Peirce's Semiotic and Psychoanalysis

Commentary to the article of Vera Saller

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The philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce is, in many ways, typically American and, at the same time, the idiosyncratic expression of an odd, poorly socialized polymath's attempt to bring order to all knowledge. Peirce was the major proponent of the philosophy of pragmatism, although two others – William James and John Dewey – are more likely to be credited in relation to it (Menand, 2001). Pragmatism's emphases on actions and behaviors can be identified as themes that run through a particularly American contribution to many disciplines, including psychology (e. g., behaviorism, evidence-based treatments) and psychoanalysis (e. g., CPSG, interpersonal / relational theory) (Litowitz, 2011). One could arguably expect that the philosophy that would emerge from a relatively new country, created through the labors of emigrants needing to leave their troubled past behind, would be optimistic, action-oriented, and desirous of being judged by what they do in the here-and-now, not by their lineage.

Ironically, the best description of how Peirce differs from the more celebrated proponents of pragmatism – James and Dewey – was written by one of the fathers of logical positivism, A. J. Ayer (1968). In his typically clear prose, Ayer wrote that Peirce's pragmatism is built upon the twin principles of continuity and fallibility. For Peirce, all knowledge is the result of acts of interpretation (by someone of something in some respect), which are themselves re-interpretations – on and on – that may or may not capture the continual flux of the external or corporeal world correctly. His vast oeuvre, which is still being compiled by a small band of Peircean scholars and issued in periodic publications, can be seen as a working through of these principles so as to capture all branches of science (knowledge) in one unified system.[1]

Since we can never be sure that we have correctly captured reality, we must keep communicating and, through continuous dialogue within a community, we will get closer and closer to getting it right – this latter eschatological thrust being Peirce's expression of American optimism. On the one hand, his emphases on dialogue and communication connect Peirce to continental psychologists like

Ragnar Rommetveit and philosophers like Jürgen Habermas. On the other hand, his *semiotic* has not found a large audience among writers abroad whose thinking has been dominated by Saussurean *semiology* (Umberto Eco being a notable exception).

Even in his native country, Peirce has not enjoyed the influence that his theory deserves. One reason, alluded to above, is the attraction of American (non-Peircean) pragmatic philosophy toward dyadic theories: stimulus and behavioral response; mother and child interactions; ego's mastery of and adaptation to its environment; and so forth. Peirce's insistence on irreducible triadic relations and, in particular, his concept of *thirdness* has been the most misunderstood and most often, ignored. The complexity of his semiotic, with its cross-classifications, levels of interpretation and idiosyncratic terminology (e. g., *interpretant)*, combined with the slowly published release of his complete writings, have kept Peirce an obscure prophet in his own land.

Consequently, one reason that Peirce has not been an influence on psychoanalytic theories can be attributed to the simple fact that most theorists are not familiar enough with his work to use it or integrate it into their own. Even psychoanalysts with a background in philosophy tend to bring into psychoanalysis thinking from classical (e. g. Aristotle, Plato) or continental (e. g. Heidegger, Gadamer) philosophers. It is, therefore, with interest and pleasure that I find attempts to integrate Peirce and psychoanalysis among colleagues in Switzerland, Saussure's native land.

Among those who do try to use Peircean concepts in their work, whether in psychoanalysis or in another discipline, the great failing is to focus on his logic of signs (wherein he defines icon, index and symbol) and then to interpret his examples as entities in the world, existing independent of any act of interpretation. The tendency to create entities (objectification) out of concepts and processes that are continua can be found among psychoanalysts who write about *the* unconscious as an object in itself or as a location for other objectified entities, such as repressed thoughts or thing-representations (cf. Schafer, 1981). Recently, some psychoanalysts have enlisted the concept of "*the* third" as a way to express an intersubjectivity that emerges between two inter-acting subjectivities – for example, between an analysand and her analyst during the course of treatment (Litowitz, 2014).

The global shift within psychoanalysis from an exclusively intra-psychic discipline to include inter-personal (relational) perspectives – characterized as one-body versus two-body theories (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983) or field theories *(Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 2013) – has generated more writing about what happens

between the two interacting parties: how they come to mutual understandings or break through transference-countertransference impasses. Winnicott's developmental concept of a potential space, has been used to write about a similar third space in treatment, neither patient nor analyst, where something new (insight or object relation) can come to be; and occasionally, Peirce's concept of thirdness has been also cited in this context *(Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 2004). Unfortunately, given the broad and unified scope of Peirce's philosophy, it does not lend itself to such lifting of a concept or two from the whole; and therefore, the results neither illuminate the underlying philosophy nor its application to psychoanalysis.

