

# peirce's categories and sign studies

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**Abstract:** Charles Peirce's theory of signs greatly depends on his doctrine of categories, since this doctrine informs or inspires virtually all of his classifications of signs (e.g., that of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs). Thus, an adequate understanding of Peirce's semiotic or (as he most often spelled it) semeiotic is impossible apart from at least a working knowledge of the Peircean categories. This essay offers a primer of Peirce's categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Here the author succinctly explains the articulation, definition, number, names, functions, applications, origin, status, derivation, and justification of these categories. Such explanations throw much light on the theoretical structure exhibited by, and the intricate classifications encountered in, Peirce's minutely detailed theory of signs.

## introduction

For the sake of attaining an interior understanding of Charles Peirce's philosophical writings (see Peirce 1975, 1, 33), a nuanced comprehension of his categorial scheme (firstness, secondness, and thirdness) is indispensable. But, for interpreters of Peirce, no task is more demanding than that of understanding his doctrine of categories in its full sweep and intricate details. Nor is any more hermeneutically risky: possibilities for fundamental misinterpretation abound, impasses to deeper understanding are thrown in one's path. Even so, there can be no question that Peirce took his categories to be central to his project: his way of conducting the business of philosophy demanded the articulation and application of a scheme of categories at least roughly analogous to those of such predecessors as Aristotle and Kant (see Whitehead 1929, Chapter 1, Sections I and VI). He may have been deeply mistaken in this (see Buchler 1940); but if so, he was persistently—one might even say, obsessively (see CP 1.568–572)—mistaken in insisting upon the centrality of his categories. In any event, his interest in categories stretched from almost his first philosophical musings to his very last reflections (see, e.g., W 1: 4; 45), for his earliest writings exhibit a fascination with questions pertaining to the categories (Esposito 1980; Murphey 1961, 32), while his last jottings manifest their guidance.

Some of the best informed and most insightful of Peirce's commentators (see, e.g., Anderson 1995; De Tienne 1989; Esposito 1980; Fisch 1986; Hausman 1993; Hookway 1985; Houser 1989; Ketner 1989; Murphey 1961; Rosenthal 1990, 1994; Savan 1952; and Smith 1978) have focused upon the extremely difficult topic of the Peircean categories. Their efforts have yielded admirable, helpful accounts; they represent some of the best work done thus far on how to make Peirce's ideas clearer than he himself managed.

My only justification in taking up anew the task of commenting on Peirce's doctrine of the categories is that (1) disagreement on basic issues persists, (2) the insights of

Peirce's most reliable commentators have not yet been integrated with one another, and (3) my conviction that I have hit upon a helpful way of presenting Peirce's doctrine and, underlying this, a suggestive way of exhibiting the coherence of his most characteristic assertions about his three categories. In taking up anew a task taken up frequently before, I am in effect following the example of Peirce himself; for his writings reveal a philosopher who was indefatigable in his own efforts to offer a more perspicuous presentation or compelling justification of his categorial scheme. He returned, again and again, to the topic of the categories, never satisfied with any aspect pertaining to them, least of all with his manner of making them intelligible to minds who had not so completely and passionately devoted themselves to their identification and elaboration as he himself had. So I am not amiss in doing here exactly what Peirce did so frequently, struggling to make luminous what so many find opaque (CP 7.263).

In the following section, I state briefly and boldly my main points, italicizing them for the purpose of both identification and emphasis. These points concern the *articulation* (or *expression*), *definition*, *number*, *names*, *function*, *application*, *origin*, *status*, *derivation*, and *justification* of Peirce's categories. In addition, several other slightly less important points are made in conjunction with these main points. It is neither possible nor necessary to give equal space to each of the main points, since several can be treated summarily while others require fuller consideration. All of this should add up to a primer, useful perhaps *both* to readers first coming to Peirce and to those intimately acquainted with his thought. Even if this essay proves to be a primer useful only to those unfamiliar with Peirce, my efforts will be justified.

## A gloss on peirce's categories

### expression or articulation

As a very young man, Peirce became convinced of the necessity of expression (W 1: 85). He maintained this conviction throughout his life. In reference to affective, cognitive, and other domains of our experience and activity, interiority is in itself insufficient, for expression is necessary.<sup>1</sup> To use his own examples from this early manuscript, religion cannot be exclusively an affair of the heart,<sup>2</sup> nor thought solely a process or event within the inward region of a private consciousness. Our thoughts require expression or articulation both to be truly ours and to be themselves (i.e., to be thoughts). In other words, expression is not incidental to thought. That the same thought might be expressed in different ways has too often lead to the erroneous conclusion that thought and expression are separable, rather than thought being distinct from any particular expression or finite range of such expressions. Meaning and materiality are, on this view, severed, whereas the materiality of signs is integral to their functioning (W 1: 86).

Peirce's conception of his categories is, accordingly, one with his articulation of them. Of course, what has been articulated in one manner ordinarily can be articulated in countless other ways. We might conclude from this that the meaning of our expressions is something other than these expressions and, indeed, from any form of expression; that is, we might conclude that our expressions are incidental, external means of conveying an already determinate, interior thought. But the dualism between inward thought and outward expression implied here is, from a Peircean perspective, untenable. At bottom, both our inner musings and our interpersonal exchanges are equally instances of semiosis.

