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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PEIRCE'S THEORY OF LINGUISTIC SIGNS, THOUGHT, AND MEANING

In a recent article I pointed out that Stevenson's identification of psychological with pragmatic in his *Language and Ethics* rests upon the interpretation of "pragmatic" which is put forward by C. W. Morris.¹ Morris's point of view regarding the *psychological* differs from that of Stevenson, since the former prefers a behavioristic to an introspective approach (*F.S.*, p. 6). But, however important this difference is from certain points of view, it is irrelevant to the issue here under discussion, namely, the account of meaning as pragmatic advanced by Morris on the alleged authority of Peirce. In the sequel, it will be noted that the theory of Peirce also bears directly on Stevenson's theory of some meanings as "emotive." Consideration of Peirce's actual theory of signs in general and linguistic signs (called *symbols* by him) in particular is pertinent not only because of the present interest in Peirce's writings but because the inverted report of Peirce which is given by Morris has influenced, as consultation of recent literature will show, other writers than Stevenson. Since Morris has professed to be sympathetic with Peirce's theory, it is especially important to rescue Peirce's theory by reference to Peirce's own writings before an *Ersatz* takes the place of what Peirce actually held.

I

Morris adopts from Peirce the name *semiosis* for the general theory of signs. In an early passage he distinguishes four factors, components, sometimes called aspects, of signs. There is the (i) sign vehicle, that which acts or functions as a sign; (ii) there is that to which the signs refer, the designatum; (iii) there is "that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter," viz., the interpretant. (iv) "The interpreter may be included as a fourth factor." Or, summarizing, "The takings-account-of are *interpretnants*; the agents of the

process are *interpreters.*”  

In a later passage the “process of interpreting” is telescoped into the interpretant, and the consolidation is henceforth called the “interpretant.” The three factors of semiosis dealt with in the rest of the monograph are, accordingly, “sign vehicle, designatum, interpreter.”  

Since the deviation from Peirce, amounting as has been said to a reversal, is connected with the gratuitous introduction of an “interpreter,” and since this introduction is the source from which there flows the account of the pragmatic and of pragmatism given by Morris, it may seem at first sight as if the point at issue in this article were the nature of “pragmatism.” So I wish to make it clear at the outset that this is a secondary matter. The primary matter is the theory of signs in general and linguistic signs (symbols) in particular, and of meaning, put forward by Peirce:—a theory in which “relation to interpreters” not only does not describe “pragmatism” in any way whatever, but falls (and this is the primary point) wholly outside of Peirce’s theory of signs and meaning and of anything involved in that theory.

By parcelling out the triadic relation mentioned above, Morris obtains three dyadic “dimensions.” The dyadic “relation of signs to that to which they are applicable” is called the *semantic* dimension; “the relation of signs to one another” is called the *syntactical* dimension; while “the relation of signs to interpreters” is called the *pragmatic* dimension. It is further added that in their semantic dimension, signs designate and/or denote; in their syntactic dimension, they implicate; in their pragmatic dimension, they express.  

It is, in my judgment, a too frequent practice to attempt to “solve” problems by a distribution of subject-matters into different compartments—a procedure which also, in my judgment, evades the issues that are serious. Mr. Morris thus awards the semantic dimension to the empirical student of the theory of knowledge; to the logician is awarded the syntactical dimension, as appears from the word “implicates” (implies) in the above statement (the formal being thus successfully cut off from factual scientific subject-matter); to the pragmatic dimension there remains the extra-cognitive, extra-logical domain which includes “all the psychological, biological, and sociological phenomena which occur in the functioning of signs.”  

In this connection, it is said that this

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2 F.S., p. 3 and p. 4. Italics in original.
3 F.S., p. 6, where the three matters last named are called “three correlates of the triadic relation of semiosis.”
4 F.S., pp. 6–7.
5 F.S., p. 30, for the last quotation; considering that the subject-matter is *linguistic* signs, which present themselves to the factual student as themselves
three-dimensional division enables us to recognize the validity of all three points of view, including the pragmatic, which is "inclined to regard a language as a type [sic!] of communicative activity, social in origin and nature."

