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Introduction

Among many others two reasons for undertaking this study stand out, one anecdotal in origin, the other rather predictably academic. In a seminar one day, in a discussion of the difference between a legisign and a replica by means of one of Peirce's favourite examples, the English definite article, a very sharp student raised her hand and asked what sort of object the definite article represented, given that a sign is defined in part as something that represents an object. A rule? A law? But what sorts of objects were these? This, it seemed to me, was a very pertinent question in the circumstances. But it was one which began to bother me – how did we know what sorts of objects were represented by the classes of signs I was describing? The system that I had been presenting to these students defined the sign and two sorts of relations into which it entered very precisely, but it was not designed to detect any sort of object, and most researchers are content to recycle examples given by Peirce himself. Identifying the object, then, a task which we accomplish over and over again every minute of our lives, became a problem that required further research, but this meant looking beyond the three-division system I was describing.

The second reason came from a more conventional source. Writing in the Introduction to *The Essential Peirce, Volume One*, Nathan Houser, the doyen of Peirce scholars, recognizing that Peirce had been unable to complete the classification of the sixty-six signs he had posited within his general theory, set out a programme for semiotic theorists in the form of the following statement: 'Perhaps in our present state of understanding of language and semiosis we have no need for such complexity [sixty-six classes of signs] – just as we once had no need for relativity physics – but where principal distinctions can be made, they should be made, and, in any case, they will probably someday be needed' (1992: xxxviii).

The programme

The present study, then, is a contribution to that programme, but instead of adopting as its scope the principal distinctions required for the ten divisions yielding the sixty-six classes, it is restricted to six of those ten divisions, which, when correctly combined, theoretically yield twenty-eight such classes. Both the six-division and ten-division systems were Peirce's final statements on the classification of signs, and the viability of any attempt to establish the correct ordering of either series of divisions is conditioned by stages in their evolution. In this we follow what Peirce considered to be key to our understanding of the development of Plato's thought: 'everything depends upon the chronology'.¹ Consequently, the principle informing the restricted and therefore more feasible part of the larger programme adopted in the study is that what is true of our appreciation of Plato's dialogues will also be true of Peirce's theory of signs, and for this reason in the chapters to come a chronological approach has been adopted.

However, there is a drawback both to the larger programme outlined by Houser and to the less ambitious one undertaken here. Peirce spent nearly half a century developing his various contributions to logic and philosophy, and yet the later statements characterizing these contributions are still only available in a piecemeal fashion. Now the greater part of the research reported in the pages to follow deals necessarily with Peirce's later semiotic theory, namely the period following the course of lectures he gave on logic at the Lowell Institute in Boston in 1903. It is rather sobering, then, to have to admit that much of the most interesting material from 1904 and after not only comes from largely unpublished manuscripts and from letters, but even from drafts of letters. These in particular contain some of the most illuminating semiotic material that Peirce produced, but the fact that they were never sent confers on the enterprise an unavoidably 'but what-if', hypothetical character. If the *Writings*² had reached the period from 1903 to 1910 there would be no problem. They haven't, and so the present study is also an attempt to present some of the semiotic riches of this period in spite of the difficulties induced by this editorial handicap.

We know from the available documents that Peirce struggled to finalize the late sign-systems in 1908, and even now, over a century later, there is still no consensus as to how the ten divisions they projected should be arranged, or even as to the viability of such an enterprise in spite of its being a necessity, as Houser has noted. Some authorities, Weiss and Burks (1945), for example, have proposed a reordering of Peirce's original scheme. Others, like Spinks

(1991), have claimed that the task of identifying the sixty-six classes is, if not impossible, counterproductive.³ Yet others, more circumspect, like Liszka (1996), have suggested that in view of the incomplete and disparate nature of the available data, it is more prudent to concentrate on the three-division system Peirce announced in 1903.⁴ But perhaps the most significant comment on the problematic nature of the more complex of the late systems and on the need of a research programme of the sort mentioned by Houser is that of another noted Peirce scholar, Thomas Short:

For all the enthusiasm that Peirce's later taxonomy has elicited, with its promise of a vast system, an endlessly ramifying formal structure that applies everywhere and to everything, close examination of it disappoints. It is sketchy, tentative, and, as best I can make out, incoherent. Its importance lies not in what it contains but in the kind of project it defines. That project has not yet been adopted by any of Peirce's devotees. (2007: 259–60)

Other authorities, Savan (1988) and Shapiro (1983), for instance, have indeed attempted to characterize the later typologies and identify some of their defining features. Nevertheless, Short's rather extreme statement clearly describes the sorry condition in which Peirce's final statements on signs find themselves within the Peirce community, even now, some ninety-odd years after Ogden and Richards first brought them to the attention of the public in the ten pages devoted to Peirce in their Appendix D (1923: 279–90). It is precisely the purpose of the present study to take up the 'project' mentioned by Short, but the emphasis will be less on how best to order those later divisions as on how coherent at least one of the two systems announced in 1908 can be shown to be. As the title suggests, the study develops two interrelated themes: the late 28-class sign-systems and a 'philosophy of representation'; but in doing so it also investigates the evolving logical status of Peirce's object.

To begin with, it should be noted that in what follows the term 'sign-systems' refers both to the definition of semiosis – the complex process in which the sign participates together with the object it represents and the effects that it produces – and to the typologies which were derived from it. All of Peirce's definitions of the sign in 1903 and earlier were triadic in nature, whereas in the period after 1904 they came to be defined as effectively involving six elements. In this respect the year 1903 constitutes a sort of theoretical watershed, and the late sign-systems are therefore those established after 1903 and based upon the more complex definition of sign-action. As it happens, the ten divisions of the 'later taxonomy' mentioned by Short which should, theoretically, yield sixty-six classes of signs also include the very six from which twenty-eight can be obtained. This

being the case, one approach to a better understanding of the ordering problem is to investigate the specificity of the six-division system before attempting to master its more complex companion. By isolating characteristics of this simpler typology and then comparing and contrasting them with the remaining divisions of the 66-class system we might gain a greater understanding of how they differ and, consequently, of how better to integrate the two, should this prove to be theoretically possible.

