

In Which Sense Is It Appropriate to Discuss Charles S. Peirce's Philosophy of Communication?

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Abstract: Peirce rarely discusses communication as such, so why follow this hypothesis? We start by briefly situating Peirce and his work. A critical distance taken from a Gadamerian hermeneutic comes with a discussion of Karl-Otto Apel's interpretation of Peirce as a philosopher of communication. The discussion somehow follows a temporal guideline: interpretants in Peirce certainly provide the basis for communication, whereas the normative science component of Peirce's triadic philosophy permits the consideration of probability issues with realism, therefore providing a basis for preventive and prospective considerations. Semiosis can both be understood as an unending quest for knowledge and as an actual communication process, since it involves taking seriously the interpretive dimension of the work. This normative impetus implies a relation to others understood under the perspective of what Peirce calls Speculative Rhetoric. We see there an important insight to understand the need for science communication.

Keywords: Peirce, Charles S.; semiosis; hermeneutics; ethics; interpretant; communication; Appel, Karl-Otto

Introduction¹

Some Contextual Remarks to Facilitate Peirce's Interpretation

As we probably know, Charles S. Peirce did not develop his thinking in a professionalized environment classical for philosophy professors, apart from the short period during which he was part-time lecturer at Johns Hopkins University (between 1879 and 1883; Apel 1975, 5). Therefore, his immense collection of writings, which has been edited by bits and pieces along the years, was not easily

¹ This article follows on another one (see Létourneau 2018) that treats Peirce's contribution to the epistemology of the social sciences. Some of the ideas have been revised and further developed here, while other elements, specifically around communication, have not been treated before.

accessible before the mid-1950s. With the eight volumes of the *Collected Papers* (in the last edition) and the eight volumes of the *Writings of Peirce*, much is available but not everything; we use specific editions for the *Letters* exchanged with Victoria Welby and other collections of writings. In any case, if we take some time reading Peirce, we will easily see that the number of pages, articles, book projects, chapters, and discussions devoted to issues of logic and reasoning far outweigh the sections devoted to communication as such, which is at best a minor theme in the whole.

This having been said, he is a tremendous creator in logics, semeiotics, and many other fields, including mathematics. Speaking of semeiotics, again it would seem that the bulk of pages devoted to this field, and especially to terminological and conceptual issues in that domain, is impressive compared to the pages treating issues relevant to interactive relations between agents, which are certainly what we think about while discussing communication. But importantly enough, Peirce mentions transmission and discusses establishing states of thought among partners in what today we could call a communicative process, an expression he does not use. The frame to use is what he calls “speculative rhetoric” (CP 2, 425); we will come back to this later.

More than a century after Peirce, communication has become a diversified scientific field of research and teaching (a domain of research that obviously did not exist in Peirce’s lifetime). Furthermore, it has now also been appropriated as a sub-theme by several other disciplines (for instance, psychology of communication, political communication, etc.). In these conditions, even if Peirce was an extraordinary individual, we cannot expect of him to give us a specialized discourse corresponding in all points with what is expected today when we talk about communication. Also, we are not the contemporaries, the original “addressees” of his writing.² When we read Peirce nowadays, it is after the development of George Herbert Mead; after the development of symbolic interactionism in Herbert Blumer, Erving Goffman, and others; and after Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas. Elements relevant for interactionism are present in Peirce, but they are not as explicitly developed as what we find in these more recent authors, who have all benefited from the work not only of Peirce but also of John Dewey and Mead, among others.

Also, we should keep in mind that Peirce was constantly revising his own theories; a consequence of this is that he frequently changes the names he uses to identify classes of questions. As Kelly A. Parker (1978) explained very well, Peirce was fascinated by all issues of architectonic, both for sciences and for philosophy – the very structuring of the fields he considers are evolving and changing under his scrutiny and his pen. Peirce often put back on the table questions already treated elsewhere without always discussing the links with his previous elaborations; the frequentation of his texts shows that he refers little to his own writings. He does not hesitate to take up again the reflection in a new way, and then tends to reassess

² Algirdas Julien Greimas ([1970] 1987; [1979] 1982), a French semiotician in the Saussurian tradition, has largely developed the notion of the “destinataire,” basically developing an idea already present in that tradition through the works of Émile Benveniste and others.

certain points that he has established elsewhere and otherwise, without there being a total identity between these various developments. This goes hand in hand with variations in vocabulary already identified by commentators several decades ago. Therefore, we must take into consideration whether a piece of his was written in 1867, 1890, or 1905. Scholarship on Peirce is also advancing, with people taking a closer look at the late Peirce's writings (de Waal and Skowronski 2012), whereas twenty years ago this examination was more restricted.

The Relevance of Peirce

Hans Joas (1993; 2009) has already pointed out how revolutionary Peirce's contribution has been. He first recalled some consequences of Peirce's thought and of pragmatism in general: the impossibility of an abstract doubt like René Descartes's and, therefore, the renunciation of a starting point in a solitary consciousness. Doubt only surfaces in situations of action. We can then think of the cognitive process as a cooperative process. It follows that thought is born in problematic situations, intimately linked with action, and the dualism opposing body and mind can also be avoided. And, in fact, to find this close connection between thought and action, we can take up again in reflection the maxim of pragmatism formulated by Peirce during his frequentations of the Metaphysical Club: the agent is conceived as active and solving problems, not as passive and receiving only stimuli to which it would be a question of answering. But Peirce goes further, since he rethinks the meaning of theories from the point of view of action, as we know since the so-called "maxim of pragmatism" found in Peirce's (1878) "How to Make Our Ideas Clear":

Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these is the whole of our conception of the object. (*W* 3, 265)

This means that the contribution of a theory about X is to tell us what to expect of X, how X is going to act or behave, and how we can and should act toward X. These actions will happen in interactions with X—for instance, in a laboratory setting, which was the usual case for Peirce, but also either in preparation or in response to these anticipated actions (Létourneau 2018). Meaning, therefore, has to do with actions, not only of the object theorized but also of different actors.³

³ According to Joas (1993), it is only with Dewey (1925) and especially Mead (1934) that the contribution of pragmatism to social sciences became clear, notably because of the attention provided to interactive communication. It is by focusing on the actions by which individuals impact each other that Mead allowed an intersubjective perspective, rather than stopping with the solitary individual agent. The formation of the individual became at the same time a space of reflection to understand the process of socialization itself. Things become clearer with Mead's theory of communication: symbols, whether they are objects, gestures, or words, take on their meaning in interactions.