Whether I am correct or not in my general statement about the tendency to solve problems by parcelling out subject-matter into independent domains or dimensions, one has only to read Peirce to see that Morris's account effectually splits apart the very subject-matters with which Peirce labors in order to provide an integrated solution. And while the point at issue is not the nature of pragmatics, much less its correctness, discussion must begin at this place since Morris's misinterpretation, as far as Peirce is concerned, centers at and proceeds from his extraordinary account of what Peirce means by "pragmatic" in connection with linguistic signs. The actual issue, however, is the theory of Peirce concerning the nature of linguistic signs and of meaning. The misrepresentation in question consists in converting Interpretant, as used by Peirce, into a personal user or interpreter. To Peirce, "interpreter," if he used the word, would mean that which interprets, thereby giving meaning to a linguistic sign. I do not believe that it is possible to exaggerate the scorn with which Peirce would treat the notion that what interprets a given linguistic sign can be left to the whim or caprice of those who happen to use it. But it does not follow from this fact that Peirce holds that the interpretant, that which interprets a linguistic sign, is an "object" in the sense of an existential "thing." On the contrary, the interpretant, in Peirce's usage, is always and necessarily another linguistic sign—or, better, set of such signs. The following passage is strictly representative: "On the whole, then, if by the meaning of a term, proposition, or argument we understand the entire general intended interpretant, then the meaning of an argument is explicit. It is its conclusion; while the meaning of a proposition or term is all that that proposition or term could contribute to the conclusion of a demonstrative argument." 

Against such statements as the above may be placed the follow-

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6 Collected Papers, Vol. V, pp. 110–111; "conclusion" not italicized in original. The reader who consults the Indices, especially of Vols. II and V, of the Collected Papers will be readily convinced of the representative character of this passage. I add, however, the following: "the conclusion of an argument" is "its meaning, . . . its intended interpretant. . . . It seems natural to use the word meaning to denote the intended interpretant" (Vol. V, p. 108). In the Indices, consult Meaning and Symbol, in addition to Interpretant.
ing statements of Morris, in addition to what has previously been cited from him about the pragmatic dimension and the interpreter: The relation of language "to the persons who use it"; "that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to that interpreter"; "the relation of signs to interpreters . . . the pragmatical dimension"; "expresses its interpreter"; "expresses is a term of pragmatics"; "the permanent significance of pragmatism lies in the fact that it has directed attention more closely to the relation of signs to their users."

The extent to which the view presented in these passages inverts Peirce may be gathered from the fact that Peirce uniformly holds (1) that there is no such thing as a sign in isolation, every sign being a constituent of a sequential set of signs, so that apart from membership in this set, a thing has no meaning—or is not a sign; and (2) that in the sequential movement of signs thus ordered, the meaning of the earlier ones in the series is provided by or constituted by the later ones as their interpreants, until a conclusion (logical as a matter of course) is reached. Indeed, Peirce adheres so consistently to this view that he says, more than once, that signs, as such, form an infinite series, so that no conclusion of reasoning is forever final, being inherently open to having its meaning modified by further signs.

Verbally, this intrinsic "relation of signs to one another" sounds like the syntactical dimension of Morris. But in the case of Peirce this moving or sequential relation of signs is formal only in the sense of being the form-of-the-movement-of-an-ordered-series-of-signs-to-a-conclusion. The formal treatment of Peirce is found in his Logic of Relatives, which is integrally connected with his whole theory of signs. That to Peirce the movement of signs, while it has form, is itself material or factual, not formal, appears clearly in the following passage: "To say, therefore, that thought cannot happen in an instant, but requires a time, is but another way of saying every thought must be interpreted in another, or that all thought is in signs." ⁸