These reflections on thought and expression, meaning and articulation, bring us to our first main point: Peirce's categories were *self-consciously historical in their articulation*. They were conceived and formulated with an awareness of how Peirce's most influential predecessors had designed their own categorial frameworks. In particular, the experiments of Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel to devise a list of categories influenced Peirce's own efforts (see CP 5.43). The various attempts to interpret Peirce's categories solely in reference to one of these three principal predecessors (e.g., to see Peirce's categories as a revision of Kant's [see Hartshorne, in Kane and Phillips 1989]) provide a one-sided account of a doctrine with a complex genealogy. In particular, consideration of the *arché* of Peirce's doctrine of categories (his immanent critique in such early texts as "On a New List of Categories" of the Kantian derivation of the universal categories) should not be allowed to eclipse decisive steps in their ongoing reformulations (above all, the eventual realization that his own categorial scheme was more akin to post-Kantian idealists like Schelling and Hegel than to Kant's strictly transcendental idealism).

Articulation is a process of cultivation. In at least several contexts, Peirce stressed this point precisely in reference to the categories: the categories "must grow up in the mind, under the hot sunshine of hard thought, daily bright, well-focused, and well-aimed thought" (CP 1.521). One also meets this metaphor in his unpublished writings: "For now is to begin a long course of *cultivation* of the conceptions I have thus far gained. This process I continue to perform, pen in hand" (MS 311 [1903], 15; emphasis added). In a manuscript from this same time, Peirce stressed: "It now remains to treat my conception of the problem like a seedling tree, which must have water, nutriment, sunlight, shade, and air and frequent breaking of the ground above it in order that it may grow up into something worthy of respect" (MS 312 [1903], 6).

Peirce's categories are experiments in articulation or expression, wherein the very boundaries of articulation and thus intelligibility are being explored. Though this characterization of Peirce's categories is in accord with his stated objectives and implicit in his actual investigations, it was not Peirce's own formal definition.

#### DEFINITION

Peirce asserted "the word *Category* bears substantially the same meaning with all philosophers" (CP 5.43). Concepts operate at various levels of generality, ranging from quite specific levels to ever more general ones. It is no mystery why the concepts by which we grasp the macroscopic objects and affairs of everyday experience are the ones in which our conceptual mastery is most manifest and least problematic. Concepts tending toward higher levels of generality are often identified as categories; those attaining the highest level of generality are most properly designated as categories. One might try to articulate a long list of particular categories or a short list of truly universal ones. Peirce tried his hand at both (Esposito 1980), but devoted himself primarily to devising a new list of universal categories. For his purpose, then, the term category is, though *equivocal in meaning*, sufficiently uniform to trace a thread of continuity from Plato and Aristotle, through the medieval schoolmen, to Kant and Hegel: a category is a concept of the utmost generality. Despite these radically divergent conceptions of the most highly general concepts, these conceptions are akin in their generality and hence scope. One might reasonably object that the term *category* is an irreducibly equivocal one, but Peirce's definition surprisingly remains unscathed by this objection; for the function of his definition bears upon the minimal continuity requisite for comparative judgments.

It is helpful to distinguish between firstness, secondness, and thirdness, on the one hand, and the categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness, on the other. Firstness, secondness, and thirdness are ubiquitous features of phenomena, whereas the categories are the formal articulation of these features. But categories as the articulation of such features of our experience and, beyond the limits of actuality, of our imagination are no ordinary concepts. Whereas the concept of a chair is not itself a piece of furniture, the categories partake of what they articulate. They are immanent in and integral to any phenomenon whatsoever. The insistence upon this does not make them mental or private; rather it counters the Cartesian dualism of immaterial thought and extended (or physical) thing as well as the Kantian dualism of knowable phenomena and unknowable noumena.

(Alleged) novelty or originality

Despite the title of one of Peirce most famous articulations of his categorial scheme (“On a New List of Categories” [emphasis added]), not too much should be made of the novelty of Peirce’s categories. In fact, Peirce was insistent that his new list was, at most, only a somewhat novel articulation of truths glimpsed, however obscurely and confusedly, at the very emergence of human consciousness. An exchange between Peirce and William James is instructive in this regard. James is here responding to Peirce’s drafts of two lectures on pragmatism, part of a series to be presented in Cambridge several months later. In a letter dated June 5, 1903, he wrote that these lectures

are wonderful things ... but so original, and your categories are so unusual to other minds, that, although I recognize the region of thought and the profundity and reality of the level on which you move, I do not yet assimilate the various theses in the sense of being able to make a use of them for my own purposes. I may get to it later; but at present even first-, second-, and third-ness are outside of my own sphere of practically applying things, and I am not sure even whether I apprehend them as you mean them to be apprehended. I get, throughout your whole business, only the sense of something dazzling and imminent in the way of truth. (Perry 1935, 427)

Immediately upon receiving this missive, Peirce replied. He informed his friend that: “It rather annoys me to be told that there is anything novel in my three categories; for if they have not, however confusedly, been recognized by men since men began to think, that condemns them at once” (Perry 1935, 428; also in CP 8.264). Peirce’s categories are, however inchoate and indistinct in their formal articulation and thus recognition, are neither novel nor original.

