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Capturing Cerberus: The Rhetorical Path to General Semiotics

Mats Bergman

As he struggled to clear the way for philosophical semiotics, Charles S. Peirce encountered a troublesome beast: the view that signs are essentially human or cultural entities. Peirce found himself in an intellectual catch-22. If he avoided or attacked this *Cerberus*, he risked alienating his potential audience; but if he made concessions to the hellhound, his universal science of signs would be gravely compromised. The Greeks and Romans used to place pieces of cake in the hands of the dead to appease the Hound of

Hades; Peirce's "sop to Cerberus" entailed the insertion of "person" or "human mind" in his definition of the sign relation.

The addition of a human ingredient into the conception of the sign has mostly been interpreted as a momentary lapse on Peirce's part; the truly general definition should not be restricted in such a fashion. Therefore, many Peircean semioticians have tended to prefer his more abstract accounts of the basic constituents of semiotics. Some have taken this line of thought to its logical conclusion, arguing that a satisfactory theory of sign must be *strictly* formal, derivable from a few basic relational principles. Semiotics could thus be formulated with mathematical precision.

Without denying that Peirce indeed sought an adequate general conception of the sign, I would argue that this view of the nuts and bolts of semiotics is too simple, and may in fact prove to be misleading. A closer study of Peirce's work reveals a far more intricate story, connected to the question of the basic character and motivation of his project.

In this speech, I want to discuss how Peirce may succeed in having his cake and eating it too – that is, how his theory may be able to both put forward a general conception of the sign *and* accommodate the view that the signs of the world must be understood in terms of human or social signs. However, this requires a distinction between two basic strategies or approaches to semiotics, both to be found in Peirce's mature writings. The first could be called deductive and formalistic and the second inductive (or abductive) and experiential. While I will not here expound these arguments in detail, I hope to

suggest how this latter “rhetorical” or social path to the world of Peircean semiotics can render the theory more viable as a resource and framework for all kinds of inquiry, including studies in the humanities and the social sciences. If I am allowed to stretch the metaphor a bit further, we may in this way be able to *capture* Cerberus, rather than attempting in vain to slay, avoid, or bribe the worrisome beast.

The Formalistic Approach

Let us first consider Peirce’s formalistic approach.

Anyone who has studied Peirce’s semiotic writings knows that he spends a considerable amount of effort searching for an adequate definition of the general sign relation. More than once, he declares that the idea excited by the common word “sign” is hazy, and that its meaning needs to be worked out.

Reflecting on the problem in a letter to Victoria Lady Welby, Peirce asserts that if “the question were simply what we *do* mean by a sign, it might soon be resolved”. However, he contends that we are in a situation similar to that of a zoologist, “who wants to know what ought to be the meaning of ‘fish’ in order to make fishes one of the great classes of vertebrates”. This endeavour will, supposedly, give us a new concept that may exclude some things ordinarily called signs, but which will almost certainly expand the scope of “sign” in other respects.

The outcome of Peirce's definitional undertaking is of course quite well known and probably relatively uncontroversial in its main outlines. No introduction to his theory of signs, however brief, will fail to mention that the Peircean sign is a *triadic* relation, and that the sign can be defined as something that stands for something else (its *object*) for something third (its *interpretant*), or alternatively as something that mediates between its object and its interpretant. The most obvious mark of a sign is its structure, which distinguishes it from monadic and dyadic relations.

Most presentations of Peircean semiotics will also point out that the interpretant is not equivalent to an interpreter. Peirce strives to eliminate all references to mind from the general definition. For instance, he announces that he intends to give a characterisation of the sign that "no more refers to human thought than does the definition of a line as the place which a particle occupies, part by part, during a lapse of time". Peirce even declares that "the new concept of a 'sign' will be defined exclusively by the forms of its logical relationships; and the utmost pains must be taken to understand those relations in a purely formal, or, as we may say, in a purely mathematical way". Lacking a strictly mathematical or diagrammatic expression, the conception of the sign implied by these proclamations is perhaps most clearly articulated in the following definition:

A "sign" is anything, A, which,

(1) in addition to other character of its own,

(2) stands in a dyadic relation, γ , to a purely active correlate, B,

(3) and is also in a triadic relation *to B for* a purely passive correlate, C, this triadic relation being such as to determine C to be a dyadic relation, ζ , to B, the relation ζ corresponding in a recognized way to the relation γ .