From my perspective, understanding Peirce must begin where he begins, in the phenomenology of experience: the qualia (the potentiality of firstness) that exists in the world can become a component of a sign *but only* once we encounter it at a given moment (the singularity of secondness) *and only if* that encounter contains a generality that transcends the individual moment (the law-like generality of thirdness). Each type of sign in the popular triad of icon-index-symbol consists of qualia or materiality, an encounter or act of interpretation, and a transindividual meaning.[2] However, for any given sign one or another component may be dominant; and this leads to the complex cross-classifications that most writers ignore in favor of identifying a sign by one dominant feature alone. Unfortunately, simplifying Peirce's semiotic leads to simplistic conclusions, for example: collapsing dreams and metaphors; or failing to distinguish among forms of symptomatic expression.

A second reason why Peirce's philosophy has not been incorporated into psychoanalytic writing originates in Freud himself. As monumental and astonishing as his theories are, they necessarily suffer, as does any writing, from the limits of knowledge at the time of writing. For example, today we know so much more about the brain than in Freud's time, when the synapse and the reflex arc had just been described. How might Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology" read if written today? (Both Gerald Edelman and Antonio Damasio claim to be picking up where Freud's *Project* left off.) Similarly, where Freud's theorizing deals with representation – perception and memory – and with language, one finds his writing equally in need of reexamination. Unfortunately, however, in our reverence for Freud's contributions, more often than not, writers today try to use current knowledge to justify, rather than to interrogate, Freud's conclusions. Nowhere is this tendency more in evidence than in the persistence of Freud's distinction between two types of thinking – primary and secondary processes.

It was in "The Interpretation of Dreams" (1900) that Freud first introduced the idea that humans engage in two types of thinking, a distinction he needed in

order to explain the differences in how we think when we are awake and how our mind works during sleep, as evident in our dreams.[3] Freud introduces this great work with the claim that, unlike the many authors cited in his literature review, he would provide a *scientific* theory of dreaming. Having provided many examples of dreams and ultimately the description of dream processes (the "dreamwork") in Chapter 6, Freud embarks in Chapter 7 to make good on his promise. The science that he provides comes from the ideas he had sketched out earlier (but not published) in the *Project*. Thus, Freud explains the differences in dreaming and speaking in terms of energy: bound and free; forces seeking discharge; counter-forces (repression, censorship) pushing back. He then adds to this basic metapsychology ideas about human development that were extrapolated from the Darwinian zeitgeist of his time. The ontogeny-recapitulates-phylogeny argument of social Darwinism can be found throughout this great work, most directly justified in the key passage (in Chapter 7) where Freud collapses all three kinds of regression. As a result, generations of psychoanalytic writers have continued to accept Freud's extension of processes originally proposed to explain dream representation and interpretation – e. g., condensation, displacement, considerations of representability – as valid descriptions of a type of thinking more generally, apart from dreaming.

We now have evidence from disciplines that did not exist in 1900 that directly undermines Freud's more general claim about thinking, while not disputing his insights about processes of dream construction that aid our work in dream interpretation with patients. Specifically, research studies in child development and developmental psycholinguistics provide a very different picture of how children think, calling into question Freud's claim that their cognition is primary in either a logical or phylogenetic sense. A comparison of the features that Freud ascribes to the dreamwork (e. g., condensation, displacement, considerations of representability) with findings from child research studies clearly demonstrates that Freud's 1900 proposal is untenable (Litowitz, 2007). Furthermore, Freud's insights about dream representation and interpretation, which remain one of his great contributions, are now better understood in terms of semiotic theories, which were also not available to him in 1900.[4]

Specifically, because of his goal to encompass the broadest range of disciplines, Peirce's semiotic contains sufficient nuance and flexibility to describe the differences not only between the imagic representations in dreams (so-called primary process) and the auditory representations of speech (so-called secondary process), but also among the varied forms of expression one encounters with patients. We need to understand how symptomatic expressions differ in order to

understand why some patients communicate with their bodies (psychosomatic disorders, narcissistic behavior disorders) while others are paralyzed by obsessive thoughts. When a patient in the course of a treatment relates a dream, is a wish being expressed in images so as to circumvent repression (Freud) or is an inchoate idea first being experienced in images so that it can be expressed verbally within the therapeutic dialogue (Bion, Barrangers)? When a patient expresses resistance in treatment, what is the significance of her doing so by not coming to sessions versus her coming and being silent; between her being silent and filling the time with empty chatter?