But if a thought is one with its possibilities of articulation, and moreover if a concept (thus, a category) is also one with the possibilities of its formulation, can we so quickly and completely identify the inchoate, implicit comprehension of the categories with a systematic, formal elaboration of their meaning? Is there not here a difference that truly makes a difference? Peirce’s synechism (his commitment to the principle of continuity) is clearly operative in his insistence upon the continuity between the various phases in our conceptualization (thus, our articulation) of the categories themselves. But this should not be taken to imply a denial of ruptures or differences.

Perhaps a good way to make this point is in reference to a distinction drawn by P. F. Strawson regarding two approaches to metaphysics. He notes that: “Metaphysics has often been revisionary, and less often descriptive. Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is

concerned to produce a better structure" (Strawson 1959, xiii). Strawson offers Descartes and Leibniz as examples of revisionary metaphysicians, Aristotle and Kant as exemplars of descriptive metaphysics. Peirce's efforts do not fall into either one of Strawson's "categories," for his undertaking is neither purely descriptive nor radically revisionary. Peirce would not, however, dismiss altogether Strawson's claims that: "there is a massive central core of human thinking which has no history—or none recorded in histories of thought; there are categories and concepts which, in their most fundamental change, change not at all" (Strawson 1959, xiv). These categories and concepts underlie and guide all human thinking, the most sophisticated as well as the least refined. "It is with these [categories and concepts], their interconnexions, and the structure that they form, that a descriptive metaphysics will be primarily concerned" (Strawson 1959, xiv). Peirce's commonsensism is, in fact, the expression of his own acknowledgment that there is a "massive central core" of funded human experience. But this core *came to be*: it took shape in the course of the evolution of our species, a process intertwined with the evolution of other species and indeed with the cosmos itself. It is not only historical in character but also limited in its authority. The critical commonsensist (in contrast to the unqualified commonsensist) believes that "the indubitable beliefs [the massive central core] refer to a somewhat primitive mode of life, and that, while they never become dubitable in so far as our mode of life remains that of somewhat primitive man, yet as we develop *degrees of self-control* unknown to that man, occasions of action arise in relation to which the original beliefs, if stretched to cover them, have no sufficient authority" (CP 5.511). So, contra Strawson, what guides our least refined modes of engagement does not necessarily also guide our most sophisticated reflections: "we outgrow the applicability of instinct—not altogether, by any manner of means, but in our highest activities" (CP 5.511).

To repeat, then, Peirce's categories are neither purely descriptive nor radically revisionary. To codify a practice cannot help but alter that practice; so, too, to describe a conceptuality cannot help but transform that conceptuality. But, in Peirce's judgment, the task of describing the structure of our thought (thus, the structures by which we grasp and handle things and affairs) should be deeply conservative at the same time that it is insistently critical. What Peirce says about the reform of our language might be applied to his revision of the categories we have inherited from ancestors only barely human: "a language is a thing to be revered; and I protest that a man who does not reverence a given language is not in a proper frame of mind to undertake its improvements" (MS 279; quoted in Colapietro 1989, 4). Peirce's critical commonsensism is a doctrine in which a deeply conservative impulse but also a truly critical drive operates in a mutually supportive manner. His doctrine of categories is but one place wherein we can see these complementary impulses at work. Neither radical innovation nor inalterable adherence to traditional forms is characteristic of this doctrine.

### number

One of Peirce's most important and insistent claims regarding the categories—namely, that the categories are *three in number*—would seem to contradict the assertion that his list is not radically innovative. Perhaps, but Peirce himself did not suppose so. In this respect, they are more akin to Hegel's three stages of thought than to either Aristotle's or Kant's list of categories. In his later years, Peirce became somewhat less ambivalent about Hegel and more inclined to acknowledge his kinship with Hegel, on a specific point such as the number of categories (or the irreducibility of thirdness).

Thirdness is irreducible, but relationships numerically more complex than triads *are* reducible to triads. Peirce supposed that he had a formal proof to demonstrate the reducibility of all polyadic relationships more complex than triadic relationships to triadic ones. The literature on this difficult topic is helpful but not conclusive: it illuminates the structure and force of Peirce's various attempts to establish this point, but it does not contain a widely accepted reconstruction of his argument nor does it exhibit a clearly convergent movement toward a consensus.

### implausibility

In their pretension to provide the conceptual resources requisite for their purported aim(s)—to guide inquiry, to facilitate interrogation, to know reality, to speak of being, to mark the boundaries of intelligibility—the categories are implausible or worse, fantastic. Peirce was, of course, conscious of how his efforts to formulate a doctrine of categories, limited to just three, would appear to the minds of others. This is nowhere more forcefully expressed than in a letter to Victoria Lady Welby: “This sort of notion is as distasteful to me as to anybody; and for years, I endeavored to pooh-pooh and refute it; but it long ago conquered me completely” (CP 8.329). Yet, try as he might, he failed to refute the position to which he was led very early in his philosophical development (“In pursuing this study I was long ago [1867] led, after only three or four years' study, to throw all ideas into the three classes of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness” [CP 8.328]). He failed despite his distaste for such a doctrine: “Disagreeable as it is to attribute meaning to numbers, and to a triad above all, it is as true as it is disagreeable” (CP 8.328). He even confessed to feel himself afflicted with a peculiar form of madness—*triadomania* (CP 1.568)!