Such a characterisation of the basic semiotic relation is resolutely anti-psychologistic. However, Peirce is aware of the criticism that can be directed against his attempts to give a general account of the sign without making explicit allusions to human thought. Indeed, he often defines the sign relation in a more permissive way, sometimes inserting references to minds and persons at the interpretative end. Reluctantly, Peirce declares that he has decided to limit his conception, “so as to define a sign as anything which is on the one hand so determined (or specialized) by an object and on the other hand so determines the mind of an interpreter of it that the latter is thereby determined mediately, or indirectly, by that real object that determines the sign”. He laments this compromise in a letter to Lady Welby; the addition of “person” to one of his definitions is his “sop to Cerberus”.

Such a concession would constitute a serious crippling of the assumed potential of Peirce’s semiotics. By viewing sign relations as the exclusive domain of human minds, we in effect diminish the theory in two respects. Firstly, we are deprived of the comparison of the operation of signs with similar processes in animals and machines. Arguably, one of the strengths of Peirce’s point of view is that it permits us to see high-level sign use as continuous with less developed forms, thus enabling us to consider the differences between the cases more productively than if we merely would postulate the

uniqueness of humans as sign users. Secondly, a generalised conception of sign is more readily applicable to signs in society, as the interpreting mind does not need to be an individual; the interpretant effect of the sign could be conceived to act on a social group or a culture. In other words, a general semiotics allows us to adopt a more flexible approach to the agent/patient of sign processes than one exclusively bound to the interpretation of an individual human mind.

Why, then, does Peirce even consider such a compromise? Ostensibly, it is to make his conception more comprehensible to ordinary mortals. But I would like to suggest that the reasons might be a bit deeper. In a sense, they are symptoms of difficulties with a strictly formal and deductive approach. If semiotic relations are to be understood in a purely mathematical way, as Peirce occasionally proclaims, then we are faced with the thorny problem of how to connect form with substance. Are all triadic relations signs? Peirce himself wavers, but overall he seems to hold that sign relations are a type of triadic relation. But more worryingly, a purely formal approach renders the triadic sign a postulation, from which an elaborate system of sign classes may be deduced according to certain rules. This classification can become a veritable glass-bead game of lofty intellectual play, one that never touches the troublesome grounds of experience. But what are we in that case to make of Peirce's claim that philosophical semiotics is an *experiential* mode of inquiry? To put the matter more crassly: of what use is this elaborate theory?

To me, such considerations reveal how important it is that we find a plausible approach to the Peircean sign without compromising the generality of the conception – a path that would not render the sign a mere postulation in a formal analysis, severed from its roots in experience.

Rhetorical Strategies

If the rigorous formalistic strategy is deemed to be inadequate, we need to find another route to the general conception of the sign. In a useful discussion, Rulon Wells has suggested that there are three principal ways of delimiting signs: *definition*, *classification*, and *the method of more or less*. The first two of these are amply present in Peirce's writings. However, Wells finds both methods deficient; the attempt to straightforwardly define the sign tends to lead to empty formalism or "pseudogeneralisation", while classification might give us too broad classes of signs, in which it is impossible to distinguish essential features of signhood from contingent ones. Of course, this argument stands and falls with the assumption that semiotics ought to be something more than a mere descriptive catalogue of signs in use; we are looking for connections and generalisations.

The third method consists in pinpointing certain *paradigmatic* cases of signs, readily available and full-blooded cases to which other instances of signs or sign-related phenomena are then compared. Borrowing a term from Hilary Putnam, Wells characterises the conception of sign he is looking for as a "cluster-concept". It is marked

by its indefinite boundaries; the touchstone will not contain a set of clear-cut – that is, necessary and sufficient – conditions for signs.

For Wells, the semiotic entity that best manifests semiotic features is the conventional, linguistic sign in use. In other words, the paradigm case is the social, *communicated* sign.

At first blush, this proposal appears to be plainly in conflict with the outlook of Peirce's technical definitions – another version of the “sop to Cerberus”, perhaps. Nonetheless, Peirce's discussions of signs and related matters sometimes advance along a route roughly similar to the one staked out by Wells. For instance, Peirce maintains that philosophers “must not begin by talking of pure ideas, – vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habituation, – but must begin with men and their conversation”. Here, it may be appropriate to emphasise that semioticians are primarily philosophers from Peirce's point of view.