Purpose of This Paper

What I propose to do here is to return consciously to Peirce after the contribution of Mead, interactionism, and the re-reading of Umberto Eco, the Italian semiotician famous for bridging the gap between European (stemming from Ferdinand de Saussure) and American (stemming from Peirce) theories of signs. We shall see that some of Peirce's key concepts can be decoded by showing, better than has been done up to now, their interest for the interpretative sciences in general, among which we must count at least some of the social sciences. If Eco has well seen the relevance (and the limits) of Peirce for the interpretation of works, we cannot say that the wider scope of the link between the triadicity of Peircian categories and the question of inference for the interpretative sciences has been well grasped. But to show this, we will also have to go back to the basis of Peirce's theoretical contribution. The normative character of Peirce's approach constitutes the beginning of an important critique of social morals, while in a sense inaugurating the field of action sciences, as we shall see later.

While discussing Peirce, in some contexts, there is a need to interpret, enlarge, and sometimes rectify expressions. One way to make sure of the rectitude of the reading is to get back to the original writings, analyze, and discuss them in detail.

The Basis of the Semeiotic Triad

The Categories

In a piece of 1867, "On a New List of Categories," which came very early in his reflection, Peirce comes back to the whole of the Kantian categories. Peirce first retained five of them, among which are being and substance. He then kept only three of those, rethinking them and increasing their importance. At the time of his 1867 text, he called them quality, relation, and law. A little later, the names changed to take on a more technical meaning.

They became, of course, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, which are in deep continuity with feeling, action, and thought. Thus, Firstness in a sense is what comes first, even if it is ultimately unthinkable without experience. Is it conceivable without comprehension, which belongs to Thirdness? One can also wonder if the thing is thought properly, according to the right rules, the right concepts; but it will be understood according to a rule, whatever it is, and one can rightly wonder which one. Action is of the order of Secondness since it is interaction, contact, encounter, and lived resistance, whereas thought as Thirdness draws out the signs, the regularities, the representations, and the laws:

Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is,
positively and without reference to anything else.

Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it

is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third.

Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it

is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other. (H, 24)

These are the being of the positive qualitative possibility, the being of the fact, and the being of the law that will govern the facts in the future. He comments on actuality, or Secondness: "The actuality has something of the brute. There is no reason in it" (H, 26). His examples also explain it: "The law of gravitation is the judge upon the bench who may pronounce the law till doomsday, but unless the strong arm of the law, the brutal sheriff, gives effect to the law, it amounts to nothing" (H, 26). Therefore, it has to do with immediate reaction. Related to the double consciousness of effort and resistance, secondness has to do with immediate reaction. "So is *existence* which is the mode of being of that which reacts with other things. But there is also action without reaction. *Such is the action of the previous upon the Subsequent*" (H, 26). There is an immediacy of activity, existing is to be affected, somehow in a direct and pre-reflective manner. "The unanalyzed total impression made by any manifold not thought of as actual fact, but simply as a quality, as simple positive possibility of appearance is an idea of Firstness" (H, 25) Let us think about redness, for example; it is a possibility that can be actualized or not. Firstness names this possibility.

It is especially concerning Thirdness that the temporal aspect is more obvious. In everyday life, we make predictions all the time, and most of them come true, explains Peirce.

To say that a prediction has a decided tendency to be fulfilled, is to say that the future events are in a measure really governed by a law. If a pair of dice turns up sixes five times running, that is a mere uniformity. The dice might happen fortuitously to turn up sixes a thousand times running. But that would not afford the slightest security for a prediction that they would turn up sixes the next time. If the prediction has a tendency to be fulfilled, it must be that future events have a tendency to conform to a general rule. (CP 1.111, 26)

This does not mean that the prediction is guaranteed to come true: it must be understood in a probabilistic way, as the example of the dice shows. The Peircian interpretation of probability is wise to frequentism as to perceptions: "If a pair of dice turns up sixes five times running, that is a mere uniformity" (CP 1.111, 26). Even if one does not know with certainty that the double six will return the next time, events will tend to conform to the general probabilistic rule because of a roughly predictable frequency. It is this kind of rule that makes it impossible to hold to a nominalist position:

"Oh," but say the nominalists, "this general rule is nothing but a mere word or couple of words!" I reply, "Nobody ever dreamed of denying that what is general is of the nature of a general sign; but the question is whether future events will conform to it or not. If they will, your adjective 'mere' seems to be ill-placed." A rule to which future events have a tendency to conform is *ipso facto* an important thing, an important element in the happening of those

events. This mode of being which *consists*, mind my word if you please, the mode of being which *consists* in the fact that future facts of Secondness will take on a determinate general character, I call a Thirdness. (CP 1.111, 26)

The importance of this for probabilistic thinking cannot be underestimated. For instance, when in the present we think about phenomena like pandemics or climate change effects, planning is required—and transformed, since it has to understand this probabilistic aspect. Climate change, future events, and the like must be taken seriously because of their high level of probability, even though there is some lack of detail (we do not know exactly what, how, when, and where in all precision some events, like a flood or a drought, will happen; the same goes for pandemics and other hazards). This comes with all probable thought in the contemporary sense of the term: one will not be able to know with certainty what will happen in such and such a future throw of the dice, but one will know with certainty that, in a set of throws, a certain proportion will be respected.

Things become even more interesting when we connect the categories with the semeiotic theory. Firstness concerns signs, names, considered in a way before any actualization of a possibility in existence. It is a question of pure possibilities; one could say we are discussing with Firstness a description of the meaning of a word as it figures in a dictionary, for instance. To discuss actuality, it is necessary to discuss encounters, relations—one can also say contact, impact—which are a matter of Secondness. As such, impact is thought of “before” interpretation comes into play. The category of Thirdness will allow one to give a certain meaning to an encounter, whatever is the interpretation. It permits one to give a certain content to a relation between a first and a second. At the same time, to understand this contact, this encounter, this shock, one cannot limit oneself to the identification of the possible or the actual, but it is still necessary to grasp its meaning under given interpretative terms. The three Peircian categories are like a new kind of Ockham’s razor: they suppose that we could distinguish the possibilities from the relations and the regularities or concepts allowing one to account for those possibilities and relations. It is a bit like the cube that needs the line that needs the point. The point by itself has no meaning, but we must postulate it, and we must distinguish it from more complex levels of composition. Thirdness is the class of regularities that we can give ourselves, but it still does not tell us if such and such a regularity thought about a given thing is the right one, is sufficient for the needs, etc. In that sense, the discussion is forcibly situated at the normative level since error is possible and does happen many times. Indeed, the consciousness that we can err is the starting point of semeiotic thinking (CP 1.149, c. 1897; Redondo 2012, 220).