It is worthwhile to note here that, even if the categories are fanciful, they might not, purely on Peirce's account, be utterly discredited. In anticipation of a topic treated below (the *function* of the categories), let me simply recall here Peirce's suggestion that an “analogy, however fanciful, which serves to focus attention upon matters which might otherwise escape observation is valuable” (CP 1.521; see also Colapietro 2001, 8). If an analogy serves not only to focus attention in this fashion but also to suggest unanticipated directions in which to look and also unsuspected patterns of connection, it is even more valuable. Whatever else Peirce's categories do, they do at least this much. Hence, their initial implausibility needs to be weighted against their potential fecundity.

### vagueness and generality

The categories are both *general* and *vague* in nature. They are, moreover, general and vague in Peirce's own sense of these terms (see, e.g., CP 5.505–506). To assert that the categories are *vague* means that they are semeiotically or experientially indeterminate in a certain respect: “A sign is objectively *vague*, in so far as, leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, it reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing its determination” (CP 5.505). The categories are meanings *in the making* and, as such, they are open to further determination and hence fuller articulation. Whatever meaning is given, is given mostly as a task to be carried forward. This is even true of articulations of the categories than it is other modes of meaning. In addition to being *vague* in Peirce's sense, the categories are *general*. Peirce explains: “A sign is objectively *general*, in so far as, leaving its effective interpretation indeterminate, it surrenders to the interpreter the right of completing the determination for himself” (CP 5.505).<sup>3</sup> For example, the vagueness of thirdness means that, no matter how determinate we have rendered this cat-

egory, ever further conceptual and experiential mediation is possible. In contrast, the generality of thirdness is in effect an invitation to the interpreter to take any phenomenon whatsoever as a site in which continuity, mediation, transuasion, or thirdness under some other description can be discerned. Hence, the vagueness of the categories is, far more than that of other concepts, ineliminable, just as the scope of their generality as indefinable.<sup>4</sup> There is no absolutely determinate meaning to be attached to them, once and for all; nor is there any horizon in which they can be located, (again) once and for all. Part of the meaning of the categories is their power to challenge the established bounds of meaning and the accepted range of their applicability. Herein we see the potentially positive aspect of the categories in their irreducible vagueness and generality. But this makes of the categories something so elusive and intangible as to be incomprehensible. Indeed, this is the next point to be considered.

#### (in)comprehensibility

The categories are almost incomprehensible in their utter abstractness.<sup>5</sup> The categories in themselves (i.e., the categories in their firstness) are, paradoxically, barely intelligible conceptions and the means by which whatever is experientially encountered or even experimentally known might be disclosed more fully. In one text, Peirce describes them as “ideas so broad that they may be looked upon rather as moods or tones of thought, than as definite [or determinate] notions, but which have great significance for all that” (CP 1.355). In another text, he suggests, “Perhaps it is not right to call these categories conceptions; they are so intangible that they are rather tones or tints upon conceptions” (CP 1.353; see also Colapietro 2001, 5–6).

At the risk of treading upon later topics (especially that of the recursive application of the categories), let me propose a threefold distinction regarding the Peircean categories themselves: the categories in their firstness (as they are in themselves, apart from all else), in their secondness (as they are encountered in experience), and in their thirdness (as they articulated in various processes of semiosis). The truth regarding the categories, “like every truth, must come to us by way of experience” (CP 1.417). But experience encompasses more than the outward clash of organism and environment, or self and world. Indeed, any truth regarding any one of the categories is a “truth so broad as to hold not only for the universe we know but for every world that poet could create” (CP 1.417). So “the most universal categories” are those pertaining to the “elements of all experience, natural or poetical” (CP 1.417). Outward, physical engagement with the world is but one form of experience; inward, imaginative involvement is, for Peirce, truly a form of experience.<sup>6</sup> We learn from the enactment of imaginative dramas, not just from engagement with the outward world. The two forms of learning are, in practice, closely connected.

In accord with the recursive application of these heuristic clues (the application of the categories to themselves for the sake of suggesting possibilities of conceptualization and opening paths of inquiry), the categories in their secondness admit of a twofold distinction. The categories as they are encountered in purely imaginative experience (“poetical experience”) are closer to the categories in their firstness (they are in fact the closest we ever get to the categories in their firstness), whereas the categories as they are encountered in outward experience (“natural experience”) are more genuinely an instance of secondness.<sup>7</sup> Experience is a phenomenon in which secondness or opposition is predominant, somewhat eclipsing both qualitative immediacy (firstness) and grounded intelligibility (thirdness).

