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The Natural History of Branching: Approaches to the Phenomenology of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness

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ABSTRACT

In the present essay the author sets out to reflect on the notions of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, pursuing the research beyond what is directly given in Peirce's writings. For the purpose, Peircean phenomenology is considered to be a special variety of the Husserlian kind, because it restricts possible phenomena to threesomes and also attributes special contents to the three categories. The first restriction means that Peirce's theory is a kind of structuralism, although a triadic one, whereas the second restriction implies that it is not merely formal. In the present essay, specific, primitive meanings are assigned to each of the categories, and they are seen to be similar in form to the dyads and triads of social psychology. At the end, signs are considered to be special kinds of Thirds, and an attempt is made to elucidate what hypo-icons owe to Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.

All my notions are too narrow. Instead of 'sign', ought I not to say *Medium*?

—C. S. Peirce (MS 339, 1906, quoted in Parmentier 1985)

There are two approaches to the work of any scholar, which should not be lightheartedly confused: one is concerned with the bio-biographical task of understanding what the scholar may have wanted to say, as it should emerge to the scrutinizing eye when the writings of the scholar are pondered more deeply. The second one has to do with the contribution of the

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scholar in question to the body of truths that can still be upheld today with reference to the issues that he has discussed in his writings. The former task is particularly important when most of the writings have been published posthumously, as is the case with the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Edmund Husserl. The second task involves more of a dialogue: we may grant that the scholar in question has thought deeply and for an extended time about the issues involved, but to some extent we may have an advantage over him, not only because, as the classical saying goes, we stand on his gigantic shoulders, and of all those who have stood on his shoulders since then, and of those who have taken competing views of the landscape, but also because there may have been empirical findings and theoretical clarifications made since then, which place the issues in a new light. There is a risk of reading the work of Peirce, Saussure, Husserl, or any other thinker, as a Christian literalist reads the Bible, claiming that once we have understood what our author says, we have also immediately understood the subject matter. I certainly do not propose to read the work of any scholar as the devil purportedly reads the Bible. But it may be useful to listen to both diabolical and angelic tongues when pondering a particular work.

It is therefore not without second (or even third) thoughts that I undertake to mix the genres in the following. What follows is basically a tentative of the second kind, to develop present-day semiotic theory, but I will take my cues from Peirce's writings to the extent that I have managed to understand them. I will try out the idea that there is indeed some deep, but opaque, truth in Peirce's ideas of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, which other commentators on Peirce seem to take simply for granted, as if the meaning of these categories were immediately enlightening. I will not accept, nor directly exclude, the idea that everything which is given to our phenomenology appears in the form of Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness, or some combination thereof, but I will claim that these categories offer a useful perspective for understanding at least some matters of importance to contemporary semiotics, notably bordering on the issues of contemporary developmental psychology and the study of evolution. In so doing, I think I am following the pragmatic lead of Richard Parmentier (2009) in attending to the utility of Peircean conceptions to social analysis.

My starting point, nevertheless, will be another phenomenology, that of Edmund Husserl, of which Peircean phenomenology may be seen as a particular instance. That is, to understand Peirce I will in part take an outside view. Moreover, I will make my reading of Peirce starting out from a fairly late remark made by Peirce, the statement appearing in the epigraph to this article which

occupied the same position in Parmentier (1985), and therefore I will suppose that we are really involved with some phenomenon much broader than what may properly be called a sign, but which can be better described by terms such as medium, mediation, and/or branching. Nothing hinges on this being a correct interpretation of Peirce. I am simply interested in pursuing some ideas suggested by my reading of some passages from Peirce's work.

Husserl and Peirce on Phenomenology

According to Peirce's definition, phenomenology is that particular branch of science that "ascertains and studies the kinds of elements universally present in the phenomenon, meaning by the phenomenon whatever is present at any time to the mind in any way" (*EP* 2:259). Peirce himself claims to have taken the term from Hegel, but as has been pointed out by Frederik Stjernfelt (2007, 441 n. 153), his usage of the term coincides with the period in which he was reading Husserl, and there are indeed obvious similarities between Peirce's and Husserl's usages, which are not found in Hegel's work. Stjernfelt (2007, 141–42) quotes many examples of Peirce's definitions of phenomenology that show clear similarities to Husserl. He also documents the mutually negative opinions the two scholars would seem to hold with respect to each other, clearly because none of them had really read—or, at least, not understood—the other. Joseph Ransdell (1989), who starts out denying that Husserl and Peirce could have anything in common because of their different attitude to Descartes and to science, in the end admits that both are phenomenologists, to the extent that this "means to consider phenomena as phenomenal only, notwithstanding such apparent 'transcendence'—both intrinsic and relational—as they may have or seem to have."¹ The precursor of such rapprochements is, interestingly, Herbert Spiegelberg (1956), otherwise known as the most authoritative historian of the phenomenological movement, in the strictly Husserlian sense (see Spiegelberg 1960). Spiegelberg points to many differences between the two phenomenologies, and in the end he does not seem to think an influence probable. Here, we will, however, be concerned with only one similarity and how it turns out to lead to a dissimilarity.

Peirce later on renamed his phenomenology "phaneroscopy" and described it as follows: "a study which, supported by the direct observation of phanerons and generalizing its observations, signalizes several very broad classes of phanerons;

1. Ransdell completely misunderstands Husserl's view of Descartes and of science, basing his interpretation more on such unorthodox disciples as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

describes the features of each; shows that although they are so inextricably mixed that no one can be isolated, yet it is manifest that their characters are quite disparate" (CP 1.286). It would suffice to substitute the term "phenomenon" for "phaneron" to obtain a text that might be describing the phenomenological method according to Husserl (see Sonesson 2009b) as Spiegelberg also repeatedly notes, although the reference is to other Peircean texts. Phenomenology is a method of description. The phenomenological method is based on the fact that everything which, in the normal course of events, is available to (at least human) consciousness is present to this consciousness as something being outside of it. Consciousness is consciousness of something—and that thing is outside of consciousness. This is what, in the Brentano-Husserl tradition, is known as "intentionality": the contents of consciousness are immanent to consciousness precisely *as* being outside of consciousness. Thus, we may describe a particular phase in the stream of consciousness as being an act in which something outside of consciousness becomes the subject of our preoccupation. In accomplishing such an act, we are directed to something outside of consciousness. When we are doing phenomenology, however, we are turning our regard inward: the theme is not the object outside, but the act of consciousness itself. This it was that Husserl described as the "phenomenological reduction." There are several other methodological moments to Husserl's phenomenology, as the *epoché*, the suspension of belief whether the object to which the act studied is directed exists or not, and the "eidetic reduction," the directedness to the general structures, rather than the individual character, of each given act. In order to attain this level of generality, we have to go through free variations in the imagination, also known as "idea-tion," by means of which we vary the different properties of the act, in order to be able to determine which properties are necessary in the constellation and which may be dispensed with. If, like Husserl, we start out from perception, we might want to vary the different ways of perceiving the cube. There are indeed many acts of perception that are still the perception of a cube, and even, more specifically, the perception of this same cube. Most notably, of course, the cube may be seen from different sides, from different perspectives, only in part from a peephole, and so on.