Peirce also singles out ordinary dialogue as “a wonderfully perfect kind of sign-functioning”. Furthermore, in a suggestive passage, he indicates that semiotic grammar needs to employ so-called *rhetorical* evidence, that is, inferences drawn from our commonplace experiences of assertions. This evidential base is formally defective. Yet, it does not only provide the initial material for the inquiry, but also constitutes the testing ground for the systematically developed analysis; as Peirce puts it: “the deductions, or quasi-predictions, from the theory having been made, it is requisite to turn to the rhetorical evidence and see whether or not they are verified by observation”.

Consequently, Peirce could very well agree with Wells that the communicated sign can be viewed as the paradigmatic case of signhood. This impression is strengthened by certain modifications in Peirce's mature theory of signs. He claims that "a sign as ordinarily understood is an implement of intercommunication; and the essence of an implement lies in its function, that is, in its purpose together with the general idea, – not, however, the plan, – of the means of attaining that purpose". The common idea of a sign is best captured in the use of signs to communicate; this is equally true of thoughts, signs that convey ideas from the self of the past to the self of the future, as it is of the signs used in explicitly social exchanges.

This line of thought is supported by an informal "derivation" of the principal components of the sign that Peirce sketches in the landmark essay "Pragmatism" from 1907. There, Peirce first identifies the most obvious case of sign action, that is, a communicative exchange. He then notes that it is highly characteristic of signs that they "mostly function between two minds, or theatres of consciousness, of which the one is the agent that *utters* the sign (whether acoustically, optically, or otherwise), while the other is the *patient* mind that *interprets* the sign".

Peirce argues that neither utterer nor interpreter is strictly speaking necessary for the function of a sign, although they are no doubt typical features of semiotic operations. Instead, he inquires "whether there be not some ingredient of the utterer and some ingredient of the interpreter which not only are so essential, but are even more

characteristic of signs than the utterer and the interpreter themselves”. In other words, he is looking for elements that can perform the paradigmatic *roles* of utterer and interpreter, and identifies these as the *object* and *interpretant* of the sign relation.

According to Peirce, the utterer constructs and puts forth the sign, and the object fulfils the same, or a similar, function. The crucial aspects of the utterer, corresponding to the object-function, are those of *determination* of the sign and *contextualisation* of semiosis. Serving in the capacity of initiator of communication, the utterer can be said to determine what the exchange will be about, and in a corresponding fashion, the object also *delimits* the action of signs.

In a similar manner, Peirce characterises the interpretant as a “close analogue of a modification of consciousness”. In other words, it corresponds to the *semiotic effect* that a sign determines in an interpreter, be it of the character of an emotion, effort, cognition, or other kind of habit-change. If there is no actual interpreter, then the interpretant is what *would be* determined in an interpreter if there were one.

Thus, we see how the crucial semiotic functions involved in utterance and interpretation are supposed to be captured by the correlates of the general sign relation. This way of approaching the matter does affect Peirce’s definition of signs, which in these contexts is typically explicated in terms of *mediation*, rather than representation. For example:

...the essential nature of a sign is that it mediates between its Object, which is supposed to determine it and to be, in some sense, the cause of it, and its Meaning, or as I prefer to say, in order to avoid certain ambiguities, its *Interpretant*, which is determined by the sign, and is, in a sense, the effect of it; and which the sign represents to flow as an influence from the Object.

While communication (in the ordinary sense of the word) is not exhaustive of semiosis, this characterisation arguably takes in something of the character of a common communicative exchange.

However, a critic may at this point enquire what justifies Peirce's contention that this analysis is applicable to signs of all kinds, and not merely to implements of intercommunication. Peirce appears to be caught in a trap; on the one hand, he wants to draw up a definition of the sign that does not refer to personal minds, but on the other hand, his conception is supposedly derived from the eminently human and social process of conversational communication.

How serious is this deadlock? Peirce could defend his position by noting that the references to sign users are merely aids for understanding. In fact, he explicitly states that although "it is not necessary that any person should originate the sign or that any person should interpret it, yet it will contribute to perspicuity to use language as if such were the case, and to speak of the *utterer* and the *interpreter*". However, the problem is perhaps not so easily disposed of. Arguably, the references to utterance and interpretation are not

just linguistic aids, but may play a more substantial role as means for comprehending the functions of all kinds of signs.

Looking at the matter from a slightly different angle, we are faced with the question of the legitimacy of our comprehensive conception of sign, which must ultimately be based on our limited experience of signs and our fallible powers of reasoning. As Peirce admits, “we ought not to think that what are signs to us are the only signs; but we have to judge signs in general by these”. Obviously, such a generalisation could be accused of *anthropomorphism*, but, somewhat surprisingly, Peirce contends that we can know only the human aspect of the universe. He even asserts that “man is so completely hemmed in by the bounds of his possible practical experience, his mind is so restricted to being the instrument of his needs, that he cannot, in the least, mean anything that transcends those limits”.