The Interpretant Considered from a Hermeneutic Perspective

Enlarging/Criticizing Hermeneutics

Eco (1979; [1984] 1986), who integrated Peirce’s triad in contemporary semiotics, explains that Peirce’s revolution with the introduction of the interpretant requires a writer to construct a model of the reader, since the reader will rely on his or her

class of interpretants to understand a given work.⁴ There is also novelty in the fact of understanding Peirce's thinking as a contribution to hermeneutics, a thing that becomes obvious when we read Eco (Dubord 2021; Létourneau 2022). But hermeneutics will be associated most of the time with Hans-Georg Gadamer, who himself was under the profound influence of Martin Heidegger. One crucial concept for Gadamer ([1960] 1989) is the famous *Wirkungsgeschichtlichesbewußtsein*, the history of the efficiency of works, texts, or otherwise discussed in his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*. All is clearly not to be rejected here; this concept helps to recognize historicity and influence, lasting effects of concepts and cultural artifacts on today's reader. But it seems to me that the problem lies in the "oneness" of this concept, which corresponds to tradition, at the juncture of the Hellenic and the Judaic (and then Christian) traditions (Létourneau 1998). All of this is related to something that is quite problematic inside Gadamer's perspective, and, once again, this is coming directly from Heidegger: ideas like "the truth of art" and accessing the "truth of things in themselves," claims that are continuously put in contrast in Gadamer with methods in general. Methods come in second in opposition with a dialogue with the things themselves, as if they had not been useful at some point precisely by providing access (Létourneau 1998).

It seems that what we have, instead of a unity, is a plurality of effects and of traditions; those mentioned certainly are part of this ensemble of trends, but many others are, too. The focus on truth seems also debatable since hermeneutics has first and foremost to do with understanding meaning, which is not the same as truth, even if we want to conserve the value and importance of truth assessments (Eco 1979; Schleiermacher 1977). To give an example, myths might have great meaning, but this does not equate to them being true. As for the critique of methods, only an expert, Hellenist, historian, linguist, historian of Plato and the dialectic (and of the history of hermeneutics as a subdomain of philosophy) like Gadamer could put forward the perspective of being somehow above method. I compare his posture with that of the accomplished pianist, who will be probably less technique-conscious than some beginners. If we understand that the basis of interpretation is signs, interpretation is favored by a good use of semiotics, not hindered by it. The distance that is admitted here toward the ontological commitments of a Gadamerian hermeneutic is also adopted in the consideration of the metaphysical developments of Peirce's thought, which are obviously important for him; they can be considered for themselves in some other research.

Habermas and his mentor, Apel, seem to be the main European philosophers that helped to give back to Peirce his importance and actuality, after the phasing out of pragmatism due to powerful new trends in philosophy (let us simplify the story: on one side, phenomenology, on the other, analytic philosophy). The style of Peirce is quite different than what we find in European thought; it is certainly something different than German philosophy. His own concepts might seem to be

⁴ Here, the word is spelled "semiotics" to discuss the current science of signs, which is something distinct from Peirce's thought about it considered as such. See, for instance, Greimas and Courtès ([1979] 1982).

complex, but at least he takes the required time to try and explain them. Apel, a German philosopher, presented Peirce as a revolutionary thinker in his 1975 book and in many articles (see Apel 1981). Peirce was understood as having initiated, with others, the so-called “linguistic turn” in philosophy, transforming Kantian thinking about the a priori into a perspective Apel called, interestingly enough, “transcendental-pragmatic.” This was an important idea because it permitted one to give a formal ground to science, morals, and politics, without the background of a particular tradition and community. Here, the perspective was quite broad, and it renewed our relationship with universal questions and themes.

One key idea that was developed by Apel in his interpretation of Peirce was the regulative idea of a communication community (*Kommunikationsgemeinschaft*), or a community of interpreters, the role of which was especially fundamental in scientific endeavors and ethical reasoning. Apel’s reading was clearly oriented toward the future, not so much on the past. With differences, the same would also apply to Habermas. Obviously, there is such a normative dimension of thinking in Peirce, but is it really centered on communication? In any case, there is no doubt that the meaning of a given theory is something assessed in such a community, for better or worse. Apel did not focus on disagreements, even though he obviously recognized them. It is true that assertion and other speech types are mentioned and theorized by Peirce as pragmatic signs, as we see for instance in his discussion of rhemes, symbols, and the interpretant more generally (Misak 2004).

For Apel, the term “pragmatic” is appropriate since acts of language are indeed recognized by Peirce, many decades before Austin and Searle. Apel aims to ground both the quest for knowledge and ethics in the “transcendental” requirement of the communication community. It is important to understand here that “transcendental,” in the neo-Kantian sense of Apel, does not refer to a transcendent being but to conditions of possibility of an element. It is something else than the transcendentalism refuted by Peirce (CP 5.572), always looking for the things in themselves. Peirce was a fallibilist in sciences, but is it true or valid to qualify his language as transcendental-pragmatic? Is it not a little strong, even though he discusses the continually enlarging community of interpreters, especially in science and research? I wonder if the transcendental-pragmatic interpretation is the best way to consider Peirce’s consideration of communication from a philosophical point of view. The alternative seems to be to consider Peirce’s import at the practical level of exchanges, instead of taking it as a condition of everything else. But on that level, he does not say much. And if the first option is to be preferred, what does it mean?⁵

The Domain of Thirdness and the Interpretant

There are excellent reasons to consider Peirce’s work as relevant to a theory of meaning, and it is also the case that a contribution to hermeneutics coming out of

⁵ See also the discussion of Mats Bergman (2000) regarding Parmentier’s theorization around mediation.

Peirce's thought can be demonstrated as fruitful, provided we accept some considerations about the reader's place in the semeiotic process (see Eco 1979). All of this is based on the interpretant, which completes with the representamen and the object the basic triad of what constitutes a sign in Peirce's very peculiar theorization on semeiotics.

And, if we have the aim to thematize the issue of a Peircian philosophy of communication, one main place to start is the role of the interpretant in Peirce's semeiotics. A sign can be a sign if it relates a representamen and an object to and by an interpretant. This is realizing semiosis but only in the long run, since semiosis is a continuing process, not finished once and for all. The interpretant is a kind of sign that gives meaning; to provide an example already used by Parker (1998), a footprint in the sand can be the representamen, the object will be the person, or the foot that produced that trace, and the interpretant is the understanding of this by some person linking together the two phenomena, the trace, and the object. That person could be named the "interpreter," which differs from the sign, the interpretant as such. This could be thought as a process occurring at an individual level, or more broadly among a plurality of individuals. There are signs for which the work of the interpretant can be obvious; in some other cases, the situation might be more complex. Peirce does not focus on situations of a possible plurality of interpretations in front of complex signs, a point that should be kept in mind.