Although he does not use the term, Peirce is clearly accomplishing the phenomenological reduction, since he turns his reflection to the very acts of consciousness. This is the "reflectiveness" of Husserl's approach, which Spiegelberg (1956, 166) says is shared by Peirce. Peirce may not have formalized the notion of *epoché*, but he repeatedly affirms that the validity of the phenomenon in the real world is of no importance. He is certainly involved with the free variation

in the imagination in order to isolate general structures, although again he may not have a particular term for this operation. He even applies abstraction to the very process of abstraction, transforming it into several concepts (see Stjernfelt 2007). These are the two aspects of the “purity” of Husserl’s method, namely, the independence from empirical facts and the concern for general essences, which Spiegelberg (1956, 166) thinks are also found in Peirce. It is the third nuclear feature of Husserl’s method, the preoccupation with intentionality, which Spiegelberg thinks is absent in Peirce’s approach.²

In spite of the terminology often used by Husserl, such as *Wesensschau* (intuition of essences), phenomenological results do not present themselves in the form of any kind of revelation, given in a single instance. Rather, the phenomenological method supposes the accomplishment of an arduous work, which has to be done over and over again in order to ascertain a reliable result. At least this is how Husserl, in actual practice, went about the task: as can be seen in the numerous volumes of the *Husserliana* published after Husserl’s death, Husserl laboriously went through the same descriptions and variations over and over again, without even being completely satisfied with the result. Some early phenomenologists, such as Aron Gurwitsch and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and several more recent ones, such as Sokolowski (1974, 2000), Drummond (1990), Marbach (1993), and Thompson (2007), went through some of Husserl’s painstaking analyses once again, finding new facts about perception, the field of consciousness, and embodiment. Indeed, as in all scientific endeavors, the result of the phenomenological method always remains provisional. This is what Husserl, with another rather misleading term, calls “*Evidenz*.” Peirce, it would seem, described this process as a more general fact of experience, pointing to the (potentially infinite) sequence of interpretants, whose final interpretant is perhaps never attained.³

The fact that different phenomenologists arrive at different results using the act of ideation, and that Husserl himself arrived at different results repeating the analysis, does not show that the results of phenomenological analyses can

2. A correlative to this is perhaps Peirce’s lack of interest in the expression of semiotic resources, to the extent that they differ and influence the meaning of the sign, as noted by Parmentier (1985, 44). As far as intentionality is concerned, however, I have often intimated that the basic meaning of what Peirce calls the sign is rather intentionality (see Sonesson 2010).

3. While some passages in Peirce’s work suggest this interpretation, others would seem to postulate that the final interpretant must be reached. In his letters to William James (*EP* 2:502), Peirce writes: “in other words our Reason is akin to the reason that governs the Universe; we must assume that or despair of finding out anything.” Also see Stjernfelt (2007, 432 n. 57) on Peirce’s entertaining something more kindred to a correspondence theory than a coherence theory of truth.

vary arbitrarily, as is often said about “subjective” approaches. On the contrary, all who have practiced phenomenology agree on the basic structures of phenomenological experience. But Husserl repeatedly invokes the necessity of a community of phenomenologists who would be able to corroborate existing phenomenological analyses. Peirce similarly referred to the community of researchers needed to accomplish his phenomenological work.⁴

Peircean Phenomenology as an Instance of Husserlian Phenomenology

Peirce’s text, cited above, continues in the following way: “then proves, beyond question, that a certain very short list comprises all of these broadest categories of phanerons there are; and finally proceeds to the laborious and difficult task of enumerating the principal subdivisions of those categories” (*CP* 1.286). Husserl, of course, would also expect some very broad categories to be established by this method. Nevertheless, it seems incompatible with his whole view of phenomenology to claim beforehand that “a short list” of such broad categories could be established. Phenomenology, Husserl stated over and over again, should be free from any prior presuppositions. Peirce, it would seem, takes for granted that we will arrive at a certain small list of categories. Indeed, as Ransdell (1989) reminds us, Peirce described phenomenology as “the doctrine of categories,” or even “categorics.” Even though Peirce nowhere says that phenomenology should be devoid of presuppositions, something of the kind is suggested by his characterization of phenomenology as “a study . . . supported by the direct observation of phanerons and generalizing its observations,” rather than generalizing from other sciences.⁵ As I pointed out in an earlier paper, this is the big difference between the Husserlian and the Peircean phenomenologies (Sonesson 2009a), and in fact, it was noted as such already by Spiegelberg (1956). Nevertheless, if we take into account Peirce’s own repeated denial of being a triadomaniac (advancing different arguments that we do not need to rehearse here), we should have to believe, in spite of the formulation cited above, that these categories are not a presupposition of phenomenological analysis but a result of it.

The difference between Husserl and Peirce becomes even more pronounced when we realize that Peirce’s “short list” will be made up of triads comprising

4. More principled, and recent, descriptions of the phenomenological method can be found, e.g., in Patočka (1996), Sokolowski (2000), Moran (2005), Smith (2007), Thompson (2007, 267ff.), and Gallagher and Zahavi (2008).

5. An anonymous reviewer has suggested that Peircean phenomenology serves “to generalize the results of other sciences (especially logic),” but this seems to be incoherent with the definition cited above—which is not to say that Peirce may not have said that, too.

other triads, as well as some dyads and a few single terms.⁶ At least in the quotation above, this recursive triadic organization appears to be a foregone conclusion of Peircean semiotics, which is prior to any phenomenological investigation, that is, is a priori, not because this has been established by free variation in the imagination, but in the (French) ordinary language sense of being decided before any observation takes place. From the point of view of Husserlian phenomenology, this is the first unjustified presupposition of Peircean phenomenology. But there are also others, which concern the content of the original triad, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, which are the meanings that are supposed to recur all through the hierarchy of triads. Thus, viewing Peirce's phenomenology from the end of Husserlian phenomenology, there are (at least) two postulates which have to be justified: that all categories come by threes (with the exceptions noted above), and the specific content of the three original categories.

