vehicles that do not affect the propositions involved; thus, one “selfsame thought may be carried upon the vehicle of English, German, Greek, or Gaelic; in diagrams, or in equations, or in graphs: all these are but so many skins of the onion, its inessential accidents” (CP 4.6 [1906]). Ostensibly, this conflicts with the position of the Adirondack lectures. The tension may be alleviated by drawing attention to the fact that Peirce is speaking of *particular* signs in the passage where the skins of the onion are treated as accidental factors. The formulation is careless; it would have been more appropriate to speak of replicas of the same sign, rather than giving the impression that there is an essential gap between thought and sign. We should keep in mind Peirce’s insistence that thought is itself of the nature of a sign; his point cannot be that we could find a hard core of the propositions by peeling off the superficial layers of signs. The situation is partly resolved by his acknowledgement that the thought must have “some possible expression for *some* possible interpreter”; it is its very being (CP 4.6 [1906]). Yet, in this instance, Peirce could be criticised for paying insufficient attention to the power of signs to shape or guide thought.

<sup>17</sup> Surprisingly, Peirce would seem to be in almost perfect agreement with the arch-relativist Goodman, who in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978) uses a remarkably similar metaphor; “When we strip off as layers of convention all differences among describing it, what is left? The onion is peeled down to its empty core.” (p. 118) We should probably not make too much of this coincidence; Peirce may be arguing for the ubiquity of signs in all cognitive activity, but he definitely does not adhere to the kind of conventionalism that turns everything into *mere* descriptions.

<sup>18</sup> Often, Peirce contrasts reality to existence in his mature philosophy, the former being defined by its simultaneously being cognitive and non-dependent upon actual thought, while the latter is connected to reaction with the environment (see, e.g., CP 5.503 [c. 1905]).

<sup>19</sup> Peirce notes that many philosophers, such as the idealists of Josiah Royce's school, claim to respect experience. Yet, they reveal that they do not know what experience is through their neglect of the concrete outward clash; they “are like Roger Bacon, who after stating in eloquent terms that all knowledge comes from experience, goes on to mention spiritual illumination from on high as one of the most valuable kinds of experiences” (EP 1:234 [1885]).

<sup>20</sup> Here, it can be useful to draw a distinction between a broad and narrow sense of experience; the former refers to experience as a cognitive resultant of life while the latter denotes something occurring or appearing here and now (see Bergman, 2004, pp. 74-76; Haas, 1964, pp. 29-30). We might say that the world of percepts are nearly equivalent to the domain of singular experience, while perception in general is a part of the field of experience in the broad sense.

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