As Morris's translation of "interpretant" into a personal user as its interpreter turns Peirce's view upside down, so his formulation of semantic, or the relation of signs to "things," is so contrary to what Peirce says on the latter subject as to make nonsense of it. The most direct way of showing this inversion is by taking what Morris says about the case of a reference to a thing in what

⁷ F.S., pp. 2, 3, 6, 7, and 29; similar statements occur on pp. 30, 31, and 33.
⁸ Collected Papers, Vol. V, p. 161. The presence of the word "time" in this passage while speaking of a sign-sequence, is sufficient evidence of the fact that to Peirce "the relation of signs to one another" is not just formal.
he calls a "thing-sentence," which, according to him, is used "to designate any sentence whose designatum does not include signs." The repeated statement by Peirce that signs as such are connected only with other signs is enough of itself to show that according to him a "designatum" of a sign which is not itself a sign is an absurdity. We seem to have here further evidence of the extent to which the type of logic presented by Morris and others is controlled by the epistemological heritage of a knowing subject, person, self, or what have you, set over against the world, or things, or objects, and capable of reference to the latter either directly in virtue of its own faculty (epistemological realism) or through an idea or thought as intermediary (epistemological idealism). The school whose logical tenets are adopted by Morris substitutes a word for a knowing mind or subject, endowing it with the same miraculous power formerly attributed to mind or to an idea as a go-between. I do not see how conversion of Peirce's interpretant, which as later sign supplies meaning to the earlier ones, can be explained save as a diluted relic of the traditional epistemological theory, with word or sign taking the place, as tertium quid, of the idea, thought, or mental state of that tradition.  

We do not have, however, to depend upon inference from what Peirce says about signs as the objects, or designata, of other signs, to observe the departure from him that is involved in the notion that the designatum of a linguistic sign can be an existential thing. In one passage Morris mentions an indexical sign; were it not for the presence, in what he says in that passage, of the word "designata," it approximates the actual theory of Peirce concerning how one kind of sign, but not word, sentence, or linguistic sign, refers to things. The passage of Morris reads: "Things may be regarded as the designata of indexical signs." To connect things with indexical signs is, in Peirce's position, a way of denying that they are connected with linguistic signs, with words, or anything he calls a symbol. For an indexical sign is a case of what Peirce calls Secondness, while a linguistic sign is a case of Thirdness. It is out of the question here to go into details of what in Peirce's

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9 F.S., p. 15. The fact that Morris adopts this term from those who, like Carnap, think that logic can be a purely or exclusively formal or syntactical affair is a good illustration of the confusion that is bound to result when an attempt is made to link up Peirce's theory with the kind of theory which he constantly opposes. Doubtless Morris's unquestioning acceptance of the kind of formalism expounded by Carnap is the reason why he is forced to give an account of Peirce's pragmatic that has nothing in common with the latter.


11 F.S., p. 25.
writings is the meaning of these terms, along with his Firstness. But a reader who consults almost at random any passage referred to by these words in the Indices of his volumes will see that they are used to differentiate, with great care and in a fundamental way, the status, force, and unique function of linguistic signs.

Linguistic signs, constituting thought and conferring generality, continuity, law, are cases of Thirdness. They have of themselves no reference to "things." Such connection as they can have is, accordingly, dependent upon the intervention of another factor. This factor (called Secondness by Peirce) is of a radically different sort from Thirdness. It is particularity as against generality; brute interruption as against continuity; contingency as against law. As respects the difference between indexical signs as cases of Secondness and linguistic signs as cases of Thirdness, the following passage is both representative and conclusive:

We are continually bumping against hard fact... There can be no resistance without effort; there can be no effort without resistance. They are only two ways of describing the same experience. It is a double consciousness... As the consciousness itself is two-sided, so it has also two varieties; namely, action, where our modification of other things is more prominent than their reaction on us, and perception, where their effect on us is overwhelmingly greater than our effect on them. And this notion, of being such as other things make us, is such a prominent part of our life that we conceive other things also to exist in virtue of their reactions against each other. The idea of other, of not, becomes a very pivot of thought. To this element I give the name of Secondness.12