The social character of the sign understood as a triadic form is linked to Peirce's explicit de-psychologization of the interpretant. The interpretant (of a representamen concerning an object) certainly can be mine, but it is a sign and, as such, it can also be yours; it can be actual in a group or a set of individuals. In the best-case scenario, we can call this group a community of interpreters. If we consider, maybe more than Peirce did, the possible plurality of certain relations between signs and representamen, we arrive also at the possibility of a plurality of virtual communities, in relation to a variety of interpretants. Or, we can also say that the "community of interpreters" is not at all unanimous; Peirce's focus is obviously more on the unity and continuity at play (Parker 1998). If, furthermore, we acknowledge that semiosis is a continuous process that extends over eventually long periods of time, we arrive at the idea of the evolution of understandings about said relationships between representamen and objects. The same obviously goes for all the different kinds of signs in Peirce's terminology: qualisigns, sinsigns, indexes, icons, rhemes, symbols. Not only do we have in many cases a plurality of possible interpretations, but there is also the possibility of mistakes, of errors. A point which is, again, not much in the focus of Peirce's discussions, even though he knows perfectly well, as one of the most competent minds in logic, that a syllogism can be wrong. We can interpret this by referring to the normative character of semiosis, which by the way is a characteristic of Thirdness in general. If we allow for a normative reading of semiosis, we can distinguish a particular reading of a sign, which can function very well as a dynamic link between a representamen, an object, and an interpretant and still be false or inadequate. Some interpretant will have to play the part; will it exact that

role adequately is another issue. But, in a sense, for any understanding to occur, it is a condition of possibility to have some interpretant.

This might be a good way to understand a so-called “transcendental” character of the semiosis in Peirce. The completed triadic process is a condition of possibility for any understanding to occur. It has something of an ideal—realized semiosis is knowledge obtained, but the real is infinitely cognizable, with time. Since his very first writings, Peirce explained that the Kantian distinction between a thing and the phenomena is meaningless (Apel 1975, 20); the important difference is between what is known and what is still to discover (Misak 2007, 6). Finally, if semiosis is a norm of understanding, a requirement, it is a solicitation for a possible community of interpreters, challenged by the norm to understand and know better about the objects of their inquiry. The fact that we can be wrong does not mean that no semiosis occurs; it only means it did not sufficiently obtain. Said otherwise, a sentence can seem meaningful at a time and be discovered later as false—a process that is constantly happening in science and elsewhere, including philosophy.

Let us go back to our example of traces of feet in the sand. An individual can look at the imprint without being already in communication, if we stay inside Peirce’s thinking. There is a potentiality for communication, but the example limits us to a process involving one representamen, one object, and one interpretant. If we complexify the example with people discussing, exchanging, seeing, and interpreting the relation between object and representamen, then communication takes place. In a broader sense, people could say that the signs on the beach communicate with readers, but Peirce’s focus is not on that point.

For Peirce, the meaning is relational, the interpretation is fundamental to any signification, and meaning is always practical, even when theoretical in outlook (see the maxim of pragmatism). By the signs, a representation (a thought, a gesture, an object, a word considered as sign) is understood by the interpretant (necessarily present to the group, community, society, individual, network, etc.) as referring to something else, an object (what we call the referent). Even though the interpretant provides a necessary basis for possible communication, it is not enough since interaction between actors is still needed on surplus of their use of interpretants about some object.

The Movement of Semiosis and the Work of the Interpreter

By going beyond the dualism of subject and object, Peirce can help us think about the interactionist aspect of life in society. The knowledge of interactions can be nourished by authors like Mead, Mikhail Bakhtin, or Dewey, who will try to radicalize the idea under the concept of transaction. But the specificity of Peirce’s contribution is to situate interactions within the framework of a dynamic of signification, called semiosis by him, before the thematization of interactions as such in the following decades (CP 5, 313).

But by “semiosis” I mean, on the contrary, an action, or influence, which is, or involves, a cooperation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its

interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between pairs. (EP 2, 411)

We must consider what this means for interpretation: the sign mediates an object for an interpretant, forcibly situated in the future tense, in an act which is called semiosis. It, therefore, expresses the movement of the sign; it articulates the representamen, the interpretant, and the object in a dynamic movement, that of the interpretative intelligence, or of the effective seizure of anything significant, about something. Now, the work of the interpretant can be found in the person with whom this individual communicates, and it is also found in the plurality of interpreters who are able to understand, to a varying degree, the message that has been uttered. Obviously, the singular individual who produces an utterance himself or herself can have a reading about it, too. Hence, the notion of semiosis refers directly to a more or less vast and delimited social set, including the self, the interlocutor, and any one inside something like a public, in a temporality that starts in the near future but which is as open-ended as the community is. Obviously, the nature of semiosis can vary enormously, and the ways of knowing about various types of referents are numerous, although Peirce undoubtedly has a clear leaning toward knowledge as it is produced in the natural sciences. We cannot say that the issue of a possible plurality of interpretations is put forward in his thinking—contrary to what we find in William James's work (1910; Madelrieux 2008).

We saw that interpretants play an important linking part for any sign to work, but signs are also historical and social phenomena (a thing recognized by Peirce, notably for symbols). Interpretants are plural and not necessarily isolated from each other. Let us recall that the Peircian interpretant can be qualified globally as a sign even when it designates some complex element as a theory of the thing concerned (H). Then, the following conclusion, or hypothesis, arises: the various users of interpretants in the process of semiosis might manage to accomplish the understanding concerned, but its content (and, therefore, its quality) will obviously vary. The content will especially depend on the extent and richness of the interpretative repertoire at their disposal. To give a simple example of this: with no previous knowledge of mechanical engineering, a given treaty in that domain will not be understood except for superficial elements based on other regularities of language already possessed. The same goes for everything else.

At a first level of reading, Peirce seems to lose sight of the fact that meaning is not only generated by the sign coming from a speaker X, it is also endowed by people with an evolving history; the receivers of the sign often have their own repertoire. We might have hoped that Peirce's discussion would address the question of the plurality of readings and of the possible error, which he certainly had in view while discussing logic and inference. On this analogical basis, we can surmise that semiosis can also miss its mark, the selected ground can be

insufficient, unimportant, not very decisive, or simply misunderstood.⁶ Since he did not devote an explicit piece on interpretation as such, we can at best suppose that the same can be said here as in logic: error being a clear possibility, his claim here can be understood (a) as a description of something that happens—forcibly an interpretant will play a part—or (b) as normative—it is a requirement of some actual semiosis that would be somehow complete or effective. Therefore, the concept is not only normative but also “pragmatic” in the sense of effective in doing something, such as a description.