In short, there are two ways of looking at Peircean phenomenology from a Husserlian standpoint: it is not free from presuppositions, or it starts out without any presuppositions arriving at the result that all deeper meaning takes the form of the trichotomies. In the latter case, Peirce's phenomenology would be a member of the class of possible Husserlian phenomenologies, namely, one which arrives at the result that everything comes by threes, comparable in that respect to Roman Jakobson's work, which, at least according to Holenstein (1975, 1976), should be seen as a binary phenomenology—or, in Holenstein's term, as a phenomenological structuralism. At this point, Peirce's phaneroscopy could be considered to be one possible variant resulting from the Husserlian variation in the imagination—one that is not necessarily true, or which may be correct or not according to its particular instantiations, such as, just to mention the most obvious cases, Peirce's first, second, and third trichotomies.

Structuralism is the idea that all meaning is produced by the opposition of terms or, at least, that meaning is always perceived by means of an opposition of terms. Let us call the former "strong structuralism" and the latter "weak structuralism" (see Sonesson 1989, 81ff.; 2009a; 2012b). Beginning with the work of Jakobson, we tend to take for granted that this opposition is basically an opposition between two terms at a time. Structuralism, however, does not have to be dyadic. Indeed, Saussure suggested a much more complicated organization in the case of language. Trubetzkoy, and even the early Jakobson, made a fairly measured use of binary oppositions in the explanation of linguistic facts, adding

6. Such as the "representamen," which is Firstness lacking subdivisions; the "object," which is Secondness, being divided into dyads; and the "interpretant," which is Thirdness, being analyzed into different kinds of triads. However, the "icon," in spite of being Firstness, is of three kinds: images, diagrams, and metaphors.

some triadic oppositions to the lot. What Peirce proposes must be characterized as a strict triadic structuralism.⁷ Indeed, to take the general case, everything must pertain to Firstness, Secondness, or Thirdness. Particulars, but not generals, it is true, may partake of them all. This is in fact not very different from dyadic structuralism, even as applied to language. A phoneme, on a structuralist reading, necessarily has a feature or the opposite. This is not the case with concrete sounds. But rather than have both one term (and its opposites), the sound is thought to realize some intermediate case.

But there is something more to Peirce's triadic structuralism. Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and their followers seem to be content to affirm that everything comes by twos, but they impose no limits on the content of the units those opposed, if it is not that one unity must, in one sense or another, have properties which are opposed to the properties of the other. More exactly, the unities must have properties that are identical, without which the opposition does make sense. It will be noted that Prague structuralism, as represented by Trubetzkoy, does not impose any such specific requirement. In any case, the triadic structuralism of Peirce is different, because it supposedly requires the units themselves that are triadically opposed to be somehow intrinsically instances of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. And this is where Peirce's conception goes beyond structuralism.

Triadic Structuralism and Beyond

There are indeed some special cases when dyadic structuralism turns out to be true, as even Peirce would admit, as long as we are at the level of Secondness (Sonesson 1989, 81ff; 2012b). I would hazard to suggest, however, that triadic structuralism is also dependant on specific circumstances. The idea that all divisions of the (experienced) world come by threes is impossible to prove; however, it may be as impossible to disprove. We are, of course, not talking about the way the world "really is," but the way it appears to be to phenomenological description; and, at least according to the quotation above, it also seems that Peirce, when he was talking about his hierarchies of threesomes, was thinking about what was accessible to phenomenological observation, for, even admitting the existence of Peircean "quasi-minds," Peirce recognizes that it is through ordinary human minds that we have privileged access to phenomena. The Peircean "universe of discourse" is regimented by the mystique of numbers, and to

7. Whether it is strong or weak is another question, which we cannot discuss in the present text.

that extent, Peirce's work is part of a large-scale Western, very learned, tradition with at least (partly imaginary) Oriental sources that construes the world (as we experience it) as being built on fixed quantitative relationships, which have an esoteric meaning.⁸ No doubt the same thing could be said about the authoritative and authoritarian binarism of Jakobson in his prime and in particular that of Lévi-Strauss. Conceptions like these were, no doubt, for an appreciable amount of Occidental history, part of the commonsense world of at least some intellectual elites, but this does not show that such conceptions could be phenomenologically justified. Nor does the opposite follow. The task of phenomenology is certainly to reach beyond common sense.

It may, of course, be phenomenologically correct to say that, from some well-defined point of view, there are indeed three kinds of signs, with respect to the different relationships that may obtain between expression ("representamen") and content ("object" and/or "interpretant"): that is, there are iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs. For a long time, I have indeed found this division intuitively satisfying, although I am still at a loss to say exactly from what point of view the variation in imagination must be accomplished to obtain this result. Thus, one may feel that the distinction between expression and content being related by a mere regularity or by a normative imposition is too important to be conflated into one kind of relationship, the symbolic one both being of course "habits," in the special Peircean sense of the term, which will be discussed below. But even if this division should turn out to be phenomenologically relevant, it does not follow that all other variations in the imagination must result in threefold divisions, phenomenologically justifiable as a matter of course. As I have argued elsewhere (Sonesson 2007a, 2007b), the question whether something has two or three parts has no meaning before determining the domain for which the model is valid, as well as the criteria of the relevant properties according to which the division is made. Since the domain of the Saussurean sign is that which is internal to the sign system, its content being all the time opposed to the "real world" it interprets, it would be triadic—to the extent that reality outside the sign system were included in the domain to be analyzed. As for the Peircean sign, it really comprises six instances, if all criteria of division are included, since there are two kinds of objects, and three kinds of interpretants, but only one kind of representamen. As soon as we

8. This is a world conception attested to from antiquity to Giordano Bruno and Raymond Lull (Yates 1964, 1966; Eco 1995) and beyond.

abandon the idea of our subject matter being signs, as Peirce himself suggested late in life, it may be easier to make sense of these divisions.

Quite apart from the necessity of always making threefold divisions, there is the question of the content of each of the three categories. Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness mean so much more than just being the first, the second, and the third category of an obligatory segmentation of the world into triads. Peirce's phenomenology is in fact very short, as Ransdell (1989) rightly observes, because he rapidly proceeds to tasks that he takes to be beyond phenomenology. There is every reason to deplore this, in particular if we follow Peirce in identifying phenomenology with the study of the categories. In fact, Peirce has a lot to say about the categories but always in passing, on the way to more serious work, and never entering into any detail. This is where one may start regretting that Husserl, with his sense for detail, his meticulous way of proceeding, and his habit of returning over and over again to the same task, never really happened upon Peirce's categories. But we must start from what we have got.