There is, however, an even more compelling reason for examining the 28-class system (which, apparently, Peirce referred to only once, namely in a letter to his English correspondent, Lady Victoria Welby), an enterprise that so far has been overshadowed by discussions of the more complex typology. Investigating the simpler system as an independent, 'stand-alone' instrument for the identification and classification of signs will also make it possible to exploit its analytical power, which, if only in terms of the greater number of different types of signs it identifies, must surely have a theoretical potential not possessed by the earlier 10-class system of 1903. One innovative aspect of this particular taxonomy is to be found, for example, in the fact that Peirce's best known division, which distinguishes between icon, index and symbol, is entirely absent from the later, hexadic 28-class system,⁵ which means that we have at our disposal two radically different analytical approaches – an earlier and a later, both within a genuinely Peircean framework – to the examination and classification of the same semiotic phenomena, so to speak. They present, in effect, two distinct conceptions of the classification of the same sign. And so an assessment of the nature and analytical potential of the 28-class system is the first of the two major themes the study develops.

Now Peirce defined semiotics⁶ as nothing other than logic, which he conceived in two distinct ways, one narrow and one broad. As we see in Chapter 1, the narrow dealt with the relation between signs and what they represent, whereas he was led in 1903 to identify the broad, 'grand', logic as a veritable 'Philosophy of Representation'. The sheer ambition of such a project is astonishing, and testifies to Peirce's confidence in the theoretical framework he had established at the time and in his attendant association of the sign with the process of representation. However, this confidence can be seen to diminish with the development of the later sign-systems, characterized as they are by a complex series of interpretants, a development which may have neutralized or even appropriated the purpose he had earlier attributed to a branch of logic which he referred to as 'methodeutic' or 'speculative rhetoric'. For this reason, the waning influence of the philosophy of representation and its relation to Peirce's mature understanding of signs

constitute the second of the themes to be developed in the book, for in this age of biosemiotics and zoosemiotics, which in their Peircean versions are based essentially upon the 1903 semiotic 'model', it is important that the logical status of representation itself and its altered status within the later systems as well as Peirce's more complex final conception of the sign they were based upon be clarified.

Organization of the book

Chapter 1 begins the chronological development of the relevant concepts, and traces Peirce's general theory of representation as far back as the 1860s. It comprises two major parts. In order to present the general background to Peirce's theory of signs the first part reviews selected influences from the modern Western philosophical tradition which contributed to Peirce's intellectual development and which he ultimately came to break with. The second presents Peirce's semiotics as he introduced it during that course of lectures at the Lowell Institute. Since most introductions to Peirce's theory of the sign are hybrid in the sense that they combine material from 1903 and the later definitions, the description given in Chapter 1 will surprise many readers as all the statements and quotations have been restricted to the 1903 period for purposes of comparison with the later systems.

Chapter 2, the longest in the book, traces the ways in which Peirce's conceptions of the sign came under considerable pressure over the period of the four years following the Lowell Lectures, that is, from 1904 to 1907, and how the theoretical developments which occurred in this period contributed to the pioneering features of the later sign-systems, and, ultimately, to the by-now problematic status of the speculative rhetoric/methodeuteic branch of the general philosophy. The successive stages described in the chapter show Peirce breaking with the philosophical tradition outlined in Chapter 1.

Chapter 3 introduces the hexadic sign-systems which evolved from the principles discussed in the previous chapter. It shows how Peirce moves innovatively from his earlier category-based conception of signification and classification to one based upon three universes. A further purpose of the chapter is to review the debate concerning the ordering of the divisions involved in the late typologies, which to this day continues to be a subject of disagreement among Peirce scholars to the almost complete neglect of the characterization and exemplification of the sign-classes themselves.

Chapter 4 compares and contrasts the two very different typologies by examining the way in which each accommodates a corpus of literal and figurative signs. It shows how the triadic system of 1903 classifies signs according to the way they represent their objects – the well-known division of the icon, index and symbol is an excellent example of this principle, together with Peirce's highly original concept of the hypoicon – while the 1908 hexad classifies signs according to the sorts of objects that they represent, a typology from which, as mentioned earlier, the icon-index-symbol division is absent.

Having compared the earlier typology with the later in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 exploits the analytical potential of the later system in its own right. It begins with a discussion of the way in which interpreters can react differentially to the same sign. One course of enquiry into this problem is provided by the 1908 system, and involves tracing the evolution of Peirce's conception of the object over the early years of the century. The final stage of this theoretical development is used to show how a number of pictorial signs are determined by an object quite different from the perceived entities they depict.

Most of these chapters have, in addition to their specific theoretical material and the illustrations, a summary of the chapter's main findings, a section which expands upon some of the more complex ideas introduced in the chapter and, in some cases, suggestions for further reading. The chapters cover as wide a variety of pictorial representations as our copyright laws allow, without neglecting, of course, the sorts of verbal examples that Peirce himself tended to use. Finally, as an aid to understanding the rapidity with which Peirce's theorizing on signs developed in the period after the Lowell Lectures, I have included an appendix containing eight increasingly complex typologies developed in the two years between August 1904 and August 1906, all from his Logic Notebook, R339.