Prospective Communication: The Rhetorical Component of the Normative Sciences

The Disciplines of the Normative Science

When Peirce wants to characterize philosophy, he presents it as a normative science. For him, this expression designates three disciplines: namely, logic, ethics (see below), and aesthetics (he spells it “esthetics”). For logic, the normative character is quite clear, coming from the fact that logic provides a standard of reasoning—for example, in the discussion of the validity of statements. As discussed previously, there is also the fact that a semiosis may or may not reach correctly what it is supposed to reach, depending on the set of interpretants available in the interpreter’s repertoire and of their historicity. On the other hand, if ethics needs logic, logic also requires ethics (EP 2, 142). For Peirce, ethics clearly belongs to the rational domain. However, as we will see, he is sometimes wary of moralist doctrines, although we can wonder if he distinguishes ethics and morality as many do nowadays (notably Habermas, Paul Ricoeur, and others). Let us look further into this important theme, and afterwards aesthetic issues will be discussed.

A Non-moral Normative Science Called “Practics”

In a 1906 text dealing with ethics, Peirce insists that, in the end, it is not so much ethics that one should speak of in order to designate the normative science that one wishes to grasp, but rather what he calls first “anethics,” then the “science of practice” (the English word he creates is “practics”). This is because ethics itself pronounces on “the nature of the summum bonum, then it implies more than the theory of conformity to an ideal, it has for object a real conformity” (CP 1.41, 573). A quotation will clarify this point:

Insofar as ethics studies the conformity of conduct to an ideal, it is limited to a particular ideal which, whatever the moralists’ statements may be, is in fact nothing but a sort of composite photograph of the conscience of the members

⁶ See Redondo (2012) for a different analogical thinking to supplement for lacks in Peirce’s teachings.

of the community. In short, it is nothing but a traditional standard, accepted, very wisely, without radical criticism, but with a silly pretense of critical examination. The science of morality, virtuous conduct, right living, can hardly claim a place among the heuretic sciences. (EP 2, 377)⁷

This distinction (ethics vs. practics) evokes the one between ethics and morality that we find nowadays in several thinkers, so let us explore this possible parallel. Today we would say that moral conformity is societal; Peirce seems to agree with this point. Rather than simply following this social normativity, the proposed Peircian practics deals with the relation to the ideal, with the normativity that plays, for example, in logic but also in ethical problems; it cannot be confused with an ethics taken here by Peirce as a simple equivalent of the cultural and social morality that can be described (EP 2, 377). One cannot insist too much on the importance of this, in particular, because of the distinction that Peirce makes between the ideal as a guide of reasoning, on the one hand, and as a source of motivation, on the other hand. On this point, he goes so far as to say that, in the end, it is to aesthetics that we must turn to find the foundations of ethics:

If conduct is to be wholly deliberate, the ideal must be a habit of feeling which has grown up under the influence of a stream of self-criticisms and heterocriticisms; and the theory of the deliberate formation of such habits of feeling is what ought to be meant by *aesthetics*. (EP 2, 377–78)

This is a peculiar way of understanding “aesthetics” (the way we write it today). Concerning this, Peirce holds that the Germans invented the word aesthetics, that they restricted it to taste, but that in the end it is still about taste if one prefers “supporting one’s family by agriculture or by highway robbery” (EP 2, 378)—a choice which, according to him, makes a practical difference, but does not change anything in the heuristic point of view, that of a logic of investigation aiming at discovery (he spells it “heuretic”). A last sentence deserves to be quoted at the end of this development: “It is clear, however, that esthetics relates to feeling, practics to action, logic to thought,” which exposes the triad that corresponds for him to the three sites of normative science (EP 2, 377–78). The difference between Peirce and the contemporary distinction between ethics and morals (in Ricoeur and others) resides in this part played by aesthetics, much more important in Peirce, even though reflexivity is a common point between practics and a contemporary “reflective” ethics in Habermas, for instance.

Now, what we find in the first Harvard Lecture of 1903 goes completely in the same direction: ethics is presented there as founded on a doctrine that does not consider “in any way what our conduct should be”; it is based on aesthetics that deals with the admirable, which of course also refers to feeling, to some Firstness, to the possible. Admiring a person or a group certainly has to do with exemplary behavior and character, which are impressive and must be accessible somehow. Outside from that, it does not say much about communication as such.

⁷ Heuretic, here, can be taken to mean “heuristic” in today’s language.

Languages and Theories, Their Properly Pragmatic Dimension

Peirce explains that man is sign; there is an equivalence between the two. "In fact, therefore, men and words reciprocally educate each other; each increase of a man's information is at the same time the increase of a word's information and *vice versa*. So that there is no difference even here" (CP 7.346, 587). This mutual play of words and humans shows the reversibility of agency. Signs are recognized, here, explicitly in their proper agency. If words can be educated, let us examine their expansion, the development of their richness and precision by their users.

True knowledge is the work of a community of researchers, as many interpreters have explained. In the framework of his reflection, reference to the community is necessarily present as a horizon, since knowledge and social life are intimately linked. In the end, just as what a thing really is is what people will eventually come to know in the ideal state of complete information, so that reality comes to be acknowledged by the community; in the same way, thought is what it is only by virtue of the fact that it is addressed to a future thought which, in its value as thought, is identical to it, though more developed. As we will see, this does not preclude the possibility of objective knowledge.

As Misak (2018) points out, the fact that we seem to arrive "in the end" at "the truth" should not be taken in the sense of a teleology (37): the accent is to be put on the incompleteness of present knowledge. The true is that which will prove to be indefectible, that is, what one should agree to and, therefore, what no one will be able to refute. Let us not forget, however, that Peirce expresses here the whole idea of the recipient of the thought or speech. Moreover, a so-called true knowledge will still have to be the knowledge of many who share it and even recognize it—otherwise, it would no longer be knowledge. Sharing and recognizing needs some communication. We go beyond the representational vision of knowledge, in the sense that it will always be appropriated knowledge—ideally for all, but this is not always the case, as we keep seeing. Here, though, we have a real request for communication.