The categories in their thirdness (in the process of being articulated and therein rendered more fully and finely intelligible) presumably admit of a threefold distinction. One possibility is that of the artistic, scientific, and philosophical articulation or embodiment of the categories,<sup>8</sup> wherein the artistic embodiments are conceived as instances of thirdness in its firstness, the scientific as instances of thirdness in its secondness, and the philosophic as instances of thirdness in its thirdness. Such a conceptualization would accord with the role of imagination ordinarily granted to art, the importance of outward experience and controlled experimentation rightly ascribed to science, and finally the centrality of mediation associated with philosophy (including the task of mediating between, or among, the various modes of articulation).

In themselves, the categories are barely intelligible, if comprehensible at all. In reference to what is other than them, they acquire an intelligibility always in danger of compromising their generality. They cease to be mere tones or tints of thought and become less ephemeral and elusive, more tangible and prehensible. In their thirdness, in their mediating and heuristic functions, they drive beyond the bounds of accepted meaning and the horizons of established applicability to such an extent that, once again, these sources of intelligibility threaten to land us in nonsense (see Colapietro 2001, 4). It is important, thus, to note the extent to which any investigation of the bases of intelligibility (the ground making possible our practices of investigation) ensnare us in paradoxes and land us in aporia.

Even though the categories are only tones or tints of thoughts, rather than either in the first encounter or final analysis comprehensible thoughts (at any rate, fully comprehensible thoughts), these tones might be rendered somewhat distinct by being named or designated. The seemingly ineffable is, to some extent, contextually identifiable—so much so, that our identifications cut across countless contexts, thereby allowing us to craft conceptions of ever broadening scope and deepening significance. This brings us to a topic already broached, the names of the categories.

#### Names

The categories are *various in name* (Freeman 1934, 57–58).<sup>9</sup> We find, among these names, both utterly unfamiliar and all too familiar ones. The advantage of using unfamiliar, technical terms to designate the categories is that the very use of such terms marks a difference between the categories in their (always merely approximate) purity and the categories as they are actually encountered in various scenes of human engagement. But such terms can accomplish this task too well, making it seem that the categories are as alien to our experience as they are opaque to our understanding. The categories are, however, not at all foreign to experience, but rather ingredient in and constitutive of experience in all of its forms. They are, in a sense, data of experience—if we only had eyes to see or ears to hear. Hence, philosophical discourse requires a twofold vocabulary. On the one hand, it requires (like other sciences) technical terms by which to designate precisely its own theoretical conceptions; on the other, it must rely on the ready-made terms of everyday language. Whereas technical terms such as firstness, secondness, and thirdness help to foster is the awareness that, e.g., firstness is not unequivocally identifiable with any traditional notion, even ones quite closely allied to it (e.g., quality, immediacy, and spontaneity). What more familiar words help to make clear is the immanence of the categories: the categories are patterns woven into the very fabric of experience and, indeed, of reality itself.



## FUNCTION

In addition to be three in number and various in name, the categories are *heuristic in function*. They were designed by Peirce to assist inquirers. They are goads and guides of inquiry, prompting us to ask certain kinds of questions and thereby to open certain paths of exploration. The heuristic function of Peirce's three categories is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his investigations of signs (Savan 1952; Shapiro 1983; Short 2004): the function of the signs is primarily to open a field of inquiry, to suggest specific paths of investigation and fruitful classifications of phenomena. Since I have explored this aspect of the categories elsewhere (Colapietro 2001), I will not repeat here what I said there.

The emphasis on the heuristic function of the Peircean categories, however, should not be taken to strip them of either their ontological or cosmological import. On the basis of texts too numerous and central to ignore, it is clear that Peirce took his categories to designate, among other things, the modes of being and also the modes of the coming to be of the cosmos itself (the cosmos being the evolution of order out of chaos).<sup>10</sup> I take his threefold classification of being to be an important example of the very point at which I am driving when I stress the categories as clues, as goads and guides to investigation. The identification of the three modes of being is an example of the categories *at work*. It is no more than a hypothesis put forth by the metaphysician to come to terms with being itself.

The contemporary assault on traditional metaphysics is complexly motivated. In part, it is animated by a break with absolutistic modes of thinking. Peirce's own approach is, however, not only explicitly experimental ("The demonstrations of the metaphysicians are all moonshine" [CP 1.7]) but also thoroughly relational ("there is no absolute third, for the third is of its own nature relative" or relational [CP 1.362]). Hence, Peirce's metaphysics marks a break, both methodologically and substantively, with traditional metaphysics, for its method is experimental and one of its principal hypotheses concerns the relational nature of everything whatsoever.

In part, the assault on metaphysics is motivated by an awareness of the extent to which historically contingent and ideologically implicated conceptions are elevated, by traditional metaphysicians, into timeless and thus immutable structures. Part of the significance of thirdness is, however, the implications of this category for appreciating the ubiquity of continuity throughout nature. One of these implications is that the continua of intersecting processes provide the key to progressive understanding. Nature has a history and in the folds of this history are to be discovered its deeper secrets. The same is true of humanity in all its variety. Hence, Peirce's metaphysics drives us in the direction of taking with the utmost seriousness the natural processes and historical practices in and through which human agents are constituted.