Often, Peirce simply claims that Firstness is something that exists in itself, Secondness must be related to something else, and Thirdness requires a more complex relationship, either a relation between three things, or a relation between relations, or perhaps both at the same time. One of the more formal definitions of the three categories reads as follows: "Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without any reference to anything else. Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third. Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other" (*CP* 8.328). Firstness and Secondness could here almost be understood as somewhat distorted equivalents of Husserl's (1913, 2:1, 225ff.) distinctions between independent and dependant parts, with the exception that there is no proviso for the difference between mutual and one-sided dependence.⁹ This then raises the question what the business of Thirdness is. If it involves a relation between two terms, instead of only one term and a relation, as Secondness could perhaps be understood to be, or a relation between relations, why then should we not go on defining Fourthness, and so on? Of course, Peirce himself claimed that all relations beyond Thirdness could be dissolved into several relations, but Thirdness itself could not be so resolved. It is not clear whether this is indeed a phenomenological fact. Actually, this must, among other things, depend on what ex-

9. This is the same threefold distinction made by Hjelmlev (1943), as Stjernfelt (2007, 167ff.) judiciously remarks.

actly is to be understood by Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Thus, for instance, is there really no relationship in Firstness? When it is used to define a kind of sign, the icon, it must already be supposed to be part of a relationship, even before it is seen as a sign, namely, the relation of similarity.¹⁰ Indeed, Peirce himself repeatedly says that Firstness cannot be grasped as such. And what about Secondness? Is Secondness second, because it is made up of two things—in which case it would already be made up of three items, two things and a relation? Or should the second thing be conceived as a relation hooked up to an element, just as I suggested some time ago (Sonesson 2012c). Thirdness, in a similar way, then would have to contain three hooks, one of which is already filled up with an element describing the nature of the relationship.

Intuitive Meanings of the Categories

There are many places, nevertheless, where Peirce imputes a much more concrete content to each of the categories. Since it is impossible to look at all the (only partly overlapping) descriptions of these categories offered all through Peirce's writings, a few instances pertaining to each category will have to do here, most of them taken over from the discussion in Sonesson (2009a; see table 1). Reasoning in terms of sufficient and necessary properties, there does not seem to be much hope of finding any more general term able to subsume this welter of divergent properties. And yet, in spite of what is, on the face of it, the range and diverseness of the contents attributed to the categories, they certainly are much more specific than what is contained in the purely numerical definitions.

Perhaps it could be argued that the three categories are, formally, quite apart from their content, themselves of the order of Firstness. Indeed, given these descriptions, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness certainly sound very much like what Vygotsky (1962) would have called "chain-concepts," characteristic of small children and what at the time were known as "savages." Since Wittgenstein presented them as "family concepts," spread all over ordinary language, these terms have been somewhat rehabilitated. Eleanor Rosch conceived the idea of the prototype, according to which a category is defined by a central example that seems to embody what is important to the category, with other members being at different distances from the prototype. In a number of experiments Rosch showed this explanation model to make sense beyond phenomenology. One of the most interesting experiments involved placing objects on a spatial layout in

10. Thus, from the point of view of the sign, iconicity only starts being potentially interesting as an iconic ground, as I have noted elsewhere (see Sonesson 1989, 2007a, 2007b).

Table 1. Extracts from Peirce's *Collected Papers*, Purporting to Describe the Categories of Firstness, Secondness, or Thirdness and in a Few Cases Subcategories to These, Such as Iconicity

	Firstness	Secondness	Thirdness
"fleeting instant"		CP 3.362 "brute actions of one subject or substance on another"	CP 5.469 "the mental or quasi-mental influence of one subject on another relatively to a third"
"the present moment"; "quality"; "possibility"		CP 1.531 "the experience of an effort"; "reaction"; "resistance" and "opposition"	CP 8.330 "law"
"except that possibility implies a relation to what exists, while universal Firstness is the mode of being of itself"			CP 1.26
"freshness, life, freedom"		CP 1.302 "actuality"; being "then and there"	CP 1.536
"spontaneity"		CP 3.432 "hæcceity"	CP 1.343
"indeterminacy"		CP 1.405 "willing"; "experience of perception"; "existence"	CP 1.536-37
"agent"; "beginning"		CP 1.361 "dependence"	CP 5.66
"immediate, new, initiative, original, spontaneous, and free, vivid and conscious"		CP 1.357 "patient"	CP 2.86-89 and 1.328
before "all synthesis and all differentiation"; having "no unity and no parts"		CP 1.357 "end"	CP 1.337
"beginning"		CP 1.337 "straight road"	CP 1.337 "fork in the road"; "straight road with intermediate places"

relation to some object that was taken to be the prototype of the category. Rosch and Mervis (1975) reflect on the relations between the prototype and Wittgenstein's family concept, arguing that the difference consists in the former being related to a central example, while the second lacks any such instance.¹¹

At first, one may tend to see in the Peircean categories some kind of "chain-concepts" or "family concepts," but I think a few of the members of the "chains" can really be considered to make up the prototype of the categories. This could be seen as a generalization of the claim, made over and over again by Peirce, that some instances of his categories are "degenerate."¹² The others, then, would be the prototypes or ideal types. According to Ransdell (1989), all instances of signs repertoried by Peirce that are not signs in the proper sense are degenerate. If degeneracy should here be taken in the sense of mathematics,¹³ degenerate items are objects that change their nature so as to belong to another, usually simpler, class. Thus, for instance, a point¹⁴ is a degenerate circle,¹⁵ namely, one with radius 0. This actually seems to go even further than the prototype concept, to the point of appearing less useful.

In the case of Firstness, this central idea seems difficult to grasp, but it certainly has something to do with fleetingness or streaminess. Secondness is dominated by the idea of reaction/resistance. And law or regularity tends to be the most prominent element of Thirdness. However, I think the following quotation from Peirce goes a long way in showing that (double-sided) resistance is the ideal type of Secondness: "A door is slightly ajar. You try to open it. Something prevents. You put your shoulder against it, and experience a sense of effort and a sense of resistance. These are not two forms of consciousness; they are two aspects of one two-sided consciousness. It is inconceivable that there should be any effort without resistance, or any without a contrary effort. This double-sided consciousness is Secondness" (*EP* 1:268). Secondness is perhaps the easiest category to grasp: it is about effort and resistance. Or we could say: resistance to the world "putting your shoulder against" something, as well as

11. Elsewhere, Rosch (1975) erroneously identifies her prototype concept with the Weberian "ideal type." The incorrectness of this is shown by Sonesson (1989, 71–72): whereas the prototype is defined by the "example of a category" and includes as other members other items being at a more or less great distance from this central instance, an ideal type is an artificial creation, which is exaggerated in relation to reality and may contain contradictory properties, often projected onto time and/or space.