In the Harvard Lectures, delivered in 1903, Peirce returned to the sudden popularity of pragmatism, a word and a trend that he had launched thirty years earlier, in 1870, without much public effect at the time. The discussions of the Metaphysical Club and the few texts he published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* had less impact than the highly successful publications of James, which came a few decades later. It was thanks to James's support that Peirce was able to continue to communicate after his forced withdrawal from the university circuit, notably with the Harvard conferences. In this context, he recalls the well-known maxim of pragmatism, but just before quoting it he provides an additional formulation, often overlooked, which proves to be very interesting. Along the way he brings in a technical term, the notion of apodosis, which is the consequent in a statement of the form "if X, then Y," i.e., the "then Y." The word is also used in music, where the rising part of a melody is the protasis, and the descending part the apodosis:

Pragmatism is the principle that every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mode is a confused form of thought whose only significance, if it has any, lies in its tendency to implement a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mode. (EP 2, 135)⁸

Peirce is, here, very clearly going beyond twentieth-century developments in pragmatics considered as the theory of speech acts—as in, I assert, I promise, I recommend, but also in the responses given by interlocutors to these acts in dialogues, points developed by Austin and Searle. Indeed, Peirce explains how a theoretical statement can and should also be understood as a kind of prescription—that is, a recommendation for action, and a very serious one: an imperative! This goes further than the mere pragmatics of speech acts, since it is a theoretical statement that is considered, not the singular words or active elements of a statement; the prescription is the moment of apodosis, the “fall,” as a series of consequences of any theoretical sentence. In conclusion, the theory is not thought completely if one does not think the consequences (e.g., seeing the theoretical statement as a rule of action). Certainly, in the quotation, what I call “recommendation” is presented only from the categorical point of view of the imperative. Let us, therefore, admit that some additional nuances could and should complete its expression here, concerning that normative dimension that is still nowadays very poorly recognized and understood. If we are to believe seriously that any theory would have its key in action statements, the link between theory and practice has never seemed so close.

In that same 1903 conference, Peirce dwells on his earlier formulation of the maxim, asking what habits produce a given thought. In every possible circumstance, we must ask ourselves when and how the theory we support makes us act. And we only understand a theory well if we see what actions it leads to. Familiarity and definitions being supposed as given, it is in order to grasp the complete meaning that we need the pragmatic aspect concerned with the consequences of actions, for the theorized object as well as for the interaction between human actions and the object in question. This implies taking seriously the theoretical commitments more than ever.

Returning to the judgment, Peirce says that it is an assertion—as in, “I say to myself.” It is thus an act, as when someone promises at the notary’s office. To make an assertion is something quite different from “grasping the meaning of a proposition” (EP 2, 140). Here, Peirce looks at specific words as speech acts, distinguished from a simple understanding. As we know, the pragmatic dimension is closely linked to any meaning for Peirce. This necessarily applies also to his own theory of categories and semiosis; thinking about their normative character frees up the necessary space for a critique and allows us to avoid the idealism that would spontaneously consider the link as realized, communication as carried out, and knowledge as an assured fact.

⁸ This excerpt is from Peirce’s first Harvard Lecture in 1903.

The Community

For the social question, the notion of community is often in counterpoint, especially since Ferdinand Tönnies (*Gemeinschaft* vs. *Gesellschaft*), a German theorist probably unknown to Peirce.⁹ Let us get back to previous writings from Peirce. The notion of community has several aspects; its meaning is not univocal. On the one hand, the community is the bearer of various prejudices, and it can do violence to individuals by forcing them, by exerting constraint; it is thus a place of pressures and social conformism. Peirce underscores how in communities, a method of conviction based on the will and the effort of persuasion is frequently present. It is, however, not what a thinking individual seeks. Communities with contrary convictions also sometimes encounter each other; then, conviction appears less certain than we thought and is destabilized. Persecution and cruelty have been used wherever there has been a clergy, an aristocratic caste, “an absolutely ruthless power,” which has been seen frequently. Communities and morals go hand in hand and undoubtedly require a critical distance.

On the other hand, for Peirce to speak of science is to speak of a complex enterprise; it is a social fact that extends over several centuries and involves a plurality of people who necessarily work with and in relation to each other. It is known that Peirce is not a skeptic; for him, knowledge of the world is possible, and, moreover, knowledge can be bettered. He wishes not to abuse the notion of truth, but depending on certain conditions, a proposition can be considered *as likely* to be true, and “likeliness” is better than falsehood. Peirce’s realism supposes the work of investigation, maintained for an indefinitely open period and by a group also seen as open, without obvious limit.

A quote shows this but also raises some difficulty:

The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you. Thus the very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without defined limits, and capable of an indefinite increase of knowledge. (EP 1, 52, original emphasis)¹⁰

We are, here, far from a radically pluralist conception of knowledge, postulating a plurality of irreconcilable realities. There is, or there should be, a reality, as there is or should be a community. Of course, we can distinguish between description of states of affairs and norms, but there is no consideration here of the possibility of setbacks or net losses in knowledge—risks that we are sometimes confronted with nowadays. Furthermore, the possibility of a validity of a plurality of understandings is not really discussed.

⁹ The name does not appear either in W, CP, EP, or in the Nation documents; see Peirce (1975–87).

¹⁰ This excerpt is taken from Peirce’s 1868 “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities.”

The meaning of this conception is to discard what would be only fantasies of one or the other, in favor of what can produce a convergence:

A method of research which would lead different individuals to different results, without taking care to lead them to an agreement, would be self-destructive and worthless. Consequently, reasoning properly conducted tends to produce agreement among men; and doubt once removed, the search must cease. (W 2, 1869–70, MS 165, 357).

Plurality can be an appearance and be only an effect of different grammatical choices. For Peirce, if so-called “different” theories lead to the same practical conclusions, they are in fact identical. There seems to be a close connection between knowledge and the production of intersubjective agreement; there is an accepted value in this convergence. Discussing method, logic is seen as dialectic, science allowing to discuss the value of arguments. Certainly, research is undertaken to remove the doubts of the researcher, but

no sensible man will escape doubt as long as people, as competent as he is to judge, are of a different opinion from his own. Therefore, to solve one’s own doubts is to determine the position to which sufficiently thorough research would lead all men. (W 2, 355)

Real doubts exist and are related to other valid opinions held by competent people. Science is in fact social; in resolving his own doubts, the researcher places himself from the point of view of possible objectors. Mead would say that the researcher has internalized the gaze of the generalized other of a particular “scientific” group.

Signs and Communication Theory: The Apparent Teleologism

Signs presuppose communities of interpreters and, undoubtedly, also a system of communication—let us think, for example, of audiophonic supports. A community of interpreters with some means of communication is required by the simple necessity of the interpretant, which needs to be used by a potential plurality of holders (interpreters).¹¹ The theory of knowledge thus seems to be transformed into a theory of meaning that presupposes and requires communication. Does it suffice to interpret Peirce’s theory of signs as being, in fact, a theory of communication? Sometimes he seems more interested in generating sub-genres of signs, in classification for a kind of grammar, his complex repertoire of functions of signs, rather than stopping at the interactional aspects, of which he speaks nevertheless by recognizing the rhetorical dimension. This rhetorical dimension is often lost sight of, for example, in the following passage, which is much quoted, but which is simply the emphatic ending of “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” the task of which was notably to refute intuitionism and Cartesian doubt:

¹¹ We should keep constantly in mind the difference between people interpreting (interpreters) and the means of this interpretation (a series of signs called “interpretants” by Peirce).