The passage is quoted at length. It indicates not only how, according to Peirce, reference of linguistic signs to things is accomplished, namely, through their getting into connection with indexical signs, but in its "two-sidedness" anticipates what James, later, but probably independently, called the doublebarreledness of experience. Implicitly, but not explicitly, it anticipates the principle of "indeterminacy," according to which, when a cat looks at a king, there is a bumping in which the king as well as the cat is moved—though not of course to anything like the same extent. Perception of "internal" and "external" worlds is a matter of one and the same event—the event to which, in recent psychology, the name "sensori-motor" is applied. And while Peirce uses the word "internal" to express the organism's part in this two-sided affair, it is equally true that the organism's side is "external" to that of the part of environing conditions in the common transaction. It all depends, so to say, on whose side we are on.

12 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 162. Physical pointing, and the expressions "this," "that," "I," "You," etc., or all demonstrative and personal pronouns, are reflections of Secondness. Peirce says somewhere that instead of pronouns standing for nouns, the reverse is the case; nouns depend upon pronouns.
This perceptual-manipulative behavioral event determines the
indexical sign which brings "us" into connection with "things,"
something it is impossible, according to Peirce, for symbols, linguis-
tic signs, or, in Morris's words, for a "sentence" to do. What the
latter calls "semantic reference" takes place, on Peirce's view,
when, and only when, there is a conjunction of the "Secondness"
of an indexical sign with the movement of linguistic signs, or
"Thirdness," thereby bringing the latter to a close in a way which
links it into the former, and thereby also conferring generality,
reasonableness, upon what in itself is like a sheer bumping of
things into one another.\(^{13}\)

Along with the statements that a "sign is not a sign"—in the
linguistic sense—unless it "translates itself into another sign in
which it is more fully developed," and that "the immediate object
of a symbol can only be a symbol," may be placed the following:
"The Sign can only represent the Object and tell about it. It
can not furnish acquaintance with or recognition of that Object;
for that is what is meant in this volume by the Object of a Sign;
namely, that with which it presupposes an acquaintance in order
to convey further information concerning it."\(^{14}\)

In adult experience, there are few cases of pure or exclusive
Secondness or Thirdness; indeed, if there were, Peirce would not
have had to take such pains to restate traditional theories of knowl-
edge and of logic by the careful discriminations he institutes, First-
ness, Secondness, and Thirdness being the names, perhaps not very
happy ones, given to the subjects that are differentiated.

It is not part of the present paper to go into detail about the
way in which linguistic signs interlock with indexical signs. It
suffices to say that such interception takes place and that by and
through it linguistic signs get that reference to and connection with
"things" which by themselves they lack. It is also true to say
that our scientific knowledge (with the exception of mathematics)
and those portions of "common-sense" knowledge which possess
generality along with existential reference represent an inter-
locking of linguistic with non-linguistic modes of behavior. While
he does not use the following mode of speech it is, I believe, faithful
to his position to say that in the course of cosmic or natural evolu-
tion, linguistic behavior supervenes on other more immediate and,

\(^{13}\) As to lack of reference of linguistic signs, or sentences as such, to things, see Indices under Thirdness, Symbols, Continuity, Generality.

\(^{14}\) The last quotation is from Vol. II, p. 137; italics not in original; the earlier ones from Vol. V, p. 397, and Vol. II, p. 166, footnote. Cf. the following:
""A sign is only a sign in actu by virtue of its receiving an interpretation, that
is, by virtue of its determining another sign of the same object,"' Vol. V, p. 397.
so to say, physiological modes of behavior, and that in supervening it also intervenes in the course of the latter, so that through this mediation regularity, continuity, generality become properties of the course of events, so that they are raised to the plane of reasonableness. For, "the complete object of a symbol, that is to say, its meaning, is of the nature of a law."