12. *CP* 1.525 would seem to restrict the term to combinations of one of the categories with the others, but then it would be a special case of what we are discussing above.

13. As suggested to me by an anonymous reviewer.

14. Refer to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point_\(geometry\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Point_(geometry)).

15. Refer to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circle>.

the world resisting back “a sense of resistance.”¹⁶ Firstness can then only be understood as opposed to Secondness: something appearing, bringing about an event, catching the attention which starts off the chain of Secondness, in which we live. Thus, Thirdness may stand for reflection, meta-consciousness, the observation of the reaction, which, as products, may give rise to rules and regularities.¹⁷

Peirce, it will be remembered, always refers to the difficulty of talking about—and even conceiving—Firstness on its own: it needs the presence of Secondness. This shows a decidedly structuralist bend, which we will be exploring in the following.

The Hermeneutics of Branching

The Peircean sign is a sign only in a very Pickwickian sense of the term. It is one of three specifications of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Taken literally, it is a combination of a fleeting moment with something that resists and something that is a rule. Even if we suppose this characterization to say something about the properties of expression, content, and the relation between them, respectively (which is not at all obvious), it is certainly a description that applies to numerous other phenomena as well. It does not tell us anything about the specificity of the sign. No doubt this idea is contained in the idea of degeneracy, but this has the curious effect of extending the name of a more specific instance to a lot of widely divergent phenomena, without however defining that specific phenomenon, but only the general class of classes. It is like saying that the point is a degenerate circle, but defining the circle as if it were a point.

Nevertheless, the Peircean triad may have something to say about meaning in a much more general sense, for which we should perhaps reserve the Peircean term “semiosis.” Maybe this is what Peirce was thinking about when, at a later stage, he complained that his notions were too narrow, and that, instead of referring to signs, he should really be talking about mediation or “branching” (*CP* 4.3 and *MS* 339, quoted in Parmentier 1985).

It was suggested above that the prototypical meaning of Secondness is resistance, including the resistance to resistance, and so on. In the theater of our experience, there must be something to initiate this chain of resistances or reactions. It is a thing no matter which that first grasps our attention—that is,

16. It is also a category well known in philosophy, but perhaps best known from the work of Maine de Biran.

17. Husserl’s phenomenological reduction is no doubt a case of reflection in this sense, but it is not the only one, as Sokolowski (1974) judiciously observes.

Firstness. In the primary sense, Thirdness is simply the observation of something occurring and the reaction to this occurrence. In accordance with this conception, “a sign [or, as I would say, semiosis] is whatever there may be whose intent is to mediate between an utterer of it and interpreter of it, both being repositories of thought, or quasi-minds, by conveying a meaning from the former to the latter” (MS 318, quoted in Jappy 2000). In many passages of Peirce’s works the object is not described as that which the sign is about, that is, to which it refers, in the sense in which this term is used in linguistic philosophy; instead, it is that which incites somebody to produce a sign which may or may not coincide with the referent. It is in this sense that the object is Secondness: it concerns the relation between the reality perceived and the expression produced. Similarly, the interpretant must be seen as the result of the receiver taking in the whole event of the utterer’s creating an expression starting out from some feature of experience. Because it refers to the relation between the utterer and that which he reacts to, it is not only an elementary relation, it is Thirdness. Indeed, this idea is very well illustrated by the notion of “branching,” which Peirce used to characterize his later concept of mediation. Conceived in this way, Peirce’s theory appears to be about the situation of communication but much closer to what we now would describe as a hermeneutical model than to the model known from the theory of information.

Even describing that which Peirce is concerned about as an act of communication may amount to too specific a notion. Instead, it could be characterized as an observation being observed. Summarizing all of Peirce’s different attempts at pinning down the nature of Firstness, we could probably say that it is something that appears without connection to anything else. It is thus prior to all relationship. Secondness is not only the second term that comes into play, but it is also made up of two parts, one of which is a property and the other a relation. It is something the function of which is to hook up with something already given. In this sense, it is a reaction, in the most general sense, to Firstness, where the first part is the connection to the property independently appearing and the second part describes the nature of this relationship. Thirdness is not only the third term which is ushered in, but it consists of three parts, two of which are relational; one which is hooked up to the term of Firstness and another which is connected to the relation of Secondness, together with which we find a third term describing the relationship between these two terms. It is thus an observation of the reaction. Appearance is monadic, reaction is dyadic, and observation is triadic (fig. 1).

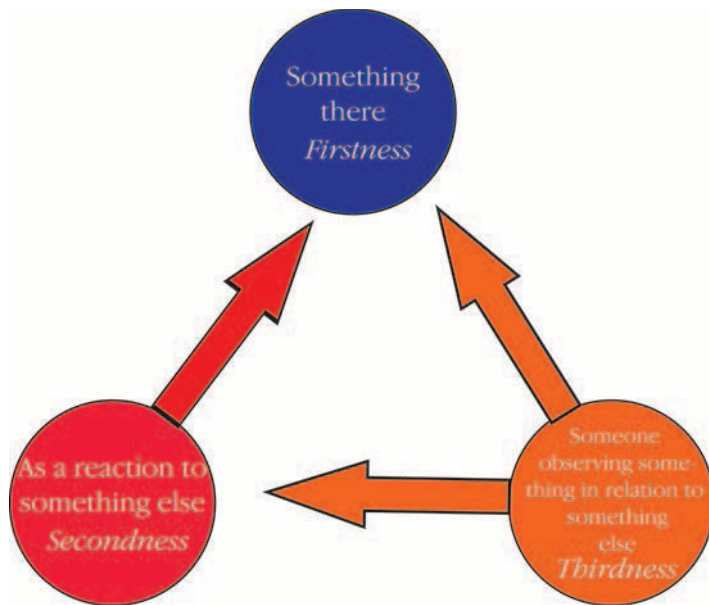


Figure 1. A proposal concerning the basic meaning of the Peircean triad

However, I do not think it sufficient to say that Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness correspond to a one-place predicate, a two-place predicate, and a three-place predicate, respectively, as Ransdell (1989) maintains. Peirce probably thought so, for instance when he claimed that “act of *attention* has no connotation at all, but is the pure denotative power of the mind, that is to say, the power which directs the mind to an object, in contradistinction to the power of thinking any predicate of that object” (CP 1.547). But this cannot explain the workings of the categories. Rather, Firstness must be a one-place predicate with one term in the slot, Secondness a second-place predicate having two terms, and Thirdness a three-place predicate including three terms. According to Peirce, “A fork in the road is a third, it supposes three ways: a straight road, considered merely as a connection between two places is second, but so far as it implies passing through intermediate places it is third” (CP 1.337). In this sense, the fork is not only the place where the road splits but from where it goes to different places.