Finally, as what anything really is, is what it may finally come to be known to be in the ideal state of complete information, so that reality depends on the ultimate decision of the community; so thought is what it is, only by virtue of its addressing a future thought which is in its value as thought identical with it, though more developed. In this way, the existence of thought now, depends on what is to be hereafter; so that it has only a potential existence, dependent on the future thought of the community. (W 2, 241)

The discussion remains in the order of the conditional; the writer's production is reduced to a sign to be recognized later, in a future state, eventually. It seems to aim at a complete knowledge, but it is to put it in dependence of the "ultimate decision" of the community, since a knowledge can be declared true only by people who will hold it as true. Peirce overcomes the paradox that consists in holding at the same time many elements: realism, constructivism, historicity of thinking and of science. And not without a touch of communication: a thought is such only by being addressed to a listener or reader necessarily situated in the future with respect to the time of the expression. We find, here, a temporality that is more than simply linear, since the past is said to depend on the future, on a possible recognition. It is rather the opposite that is usually considered as obvious—that is, the dependence of the future on the past, with causality as it is spontaneously understood.

There has been much discussion of the appearance of teleologism, here, when the text is saying something else. If one understands the text in a linear way, then one arrives at a dead end, at something that is not sustainable. According to Misak, this should not be taken in the sense of a teleology: the emphasis is on the incompleteness of present knowledge. True knowledge is that which will prove to be indestructible, that to which one should agree, and therefore that which one cannot refute.¹² Thus, a so-called true knowledge would no longer be a knowledge if nobody shares it. The practical meaning of such an assertion is rather to accept to move toward the search for true knowledge while admitting that this knowledge will have to be recognized. We will not be able to do without making communicable and therefore understandable any knowledge that may turn out to be true, even though in the meantime it could have only a hypothetical value.

Perhaps we have also underestimated the fact that Peirce sees in the community a substantial value, to which the human must necessarily be attached; it is not only an abstract presupposition of the type of community of communication as for Apel. In Peirce's review of the Fraser edition of George Berkeley's work, a text from 1871, the question of community surfaces in a framework that recurs quite often in Peirce: namely, the philosophical discussion between nominalism and realism:

¹²Misak (2013, 36–37) gives the following source: "if Truth consists in satisfaction, it cannot be any actual satisfaction, but must be the satisfaction which would ultimately be found if the inquiry were pushed at its ultimate and indefeasible issue" (CP 5, 569; CP 6, 485).

But though the question of realism and nominalism has its roots in the technicalities of logic, its branches reach about our life. The question whether the *genus homo* has any existence except as individuals, is the question whether there is anything of any more dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life. Whether men really have anything in common, so that the *community* is to be considered as an end in itself, and if so, what the relative value of the two factors is, is the most fundamental practical question in regard to every public institution the constitution of which we have it in our power to influence. (W 2, 462–87)

The discussion of agency, individual or collective, is here largely pre-empted. Peirce seeks to show the connection he sees between logic and the reality of community.

Perhaps because of the work of inference, which necessarily rests on signs whose nature is social, he believes that the logical character of propositions would lead us in some way by itself to a widening of our perspectives. I quote:

The very idea of probability and of reasoning rests on the assumption that this number is indefinitely great. We are thus landed in the same difficulty as before, and I can see but one solution of it. It seems to me that we are driven to this, that logicality inexorably requires that our interests shall *not* be limited. They must not stop at our own fate, but must embrace the whole community. This community, again, must not be limited, but must extend to all races of beings with whom we can come into immediate or mediate intellectual relation. (CP 2.364, 654)

This demands a conceived identification of one's interests with those of an unlimited community. Similarly, we can have the hope that the community will survive indefinitely, though this is by no means a necessity—just because I really need to have \$500 does not give me the money, as Peirce explains.

To get ahead with his perspective on communication, let us take some time on a series of quotes, starting with an early text by Peirce (1867) that will be followed by quotes from later. Here, we find a new triad of disciplines, compared with the one we already discussed, inside logic in a broader sense:

We come, therefore, to this, that logic treats of the reference of symbols in general to their objects. In this view it is one of a trivium of conceivable sciences. The first would treat of the formal conditions of symbols having meaning, that is of the reference of symbols in general to their grounds or imputed characters, and this might be called formal grammar; the second, logic, would treat of the formal conditions of the truth of symbols; and the third would treat of the formal conditions of the force of symbols, or their power of appealing to a mind, that is, of their reference in general to interpretants, and this might be called formal rhetoric. (CP 1.361, 559)¹³

¹³ The title of this famous article, originally published in 1867, is "On a New List of Categories."

Grammar, logic, and rhetoric are distinctly defined, even though they are closely interconnected. Their distinction and complementarity are, therefore, extremely important. Because the last discipline is concerned with the force of symbols, it treats their appeal to minds—all of which has to do with their reference to interpretants, meaning the signs that we use to understand other signs. Furthermore, Peirce explains that the choice of concrete signs will affect the interpretants, and this also is part of the domain of rhetoric: “the Theory of the general conditions under which one representamen may produce another . . . may be called *Formal Rhetoric*, or objective logic” (R, MS 839, 103, original emphasis). It could, therefore, be understood as a way to produce a response, an interpretation—or said otherwise, by the understanding it produces, new signs are generated in the practice of logic as discourse. The expression is concise and brief, without much detail.

Another quote (from 1896) will help us to get at the crux of the matter. At the end of the paragraph, it becomes clear that the “Theory of Rhetoric” (*speculativa*, which is used here, means “theory” in John Duns Scotus and others, explains Peirce) must do not only with transmission but also with affecting states of minds, which is expected, after all, if we are discussing rhetoric. We can also say that transmission goes hand in hand with affecting people’s minds. Peirce writes:

The term “logic” is unscientifically by me employed in two distinct senses. In its narrower sense, it is the science of the necessary conditions of the attainment of truth. In its broader sense, it is the science of the necessary laws of thought, or, still better (thought always taking place by means of signs), it is general semeiotic, treating not merely of truth, but also of the general conditions of signs being signs (which Duns Scotus called *grammatica speculativa*), also of the laws of the evolution of thought, which since it coincides with the study of the necessary conditions of the transmission of meaning by signs from mind to mind, and from one state of mind to another, ought, for the sake of taking advantage of an old association of terms, be called *rhetorica speculativa*, but which I content myself with inaccurately calling objective logic, because that conveys the correct idea that it is like Hegel’s logic. (R, MS 900, 110, original emphasis)

Here we have transmission not only of signs but also of states of mind: for instance, being touched by something. Rhetoric, then, is a complement to grammar and logic understood in the ordinary sense. A striking point is explicitly stated here: studying the evolution of thought is equivalent to studying transmission “from mind to mind,” which obviously implies communication even though the term is not used. Furthermore, this transmission is not limited to semantic content since it starts from and touches “states of mind.” Peirce then claims that this rhetorical theory is equivalent to the idea of Hegel’s logic, which is equivalent to speaking of concrete logic, as it happens in actual exchanges.