II

Peirce uses the word "thought" quite freely. The mentalistic associations of the word, which are due to the epistemological tradition, may give the careless reader the impression that Peirce regards linguistic signs as "expressions" of something that is itself mental. The following passage sums up Peirce's constant attitude on this point: "What I could never admit [is] that logic is primarily conversant with unexpressed thought and only secondarily with language." The following passage should provide the basis for whatever one says who sets out to write about the logical theory of Peirce: "The woof and warp of all thought and all research is symbols; and the life of thought and science is the life inherent in symbols; so that it is wrong to say that a good language is important to good thought, merely; for it is of the essence of it."

In one passage Peirce explicitly differentiates three kinds of "interpreters." The "interpreters" of an iconic sign, as a form of Firstness, is emotional; that of an indexical sign is, as we have already seen in another connection, energetic. Meaning, or intellectual and logical, interpreters are found, however, exclusively, in connection with linguistic signs. These signs in their interconnections are "thought."

If we seek the light of external facts, the only cases of thought which we can find are of thought in signs. Plainly, no other thought can be evidenced by external facts. But we have seen that only by external facts can thought be known at all. The only thought, then, which can possibly be cognized is thought in signs. But thought which cannot be cognized does not exist. But thought, therefore, must necessarily be in signs.

It is worth while to refer to what is said in connection with the phrase "we have seen." For what is here referred to is denial by Peirce of a faculty or power of introspection as the source of psychological knowledge. And certainly any case of reference of signs to their personal users must be a case of psychological knowledge.

Now in Peirce, because of denial of introspective knowledge, all psychological knowledge is a case of what Morris calls *semantic*, or of reference to an existential thing. Only it is a reference which is more highly mediated than is a case of reference of a linguistic sign to things "commonly called external." There are, Peirce says, "logicians who . . . [follow] the method of basing propositions in the science of logic upon results of the science of psychology. . . . Those logicians continually confound *psychical* truths with *psychological* truths, although the distinction between them is of that kind that takes precedence over all others." Again, "there is no reason for supposing a power of introspection, and, consequently, the only way of investigating a psychological question is by inference from external facts." Again, "we have no power of Introspection, but all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts. . . . We can admit no statement concerning what passes within us except as a hypothesis to explain what takes place in what we commonly call the external world." Again, "Introspection is wholly a matter of inference. . . . The *self* is only inferred." Since thought consists of signs, it is neither psychical nor psychological; and, as has been said, any reference of a sign to its "users" is more highly mediated, more complex, and more difficult to accomplish than is reference of it to things "commonly called external." The fact that the occur-

19 *Collected Papers*, Vol. V, pp. 332–333. The "precedence" in question is that while linguistic signs as such refer only to one another, what he here calls *psychical* is a case of sheer Firstness, or an iconic sign whose "interpretant" is *feeling*.

20 *Collected Papers*, Vol. V, pp. 150, 158, and 313. As to what is here meant by the "internal" as distinguished from external, see in addition to the passage already quoted from Vol. I, p. 162, the section on "Struggle," Vol. V, pp. 32–40, Vol. V, pp. 326, 334, and 378. It lies outside the scope of the present paper to go in any detail into what Peirce means by "internal." The following passages, however, give the clue to any one interested in following out the matter. "The old expectation, which is what he was familiar with, is his inner world, or *Ego*. The new phenomenon, the stranger, is from the exterior world or *Non-ego*" (Vol. V, p. 40). And in reference to a case of "bumping" or interference with expectation we find "direct experience of the duality of the inward past and the outward present" (Vol. V, p. 378). And, after the statement that the "self is only inferred:" "There is no time in the Present for any inference at all. . . . Consequently, the present object must be an external object if there be any objective reference in it." It is obvious that interpretation in terms of past, present, and future is radically different from that given by the epistemological-psychological tradition to "inner" and "outer." That introduction of the future is relevant is clear from the following passage, the "subjectivity of the unexpected . . . the objectivity of the unexpected" (Vol. V, p. 379). "The Consciousness of the present is then that of a struggle over what shall be" (Vol. V, p. 313).
rence and movement of linguistic signs or symbols is neither, according to Peirce, a psychical nor a psychological affair points directly to the fact that according to him "biological" and "sociological" facts are integral and indispensable factors of such signs—not something to be dismissed to a non-logical and non-cognitive dimension.