In part, the assault on metaphysics is motivated by the facile ways in which rupture and discontinuity are erased, in the name of accessibility and continuity. It is often alleged that traditional metaphysics is unwittingly circumscribed by a logic of sameness in which the force of difference is theoretically obscured or even occluded. Perhaps Peirce's own involvement in metaphysics does to some extent exhibit this tendency, though his own conception of continua as sites of difference, differentiation, and opposition seems to mark as well a decisive break with a characteristic tendency of traditional metaphysics.

In sum, the function of the categories is to goad and goad inquiry, in virtually any field of investigation (including metaphysics and cosmology). Hence, the categories designate both the irreducible modes of being and the ubiquitous traits of nature, understood as chaos in process of transforming itself into a cosmos. It is, at some point,

inevitable that inquirers will inquire into their instruments of inquiry. Moreover, it is unavoidable that the conceptions of the most inclusive scope and most diverse employments will double back upon themselves, driving toward possibilities of recursive conceptualization.

#### Application of the categories to themselves

There is no hard-and-fast line between the articulation and application of the categories. Moreover, the categories are *recursive in their applications* (Savan 1952; see also Weiss 1940, 1965). Two sums derived by addition might themselves be added together. The categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness drive toward a consideration of the firstness and secondness of secondness itself or toward a consideration of the firstness, secondness, and thirdness of thirdness. An object is, etymologically, what throws itself in the way of another; *Gegenstand* is what stands opposed to another. An object, or *Gegenstand*, is, in Peirce's language, a second, for it is what it is by virtue of a relation of opposition. But whatever stands in a relation of opposition is something in itself.

The heuristic function of the Peircean categories is accomplished through their recursive application. In turn, the recursive application of the categories is accomplished, first, by imaginatively tracing out the possibilities suggested by allowing the categories to double back on themselves, then, by experientially looking for instantiations of these possibilities and, third, revising one's conceptual framework in light of one's experimental discoveries. This revision is but a transitional phase in an ongoing process.

So, Peirce in his investigation of signs considered signs in themselves, in their secondness (i.e., in relationship to their object or other), and in their thirdness (i.e., in relationship to their interpretant or as a factor in a complex, ongoing process of mediation). On the basis of this categorically animated investigation, he was led to three classifications: that of signs in themselves being qualisigns, sinsigns, and legisigns; that of signs in relationship to their objects being iconic, indexical, and symbolic; and that of signs in relationship to their interpretants being rhematic, dicent, or suasive. Rhematic, dicent, and suasive at least roughly correspond to the traditional distinction of concept, statement (or judgment), and argument (or inference). Each one of the phenomena identified by means of this process might itself be subjected to a categorically directed investigation. And, in turn, each one of the phenomena disclosed in *this* investigation might be subjected to an analogously focused inquiry. The degree of complexity unleashed by such a recursive use of these heuristic categories can be not only staggering but also bewildering. There is no question that Peirce delighted in the play of ideas for its own sake. But it is also beyond doubt that he took such play to be part of the work of reason.

#### status and origin

The emphasis on this aspect of Peirce's categories, however, might be taken to imply that they are modes of knowing *rather than* modes of being, resources for constituting objects of experience rather than constituents of reality itself. But, as we have already seen, it would be mistaken to draw this inference. Like Aristotle and Hegel, thus unlike Kant, Peirce refused to separate appearance and reality (the world as it appears to us and the world as it is in itself). The categories are not merely mental in origin. They *are* part of the structure of our minds, but they are also part of the structure of reality itself. In a sense, we can trace their proximate origin to the mind, but the mind itself is a reality rooted in an order (or cosmos) not of its own making. The ultimate origin of the categories is reality envisioned as nothing less than the matrix of mind, the womb whence spring self-

conscious, self-critical, and self-controlling agents. In opposition to Kant, then, Peirce refused to accord the categories merely the status of a priori concepts of the understanding, necessary for the constitution of experience but inapplicable to noumena. In sum, the categories are *real in origin*.

Some crucial distinctions need to be drawn here. Above all, care must be taken when speaking about *things in themselves*. On the one hand, this expression might be taken to mean what things are in themselves, utterly apart from our experience; on the other, it might be interpreted to mean what emphatically and persistently manifests itself in and through our experience in such a way that it would be reasonable to suppose that what things *are* can be, in some manner and measure, ascertained from how things appear to us. The pragmatist is the Kantian who “has only to abjure from the bottom of his heart the proposition that a thing-in-itself can, however indirectly, be conceived” (CP 5.452). It is imperative to maintain the distinction between appearance and reality, even in those cases where we are confident that appearance and reality coincide for all practical purposes. But it is equally imperative to avoid dualism in this context. The categories themselves help us to draw this distinction, for they suggest that being is always in principle other than any one or any finite range of its appearances (this would be being in its secondness or otherness). Even so, being is always continuous with its manifestations; illusions are themselves real, the way real things appear from certain perspectives (e.g., the straight stick in water appearing to be bent).