Such a characterization has really rather little to tell us about something as specific as the sign. It is really about something much more general and elementary: something first appearing to consciousness, the reaction of a mind to this occurrence, and then the mind taking account of its own act. In its first stage,

this clearly has something to do with what Husserl calls “intentionality.” More specifically, it all seems to be a story told about attention.

The Psychology of Dyads and Triads

In social psychology, in particular developmental psychology, there is also much talk about dyads and triads, and about some things being dyadic and other triadic (Tomasello 1999; Zlatev 2009). Thus, interactions, engagements, eye gaze, and so on, are said to be either dyadic or triadic. This terminology would seem to have originated in the sociology of Georg Simmel (1971). Dyads and triads are to Simmel groups of two or three individuals, respectively. Units, not relationships are counted. Between two individuals there may be any number of relationships, just as there may be between three individuals. When, in contemporary articles, we read about a “mother-child dyad,” and so forth, this is clearly what is meant. Interestingly, the dyads and triads of psychology, just like those of Peirce, are not only defined by their number but tend to consist of a child, a caretaker, and some object attended to. In general, translated into the terminology of Sonesson (2000), a dyadic situation seems to be taken to consist of *Ego* and *Alter* (another person) or *Ego* and *Alius*, a thing or a person treated as a thing, whereas a triad includes all three types. Even more specifically, the triad tends to involve child, caretaker, and a referent.

Other uses are more explicitly relational: dyadic is opposed to triadic as the relation of a subject to an object, or another subject is opposed to the relation of a subject both to another subject and another object. Thus, on one hand, there is “dyadic eye gaze: looking at object or person,” and on the other hand there is “triadic eye gaze: looking back and forth between object and person” (see Bates 1979). A more complex interpretation would suppose that a dyadic relation is a relation between two individuals, while a triadic relation is a relation to the relation between two individuals. This is similar to what Peirce seems to mean, according to the interpretation given above. It should be noted that such a relation to the relation between *Alter* and *Alius* is not the same thing as two relations, to *Alter* on the one hand, and to *Alius* on the other. However, in practice, the only way to know that somebody is attending to the relationship between two individuals may be to observe him or her looking first at one individual and then at the other. Perhaps we would even need to go further, introducing relations between relations as well as relation between such relations.

Clearly social psychology, in spite (or because) of being a much more practical concern than Peircean philosophy, is as unclear about what dyadic and triadic relationships are as is Peirce. Basically, however, it seems that what is

involved in dyadic relations, in both cases, is a subject taking cognizance of the world, and in the triadic relations, somebody (who might be the same) being aware of what the first subject is doing.¹⁸ Typically, in social psychology, this is the caretaker observing the child's perceptual interchange with the world—and vice versa. In other words, it involves *Ego* and *Alter* interacting with reference to *Alius*.

Understood in this way, Peircean semiosis, which we should no longer restrict to involving signs, is not properly speaking “communicative,” in the sense of Merlin Donald (1991, 171ff.), but certainly “public” or, perhaps better “spectacular.” It is available to others (see Sonesson 2010). Yet, for it to be available, it is not enough for it to be present, but it must be accessible to attention. Thus, in the end, what we have in Peirce's triad is the primordial way of something becoming a theme—and the process of thematization itself being thematized (see Gurwitsch 1957; Sonesson 1989, 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Arvidson 2006). In Peirce's own words, attention is “the pure denotative power of the mind, that is to say, the power which directs the mind to an object” (*CP* 1.547). It is the basis of *noesis*—the way something appears to consciousness. It must be even more fundamental to *noesis* than the structures uncovered by Husserl (1913) himself.

Nevertheless, dyads in the sense of sociology may well turn out to be triads, if we apply the Peircean point of view. Here it is useful to remember Peirce's point about the straight road passing through intermediate places. In the case in which the dyad consists of two subjects (*Ego* and *Alter*), it seems particularly clear that a mediation—and thus a third—is required to account for what is going on and this no doubt extends to a lot of interactions between subjects and nonpersons, that is, between *Ego* and *Alius*. A case in point is empathy, much discussed at the time of Husserl and Peirce, as well as in contemporary cognitive science: at least some of the extant theories of empathy must clearly suppose empathy to be a third. Elsewhere, I took stock of the two classical varieties of empathy theory, the direct perception theory, according to which both *Ego* and *Alter* are immediately known, and the inference theory, which maintains that *Ego* is immediately known and *Alter* only by means of inference. I added, however, that this leaves two other possibilities available, and these can actually be found: from the point of view of M. M. Bakhtin, only *Alter* is directly known, since only he can be seen as a complete, finished whole; whereas Peirce must be taken to defend the final variety, according to which *Ego*, just as *Alter*, can only be known in-

18. Or something: the mind is not necessarily a subject to Peirce, but he does admit that there is no way of explaining it, at least at present, than by reference to a subject.

Table 2. An Overview of the Accessibility of Ego and Alter in Different Classical and Contemporary Empathy Theories

Classical Versions	Access to Ego	Access to Alter	Contemporary Version
Inference theory (Helmholtz, Mill)	Yes	No	Theory theory Simulation theory
Empathy theory (Lipps, Scheler, etc.)	Yes	Yes	In some respect Husserlian phenomenology
Bakhtin's theory	No	Yes	Followers of Bakhtin
Peirce's theory	No	No	Peirceans? At least some representatives of Theory theory: Gopnik, Carruthers

directly, through signs (see Colapietro 1989), and it turns out that this latter theory is still represented today, by at least some of those responsible for the theory of mind (see table 2). Indeed, Gopnik and Carruthers think the child discovers his or her own mind, just as that of others, only around four years of age (see Mitchell 1997).¹⁹ Several of these theories may in fact be correct, as applied to different kinds of empathy and when considered from different points of view. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that the relationship must be considered sufficiently intricate to be an instance of Thirdness.

Perhaps it is also relevant that Peirce, in his early work, explained the three fundamental categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness in terms of first-, second-, and third-person pronouns. He did not identify the second person, however, as one may expect, with Secondness, but with Thirdness. In his view, the second person was the most important, not the first: “all thought is addressed to a second person, or to one’s future self as a second person” (quoted in Singer 1984, 83–84). In terms that Peirce took over from Schiller, the first person stood for the infinite impulse (Firstness), the third person for sensuousness (Secondness), and the second person for the harmonizing principle (Thirdness). Peirce called his own doctrine “Tuism” from “*Tu*,” as opposed to “*Ego*” and “*It*,” and he prophesied about a “tuistic age,” in which peace and harmony would prevail. It is not clear, of course, whether Peirce would still accept these identifications later on, but, if he did, this would confirm my present interpretation of Firstness as “Something appearing,” Secondness as reaction to this fact, and Thirdness as the “Observer observed.”