For wherever there is generality, continuity, there is habit. And even a casual reader of Peirce should be aware that habit on his view is first a cosmological matter and then is physiological and biotic—in a definitely existential sense. It, habit, operates in and through the human organism, but that very fact is to him convincing evidence that the organism is an integrated part of the world in which habits form and operate. As to the "sociological" factor, it is easy to quote many passages from Peirce in which whatever is entitled to the names "logical" and "cognitive" is brought specifically and explicitly within the societal. So far is he from penning the sociological, along with the biological, within "phenomena that occur in the functioning of signs," that he sticks to the observed fact that language and linguistic signs are modes or forms of communication, and thus are intrinsically "social." In so many words he says "Logic is rooted in the social principle." "No mind can take one step without the aid of other minds"—mind as thought being defined, be it recalled, in terms of linguistic signs. "When we come to study the great principle of continuity and see how all is fluid and every point directly partakes the being of every other, it will appear that individualism and falsity are one and the same. Meantime, we know that man is not whole as long as he is single, that he is essentially a possible member of society. Especially, one man's experience is nothing, if it stands alone. . . . It is not 'my' experience but 'our' experience that has to be thought of; and this 'us' has indefinite possibilities." 21

III

I believe that in the present state of logical theory Peirce has a great deal to say that is of value. There is potential advance contained in the present concern with language and "symbols." But it can not be carried into effect, it is nullified, as long as the shadow of the old epistemological dichotomy hangs over writings that profess to be logical. Peirce uses at times words that have strong mentalistic associations. It is a reasonable conjecture that the explanation of this usage is to be found in the fact that his cosmology was closely affiliated with panpsychism. But, as the

foregoing discussion shows, he completely repudiated the notion that language is a *tertium quid* in which something called thought is expressed or clothed. With this repudiation goes denial that the names *Self, Mind, Knowing Subject, Person* as user of signs, apply to anything except a particular sort of natural existence, or "thing," which can be *known* only through and by means of the best knowledge we have of other "things," physical, biological, and socio-cultural. "*Users*" of Peirce's writings should either stick to his basic pattern or leave him alone.

**Columbia University**

**BOOK REVIEWS**

*Philosophy in American Education. Its Tasks and Opportunities.*  

This book is an "outgrowth" of an inquiry conducted by the authors as members of a Commission on the Function of Philosophy in Liberal Education. The inquiry was financed by a far-sighted and generous grant to the American Philosophical Association from the Rockefeller Foundation. The "commissioners" were selected by the officers of the Association from a panel of nominees submitted by its members.

The book was published with the consent of the officers of the Association but is not to be taken as forecasting "official actions of that body"; the authors "are simply offering [their] personal views for general discussion" and "are alone responsible for what is said" (p. vii). In addition, they present factual information and a considerable body of opinion gathered from a variety of sources: from seven two-day regional conferences with invited participants, from interviews with colleagues and informed laymen, and from some 280 letters. The letters are considered so significant that they will be published separately. It is not indicated whether or not the committee sought any expression of opinions from students "in course."

The Commission undertook to do three things: (1) to report the contemporary situation in philosophy; (2) to define the function of philosophy in liberal education and in the community; (3) to study ways and means by which the philosophical profession might more adequately perform this function and realize other possible purposes (p. vii). The authors are careful to point out