To repeat, the categories are real in origin. Hence, to stress their heuristic function does not entail denying their ontological status. The categories are ways of discoursing and inquiring about whatever might captivate our attention or elicit our questions. But they are also modes of being, ways of identifying the very manner in which things are. Implicit in Peirce's interpretation of his own categories as modes of being is a recognition of what Martin Heidegger has called the ontological difference (i.e., the difference between beings and the Being of beings). In their role as designations of modes of being, the categories are not presenting a catalogue of types of entities to be found in the world or encountered in experience; rather are attempts to evoke the various, irreducible senses in which whatever is, *is*. In being real in origin, the categories are ontological in status; moreover, as modes of being, the categories are not (to use Heidegger's language) limited to ontic considerations but (at least) move toward truly ontological interrogation (prompting us to ask such questions as, What is the being of those beings—or entities—called signs?).

#### Derivation and justification

The categories are *logical and phenomenological in derivation*, in addition to being three in number, various in name, heuristic in function, recursive in function, real in origin, ontological in status and also ontological (rather than ontic) in their attentiveness to the being of beings. This claim might need to be qualified, since Peirce appears to have derived his categories in more than one way (see Potter 1967; Rosenthal 1990, 1994). Even so, Peirce's phenomenological derivation of his three categories seems, especially, in later years, to be the one upon which he most readily relied. In addition, it is possible to construe this mode of derivation as a mode encompassing the purely logical analysis by which Peirce not infrequently derives his categories. In other words, the logical derivation of the universal categories is not to be set in contrast to their phenomenological derivation, since the phenomenological derivation is implicit logical and the logical is formally phenomenological. At the very least, we can assert that Peirce's categories are

primarily phenomenological in derivation. What is derived in one way at one level might, however, be derivable in other ways at different levels.

While being phenomenologically derived, Peirce's categories are pragmatically justified; this means that they are experientially and experimentally justified.<sup>11</sup> Their phenomenological derivation is experience in its firstness, secondness, and thirdness. But they are justified insofar as they help us re-orient our practices and re-envision our experience, above all, our practices of inquiry and interpretation. This point leads us back to the heuristic function of the Peircean categories, their function as guides and goads of inquiry.

## conclusion

Peirce's categories are self-consciously historical in their articulation, *three in number*, various in name (though these names are divisible into two main "categories": technical designations, most notably, firstness, secondness, and thirdness; and more familiar terms—quality, fact, and law; immediacy, opposition, and mediation; etc.), *heuristic in function* (specifically, diacritical and synoptic in their heuristic function, for the categories help us to distinguish between or among phenomena ordinarily confused with one another, this being the *diacritical* function of the categories, and also to discern affinities and similarities between or among phenomena ordinarily supposed to be utterly disparate or unrelated to one another, this being their *synoptic* function), *recursive in application*, *real in origin and status*, *phenomenological in their derivation*, and *pragmatic in their ultimate justification* (however formal might be their provisional justification).

These features of Peirce's categories are nowhere more evident than in his own investigation of semiosis in its simplest, irreducible form and complex, interwoven varieties. In short, Peirce's semeiotic is the site wherein one can see as well as any other context his categories at work. In particular, their heuristic function and recursive applicability are manifest in the definition and classification of signs. The power of Peirce's theory of signs is thus inseparable from the power of his doctrine of categories. Of course, the power of his categories is revealed in other contexts as well. But the growth of semiosis into an explicitly semeiotic articulation of our most general conceptions is a vivid manifestation of nothing less than the continuous growth of concrete reasonableness, a process wherein signs become the objects as well as instruments of thought and communication, wherein our strategies and norms of criticisms are themselves made into objects of critique, and wherein the historically dominant forms of human rationality are severely interrogated (as Marx noted, reason has always existed but not always in a rational form). In the course of such interrogation, we may come to judge the forms of rationality as being unreasonable (Foucault 1988, 37), our means of attaining certainty as dubious, and our styles of critique as dogmatic (for we come to see these styles as begging substantive questions and blocking paths of inquiry).

The categories are designed to maintain the delicate balance definitive of critical commonsensism: to animate and direct our critical impulses but also to maintain and enhance those densely sedimented habits so integral to our embodied agency (see Rochberg-Halton 1986, chapter 3). They are also designed to foster the contrite fallibilism unmistakably espoused by all genuine inquirers: s/he who cannot confess ignorance or error is one who betrays the ideal of inquiry, as a communal process sustained by the courage, hope, and imagination of self-avowedly fallible inquirers. Especially the categories of alterity and mediation, otherness and dialogue—secondness and thirdness

—are ones needed to mark the differences and to delineate the continuities so manifest in our semiotic competencies and stupidities, successes and failures, etc. The continuous growth of concrete reasonableness is destined to evolve to the point where reason questions its own authority and even reasonableness, where signs are assigned the task of signifying themselves in their utmost generality and staggering complexity, and where our most general conceptions become themselves the focal objects of a sustained, systematic, and critical inquiry. The growth of reasonableness is arrested prematurely if it does not move toward a critique of the norms and ideals alleged to be constitutive of growth. In turn, a critique of these norms and ideals cannot avoid being dogmatic (i.e., uncritical or insufficiently critical) if it does not move toward a conceptualization of our most general concepts—in other words, toward a formal doctrine of universal categories. In brief, reasonableness inevitably assumes the form of critique and, in turn, critique is irresponsible and dogmatic if it fails to become self-criticism. But radical critique (critique not only willing but able to subject itself to criticism) entails categorial reflection: just as the doctrine of the categories aids the task of criticism, this task conscientiously undertaken drives toward the self-critical articulation of a categorial scheme, both in its most abstract formulation and in its countless, concrete applications. Reason's reliance upon criticism is no less inescapable and thoroughgoing than is critique's reliance on categories. This triad (reason, critique, and categories) is but one of countless others in which traces of Peirce's categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness can be discerned. These traces can be used to make suggestions, frame hypotheses, interrogate phenomena, draw distinctions, exhibit affinities, etc.