Freud understood that how an Oedipal conflict is expressed as a compromise in a symptom has significance for diagnosing the nature of the patient's psychopathology (e. g., hysteria, obsessive neurosis, phobia, psychosis). Since Freud, with their emphases on the pre-oedipal period, some psychoanalytic theories have raised the question whether developmental deficits (e. g., in attachment, object relations, mentalization) are also factors to be considered in understanding symptom formation, in formulating diagnoses, and in determining clinical technique. These approaches require an understanding of how cognitive capacities for representation and interpretation develop and impact psychopathology, for which Freud's 1900 speculations on primary and secondary processes are woefully inadequate. Unfortunately, although post-Freudian theories draw on academic research findings for understanding the developing brain/mind, they most often characterize the pre-oedipal period as pre-symbolic and pre-verbal, thereby ignoring the significance of semiotic mediation in all human mentation from the beginning of life.

Thomas Sebeok's equation of life and semiosis provided the impetus for the emergence of a new field of study that explores mediational exchanges between organisms and their environments, both at the macro and micro levels. Biosemiotics uses Peircean theory to create bridges across different biological sciences, from microbiology to epigenetics, and to discuss their differences (Favareau, 2009). Among psychoanalysts, David Olds (2000), has also used Peircean categories to create a bridge between the neuroscience of brain and a psychoanalytic psychology of mind. A further question raised by Saller is: can Peircean theory also incorporate Freud's theory of a dynamic unconscious?

Peirce and Freud agreed that the greater part of our thinking occurs unconsciously; that is, outside our awareness, automatically. As Edmund Leach wrote, Pavlov's dog learned to interpret the bell (stimulus) as an index to food (reward) but thereafter reacted to it as if it were an automatic, immediate signal (like an

innate reflex) (1976, p. 23). Leach noted that the results of much of our education are similarly automatic or, as Peirce would say, "habits". But what about the particularly psychoanalytic meaning of unconscious as *dynamically* unconscious, which is neither originary (simply not yet conscious) nor automatic (no longer conscious because a habit)?

The dynamic unconscious, in the Freudian sense, is the result of having engaged some defense (e. g., repression, dissociation, disavowal, projection, splitting) that has been mobilized by a motivational force – instincts, drives, affects, anxiety – which originates in the body. Using the terminology from the physics of his day Freud created a metapsychology of energic forces and counterforces seeking homeostasis that post-Freudians have sought to replace with tension regulation, attachment patterns, cognitive neuroscience, non-linear dynamical systems, etc. These later proposed motivational sources are not confined to the dynamics within one individual's body/mind (as was the case for Freud) but take into account the individual's relationships to its surround (e. g., its object relations, attachment patterns, socio-cultural context). Therefore, there should be even more opportunities to find a place for semiotic theory in psychoanalytic discourses, beyond discussions of dreams and symptom formation.

From my perspective, the benefits of incorporating semiotic theory into psychoanalytic thinking do not include replacing Freud's original energic metapsychological models with Peirce's semiotic systems (Litowitz, 1991). Rather, Peirce's semiotic offers psychoanalysts a system to make nuanced distinctions about the data that we deal with in our work and try to explain with our theories: representations and interpretations. Peirce's theory explains that represent*ing*/interpret*ing* is one continuous process, in a constant flux that never ends – i. e., the process of "being in thought" (as Peirce would say) is *dynamic*. Further, as psychoanalysis seeks to integrate findings from other sciences (e. g., developmental studies, neuroscience, the social sciences), Peirce's system, which he elaborated precisely to differentiate one science from another, is even more important if we want to avoid reductionism. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Peirce's philosophy of continuity and fallibility is critical for our clinical work that requires continual negotiations between self and other, and decisions about subjective and objective reality. What better philosophy for a working psychoanalyst can there be than Peirce's skeptical realism that argues for an acceptance of uncertainty and error?

Charles Sanders Peirce und die Psychoanalyse

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Annotations

1   The *Peirce Edition Project at IUPUI* (Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis) has thus far published eight volumes of Peirce's unedited and uncatalogued collected writings. (See also *Essential Peirce*, v. 1 & 2.)

2   Peirce's secondness and thirdness can be captured in mediational terminology as an act of interpretation that imposes a digitalization (i. e. a binary choice) on analogical experience. And from information theory we know that a binary choice is a difference that makes a difference in the context of a set of possible choices, as in Saussure's description of language as a system of differences. However, what is missing from such alternate terminologies is Peirce's firstness, which gives a sign its materiality and connects it to something outside the sign itself (cf. nominalism).

3   Prior to 1900, in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), Breuer and Freud had written about two *states* of consciousness, which then became the two *systems*: uncns and (pre)cns.

4   Freud's knowledge of language was similarly limited by the philological and historical linguistic theoretical perspectives of his time, which also led him to make claims (e. g., the antithetical meaning of primal words) that are not tenable.