The quote in the previous paragraph (MS 900) is from thirty years after the preceding one, but there is a remarkable continuity of the terms used from one to the other. In the early piece (1867), Peirce spoke of formal rhetoric, and, in 1896, it is called “Speculative Rhetoric”; but the name of the concept is discussed after 1902

in the context of what he calls “*Methodeutic*,” which is a new development. This enlargement of the classifying category from Formal to Speculative to *Methodeutic* (we have here an evolution of the *classeme* in greimassian terms, e.g. the classifier; Greimas and Courtès [1979] 1982) is in itself very interesting: talking of method indicates that the focus seems specified toward scientific communication. Clearly science itself implies inquiry and, therefore, method. Such a move is not surprising at all, considering Peirce’s strong involvement with natural and formal science. But, as we will see, the term rhetoric is not at all replaced by this new name.

This can be confirmed by reading another quote, this time from that later period in his life (1902):

That our thoughts are signs is an old and familiar doctrine. I show that it is only in so far as thoughts are signs, and particularly . . . symbols, that they become subjects of logic; and further that the rules of logic are applicable to all symbols. Accordingly by regarding logic as a science of signs or formal semeiotic, and in the main as a science of symbols, or formal symbolic, we accurately cover its subject matter, and at the same time insure ourselves against all risk of being led astray into psychology. The word formal, in this connection, signifies that only the general conditions to which signs ought to conform are to be considered.

But those conditions may be distinguished into three kinds, leading to a corresponding distinction between three departments of logic, in its wider sense; or Formal Semeiotic. Namely the conditions are either, first, such as must be fulfilled in order that an object may be a sign at all; second, such as must be fulfilled in order that the sign may refer to the object to which it aims to refer, that is, may be true; and third, such as must be fulfilled in order that the sign may determine the interpretant it aims to determine, that is, may be pertinent. [—] The study of the third series of conditions will be found to coincide nearly with what is termed *Methodeutic* or *Methodology*; but I prefer to term it *Speculative Rhetoric*. (CP 2, 425)

Here Peirce goes back to theoretical rhetoric as a classifier. To determine the interpretant is forcibly to help with a correct understanding by some reader or interpret. The link to relevance (Peirce uses the equivalent word “pertinent”), here, is obviously of great import, for irrelevant information might be true but would serve no direct purpose.¹⁴

Interpreted with charity, this means that if we want to make people understand something, we need to inquire about it with them. If the best way to develop beliefs is by the scientific method, then it is also the better way to make people understand. We need to work at expanding the interpretive repertoires of people who are listening to us if we want to help determine their understanding. This process is to be understood as a way to be convincing. Education, therefore,

¹⁴ Obviously, irrelevant material can still be used in certain contexts. But this is not the place to enter into a thorough ethical discussion about that kind of rhetorical practice. I will only note that throwing irrelevant truths to people might be abusive—for instance, when this is done as a diversion, in a sophistic process.

has to do with broadening the collection of interpretants available to a group of persons and provide some stability to their thinking with valid and convincing arguments and reasons.

Here is a last quote, from 1902, that will reinforce our last comment, where Peirce goes on again with new terminological precisions, to help us better figure what he is talking about:

Logic is the science of the general necessary laws of Signs and especially of Symbols. As such, it has three departments. Obsistent logic, logic in the narrow sense, or Critical Logic, is the theory of the general conditions of the reference of Symbols and other Signs to their professed Objects, that is, it is the theory of the conditions of truth. Originalian logic, or Speculative Grammar, is the doctrine of the general conditions of symbols and other signs having the significant character. It is this department of general logic with which we are, at this moment, occupying ourselves. Transuational logic, which I term Speculative Rhetoric, is substantially what goes by the name of methodology, or better, of methodeutic. It is the doctrine of the general conditions of the reference of Symbols and other Signs to the Interpretants which they aim to determine. (CP 2, 425)

Signification, or meaning, is not the same as truth conditions, according to this quote. Here the “Transuational” logic is a new name for method, understood again to determine the interpretants and which clearly has to do with a rhetoric that is still attached to knowing the referent, with the constant requisite of being meaningful. The very fact of connecting methodology with rhetoric understood as reference to interpretants puts us back on track for a new understanding of science as a rhetoric to be understood.

Conclusion

We end up with a set of questions about how to interpret Peirce’s theory of semiosis through his theory of categories in the framework of a theory of communication. The communicative practices that are constitutive of the social bond in an interactionist perspective can already be identified in their “semiotic” components, and this without even needing to mobilize an extensive analytic using all the subclasses of signs generated by Peirce within his theorization. For example, what are the interpretants available to interlocutors in a conversation that we would methodically treat in conversational analysis? What is the difference between what comes from a speaker, what comes from prior social communication, or even from education, with all its assumed notions? In any pedagogical or simply communicative effort, the question of which interpretants are available to the receivers is of primary importance. Similarly, if Peirce does not discuss the question of error or misinterpretation when he presents his semeiosis, this theory makes it possible to account for it, since all that is needed to aim for a better semeiosis is a disagreement between one, the other, or the three elements involved. In this case, the notion of semiosis is recognized as having normative value.

On ethical issues, it has happened in the past that we have been suspicious of too strong a claim to moral truth, from which we wanted to deduce so-called certain consequences. Such a reservation seems to me to be rather healthy, but if we think about it, the idea of investigation supposes a desire for knowledge in relation to the situations, to the problems, by which we seek to orient ourselves in the action of making decisions, when required. I believe it is justified to affirm that, without turning into dogmatism, a search for truth remains necessary in ethics. Truth is only the qualifier of a proposition that represents knowledge; we can and must, most of the time, be satisfied with plausible and often incomplete knowledge. This does not prevent a certain orientation toward knowledge that one wishes to be true, if only to avoid errors and falsities. Peirce goes in this direction. Thus, he posits, “we are accepting this belief, not on experience, which is rather against it, but on the strength of our general faith that what is really true it is good to believe and evil to reject” (CP 2.48, 486)—this, intervening in a discussion of Fraser’s edition of George Berkeley’s work. This seems to me to rejoin this other idea, central to Peirce: the process of investigation must normally converge toward commonly shared conceptions. It seems to me that we must keep these perspectives, against the unhealthy apologies of “fake news” and against intellectual defeatism in general, but not at the price of renouncing a sane acceptance of pluralism.

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