19. Unpublished lecture, “Readings in the Phenomenology of Empathy,” given by the author at the Seminar of the Centre for Cognitive Semiotics in Lund, February 9, 2012.

Signs and Other Thirds

In the end, we cannot avoid facing the following question: what consequences, if any, does all this have for the notion of sign? It should not be forgotten that most of the phenomena included in Peirce's various lists of signs are not really signs, because they are what Peirce calls "degenerate" instances thereof. If we make a less strict analogy with mathematics, however, we could say, as above, that they are marginal cases of signs. Ransdell (1989) suggests that this should be understood to suggest that while a given verbal predicate "may not be immediately recognizable as a representation," a further "analysis of what is involved in the predication will show that something is implicitly being regarded as a sign, i.e., the property predicated falls under the category of Thirdness or representation." If so, the sign is the prototype, or perhaps the ideal type, of all kinds of Thirdness, and also of all approximations to it that take the form of Firstness and Secondness. At this point, one may want to object that it is not very enlightening to define such a broad category as Thirdness (or the categories in general) using such a specific phenomenon as the sign. The real problem, however, is that what we have, in the best case, is a characterization of Thirdness, not of the sign, which would require much finer distinctions.

Let us agree, for the moment, that the sign relation is an instance of Thirdness. Then we would like to know how it is different from other kinds of Thirdness. There is nothing to suggest that this question would be of any interest to Peirce. Parmentier (1985, 44) has pinpointed Peirce's lack of interest in the expression side of various semiotic resources, in particular to the extent that they differ and may have an influence on the content of the sign. This issue is different, but not unconnected, to Peirce's neglect of the specificity of the sign relation.

Elsewhere, taking my inspiration from both Husserl and Piaget, I have suggested that we can minimally define the sign by the following properties (Sonesson 1989, 1992, 2007a, 2007b, 2012a, 2012c): (1) it contains (at least) two parts expression and content (and is as a whole relatively independent of that for which it stands the referent); (2) these parts are differentiated, from the point of view of the subjects involved in the semiotic process, even though they may not be so objectively, that is, in the common sense Lifeworld (except as signs forming part of that Lifeworld); (3) there is a double asymmetry between the two parts, because one part, expression, is more directly experienced than the other; (4) and because the other part, content, is more in focus than the other; and (5) the sign itself is subjectively differentiated from the referent, and the referent is more indirectly known than any part of the sign. Perhaps this definition is not sufficient, but it will at least separate out a smaller class of phenomena within

the big category of Thirdness. And it will allow for the fact that, as iconic and indexical signs are based on preexisting iconic and indexical grounds, some symbolic signs may rely on some kind of Thirdness (rules or regularities) instituted prior to the sign. In many of my earlier articles, I adopted the term “ground” used in the early work of Peirce for dyadic relations, considered as a potential motivating force of different signs. Thus, while iconicity as such is not even a ground, the iconic ground may motivate iconic signs, or it may function on its own (for instance in perception), whereas indexicality, which in itself is already a ground, may motivate indices but can also function without the sign function again in perception. In the present context, I do not want to enter into the details of this discussion but will simply summarize it in figure 2.

The Three Hypo-icons

Before winding up this article, I would like to consider a particularly intriguing case: the subdivisions of the iconic sign, the so-called hypo-icons. The classical passage reads as follows: “Hypoicons may be roughly divided according to the mode of Firstness of which they partake. Those which partake of simple qualities, or First Firstnesses, are images; those which represent the relations, mainly dyadic, or so regarded, of the parts of one thing by analogous relations in their own parts, are diagrams; those which represent the representative character of a representamen by representing a parallelism in something else, are metaphors” (*CP* 2.277; *EP* 2:274). Peirce’s description of the metaphor, in this passage, is notoriously difficult to comprehend. Here it is useful to remember that, if images are instances of First Firstness, diagrams are no doubt instances of Second Firstness, and metaphors of Third Firstness. We have already encountered First Firstness in the leftmost and uppermost box of figure 2, but Second and Third Firstness are empty possibilities in that table.²⁰ If we add that hypo-icons are certainly signs in the strict sense of the term, whatever pure icons are, it seems that there must be some kind of Thirdness to all the three kinds of Firstness described above. If so, we should rather expect to find something similar to the last line of figure 2, that is, First Thirdness, Second Thirdness, and Third Thirdness. It should not be forgotten that all the hypo-icons, however much they share in Thirdness, and how, on another dimension, they vary as to Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, still remain instances of Firstness. This is a big complication indeed. I have tried to account for it by emphasizing the parallels

20. First Secondness, read off the table starting from the other dimension, exists, and so does First Thirdness, but they could hardly be what we are looking for here.







	Firstness	Secondness	Thirdness
Firstness	 Iconicity	—	—
Secondness	 Iconic ground	 Indexicality = indexical ground	—
Thirdness	 Iconic sign icon	 Indexical sign index	 Symbolicity = symbolic ground = symbolic sign symbol

Figure 2. Reconstructions of Peircean categories, grounds, and signs: since all Thirds are not signs, there must be signs that are built on pre-existing Thirds, just as icons and indices are built on pre-existing Firsts and Seconds, respectively, but this is not taken into account in the figure.