The life of signs manifests nothing less than the interplay of the categories. The interplay of the categories is operative in the growth of reasonableness to such an extent that the ongoing growth of concrete reasonableness requires, at a certain juncture, a self-consciously historical articulation of the universal categories. This articulation itself requires addressing questions regarding the number, names, function, etc. of the categories. So, in the end, Peirce's doctrine of categories must be related to his ultimate ideal of reasonableness as well as to his general theory of signs. Only then do we begin to appreciate the centrality of this doctrine in Peirce's thought, a centrality he never tired of stressing.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> It is illuminating to recall Peirce's three examples of the necessity of expression: thought, conversation, and religion (Peirce 1982, 1, 85).

<sup>2</sup> "Every religion must exist in some forms or rites in order to find the least realization" (Peirce 1982, 1, 85).

<sup>3</sup> "Notwithstanding their contrariety, generality and vagueness are, from a formal point of view, seen to be on a par. Evidently no sign can be at once vague and general in the same respect, since insofar as the right of determination is not distinctly extended to the interpreter it remains the right of the utterer. Hence also, a sign can only escape from being either vague or general by not being indeterminate. But ... no sign can be absolutely and completely indeterminate ..." (CP 5.506). Of course, "absolute precision is impossible." This implies that "No communication of one person to another can be entirely definite, i.e., non-vague" (CP 5.506). But what is true of interpersonal communication is also true of reflexive or intrapersonal communication (i.e., thought, the self in conversation with itself). As Peirce suggests, "our own

thinking is carried on as a dialogue, and though mostly in a lesser degree, is subject to almost every imperfection of language” (CP 5.506).

<sup>4</sup> “To make them [the categories] as distinct as it is in their nature to be is, however, no small task. I do not suppose they are so in my own mind; and evidently, it is not in their nature to be as sharp as ordinary concepts” (CP 8.264).

<sup>5</sup> “An absolutely pure conception of a Category is out of the question” (CP 2.86). To grasp a category in its purity or firstness is impossible, but approximating purer conceptions is not.

<sup>6</sup> “If [J. S.] Mill wishes me to admit that experience is the only source of any kind of knowledge, I grant it at once, provided only that by experience he means personal history, life. But if he wants me to admit that inner experience is nothing, and that nothing is found out by diagrams [or other experiments conducted in the imagination], he asks what cannot be granted” (CP 4.91; see also Colapietro 1989, 114–118). This does not contradict Peirce’s insistence that “No amount of speculation can take the place of experience” (CP 1.655), since the inward flights of fancy are conceived by him as part of a complex, expanding tapestry in which such flights are interwoven with the outward clashes identifiable as external experience. That is, inward experience is not to be identified with mere speculation: it is a form of experience inextricable from other forms.

<sup>7</sup> Peirce distinguishes, in the mathematical (not the moral) sense, degenerate and genuine forms of the categories. See, e.g., CP 1.521ff.

<sup>8</sup> Another possibility is to use Peirce’s own classification of the three types of persons (see, e.g., CP 1.43) as a basis for this tripartite distinction. This would yield art as an embodiment of the categories in their firstness, practice as that of the categories in their secondness, and science (inclusive of both experimental inquiry and philosophical investigation) as the articulation of the categories in their thirdness.

<sup>9</sup> Among the characteristics of firstness by which Peirce drew some of his for this category are: chance, sporting, freshness, life, vividness, idiosyncrasy, immediacy, possibility, originality, and spontaneity. Among those from which he drew some of his names for secondness are effort, resistance, fact, struggle, experience, action, reaction, causality, other (otherness), negation, obistence, and force. And among those characteristics from which he drew names for thirdness are evolution, mediation, mixture, sympathy, conduct, contract (including the act of giving), transuasion, continuity, and process. For the most part these are simply examples or instances of the categories; but occasionally Peirce employed them as names. This list has mostly been drawn from that found in Freeman (1934, 57).

<sup>10</sup> This might—and, I would argue, should—be taken to mean that the being of the cosmos is its coming to be. The categories in their cosmological sense might be identified as chance in an objective sense, events in their brute actuality, and emergent habits (or natural laws) in their dynamic involvement in governing the incredibly complex course of cosmic evolution.

<sup>11</sup> Experience is what is forced upon us willy-nilly, whereas experimentation is a deliberate endeavor to learn from experience.

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section one: peircean foundations in semiotic studies

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