Such pragmatistic and anthropomorphic remarks may seem to invalidate all attempts to construct a truly general semiotics, but we need to pay heed to the fact that Peirce says “*possible* practical experience”. Also, claiming that we can only know the human aspect does not, as such, place firm limits on human knowledge. As Peirce says, there is no point in *prohibiting* a human being from trying to jump over the moon; he or she can always try to jump as high as possible, and perhaps reach something.

However, Peirce’s statements are qualifications that remind us of the fallibilistic underpinnings of the whole enterprise. In a sense, we are only familiar with signs in use,

as the means of concrete cognition, communication, and learning. Arguably, we should understand Peirce's formal, anti-psychologicistic definitions of the sign as *abstractions* from everyday practices, of which social interactions form a particularly significant part. As Peirce contends, "we observe the characters of such signs as we know, and from such an observation, by a process which I will not object to naming Abstraction, we are led to statements, eminently fallible, and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what *must be* the characters of all signs used by a 'scientific' intelligence, that is to say, by an intelligence capable of learning by experience" (CP 2.227 [c. 1897]).

The communicative "derivation" of the sign relation sketched here can be seen as an attempt to abstract the most important elements of signs in use *so as* to enable us to study semiotic phenomena in general, to establish their connections and variations. The need for this "rhetorical" move is explained by the ubiquity of signs; it is most difficult to obtain knowledge of signs, since they are the only means of learning we have. As Peirce indicates, such reflexive knowledge must indeed be highly fallible.

Conclusion

What, then, is the significance of Peirce's quasi-derivation in view of the dilemma of Cerberus? Arguably, it is the answer – or at least the first steps toward a solution. A purely formalistic approach could be characterised as an attempt to handle the problem by simply ignoring it, while an inclusion of human agents in the general definition could be called a "sop to Cerberus". In contrast, what has here been identified as the rhetorical

approach entails facing up to and *capturing* Cerberus. This involves acknowledging that our conception of sign is always, to some extent, a human conception – we have no recourse to a God’s-eye point of view, free from human contamination. And the fact that the “derivation” sets out from a basic communicative situation can be seen as an implicit Peircean recognition of the primacy of the social in developed human understanding.

On the other hand, choosing the rhetorical path does *not* force us to make fatal concessions to Cerberus. Although the conception of sign and sign action so obtained is human in the anthropomorphic sense, it is nonetheless a *general* notion. The fact that the sign is viewed as an abstraction arising from experience implies that the conception is both substantial and fallible. The tribunal that ought to test the feasibility of the general conception of sign is that of experience and applicability in inquiry, not that of formal perfection.

To render this approach to semiotics more feasible, it is helpful to consider how well it fits into the context of the Peircean view of philosophy. According to Peirce, philosophy is a mode of experiential inquiry – it is a study of common, or ordinary, experience, which does not require special tools of observation. Philosophical semiotics is, in turn, characterised as a normative philosophical science – as logic in the broad sense, as Peirce sometimes puts it.

If we further accept Peirce’s view that normative inquiry – esthetics, ethics, and semiotics – are the heart and soul of philosophy, then the rhetorical approach that has been sketched

here gains in significance. Arguably, the principal task of semiotics – and, we might even say, of philosophy in general – is to provide means for the critic of habits. The purpose of abstraction, of working out general conceptions of sign and sign action, *of formalisation*, is first and foremost *not* conceptual analysis but rather the improvement of habits of feeling, of action, and of thought. This is just a convoluted way of saying that Peirce is not an analytic philosopher; he is a critical common-sensist and pragmatist who holds that “continual amelioration of our own habits [...] is the only alternative to a continual deterioration of them”.

The rhetorical path to Peircean semiotics avoids two potentially pernicious ways of restricting this line of inquiry. On the one hand, it steers clear of the Scylla of semiotic formalism, which easily excludes experience as a source of insight from its purview. On the other hand, it evades the Charybdis of the kind of “culturalism” that refuses to even consider the possibility of sign phenomena outside of human culture and easily falls prey to simplistic conventionalism, a form of nominalism in which signs are mere implicit or explicit agreements. Thus, the capture of Cerberus opens up a path toward a semiotics that is realistic and grounded in social experience but does not block the road of inquiry by restricting its scope strictly to signs in human interaction.