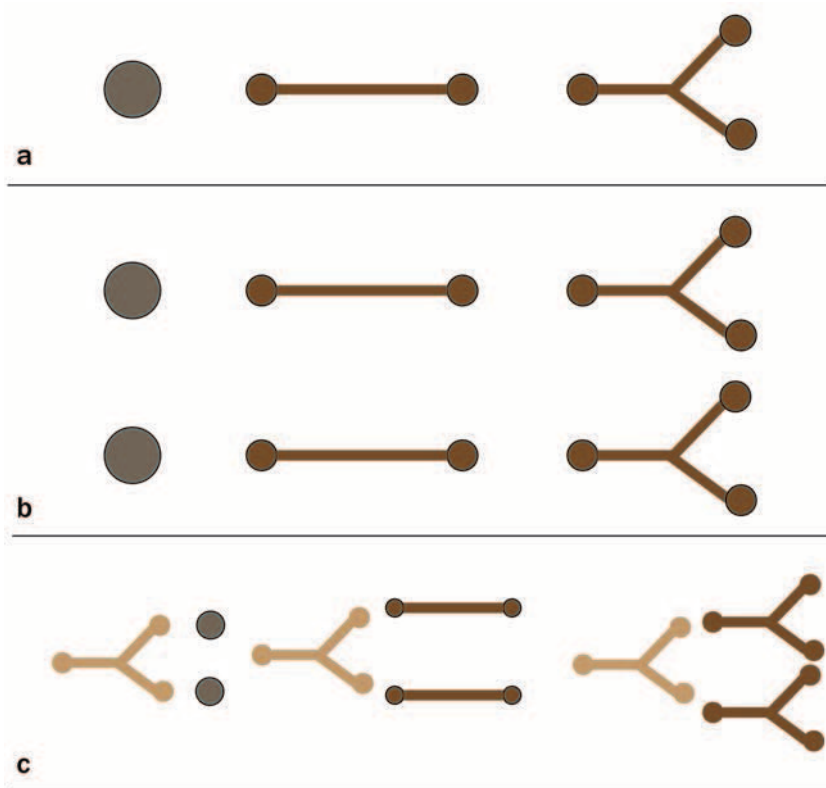


Figure 3. The hypo-icons: (a) the elementary figures of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness; (b) with iconicity added; (c) with the addition of Thirdness, specifically as the sign relation.

between the two phenomena forming the ground in the iconic signs (fig. 3), in contradistinction to the three instances of Thirdness in the general scheme of things (fig. 2).²¹ The image, nevertheless, will look exactly like the icon, so, at least for the moment, we have to take it to be the prototypical iconic sign.

At this point, it is useful to start out from the received idea of what a metaphor is—an idea received, more or less confusedly, from a long tradition of rhetoric starting out in Greek antiquity. Aristotle described the metaphor as issuing from a spark of inspiration, imposing a completely new point of view of a familiar phenomenon. For almost two thousand years, this was the general idea of

21. The question, however, is what kind of relation this would be in Peirce's scheme.

metaphor. All the treatises of rhetoric reserved a marginal category for “dead metaphors,” using the classical term *catachresis*. For the last few decades, however, our idea of what a metaphor is has changed completely, as a result of the work of Lakoff and his collaborators; now we tend to think of metaphors basically as what the classical authors would have described as dead metaphors. The latter probably tell us more about the fundamental ways of thinking of human beings, but they have less to tell about the notion of metaphor.

Let us start with a classical example of a dead metaphor: the foot of a mountain. We are concerned with something that occupies the same position on a mountain as the feet do in relation to the human body, that is, the part that is closest to the ground. This is similar to the sign for up in Blissymbolics, which is iconically signified by means of a line drawn over the line on which the others signs are placed (see fig. 4). What is up on the page of writing becomes up in general. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) give a long list of linguistic “metaphors” involving the direction upward: happy is up; sad is down. Conscious is up; unconscious is down. Health and life are up; sickness and death are down. Having control or force is up; being subject to control or force is down. More is up; less is down. Foreseeable future events are up and ahead. High status is up; low status is down. Good is up; bad is down. Virtue is up; depravity is down. Rational is up; emotional is down. All these examples, including the foot of the mountain and the Bliss signs, I suggest, are diagrams, not metaphors, in the sense of Peirce. Although the Peircean diagram is a much broader category, it includes diagrams in the everyday language sense; the lines of the population curve on the paper go up, just as the population does. This is, at least from one point of view, simply an equivalence between two two-place relations. The terms need to be reinterpreted, but the relation itself is one and the same.

In the case of a real metaphor, on the contrary, the relation itself, I suggest, has to be reinterpreted. This explains our feeling that metaphors should trans-

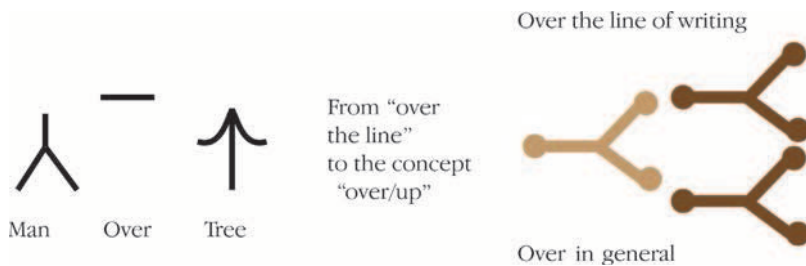


Figure 4.

gress borders. Thus, for example, if I talk about a small line of forest close to the top of the mountain as the beard of the mountain, I may not be creating a great metaphor, but I am certainly producing an effect of transgression, in which not only the terms, but the relationship between them have to be reevaluated. Or, as I suggested in an earlier publication (Sonesson 1989, 330ff.), if I say that a bat is a bird, I produce a metaphorical effect, however slight, although in some languages, and indeed in European languages at some earlier point of time, this would only had been a simple assignation of a member to a category. We no doubt ask much more of good metaphors: they suppose, I think, an interaction between the two categories brought to bear on each other, as Max Black (1962) suggested and as Paul Ricoeur (1975) seconded. Or, to express the same idea in the terms of Groupe μ (1970): good metaphors consist in treating that which is in normal parlance simply an intersection of features as being a union. If you say the king is a lion, he is not only as courageous and/or ferocious as a lion, but he becomes generally lion-like. Since metaphor is not the subject of this article, I will bring this discussion to a halt at this somewhat premature stage.

Conclusion

The whole of this essay has been an imaginary experiment. It starts out trying to understand what Peirce may have meant when proposing the three categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness as a foundation for semiosis. It continues submitting what can be gained from Peirce's writings to an operation of Husserlian phenomenology, the free variation of the imagination. The result may coincide with what Peirce wanted to say, or it could be entirely different. Why would anyone want to go through such a strange procedure? Peirce was preoccupied his whole life by issues that he understood to be semiotic. There is every reason to think that he was onto something, but his writings are very obscure. The task at present has been to delve deeper into the implications of Peirce's thought. If you do not consider semiotics to be simply the perpetuation of Peirce's ideas, it is necessary to find out what part of his thought can be safeguarded for contemporary semiotic theory. All semioticians, and many who would not characterize their profession in that way, use the trichotomy of icons, indices, and symbols, in one or other mostly misunderstood interpretation. This distinction is hardly original with Peirce, although the triadic version may be so. Therefore, I took the important task to be a reconsideration of the general notions of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, which seem to be taken for granted by most followers of Peirce, and which are generally ignored by those semioticians who would not describe themselves as orthodox followers of Peirce.

As a consequence, I started out comparing the respective phenomenologies due to Husserl and Peirce, and I suggested that Peirce's phenomenology could only be seen as a special case of that of Husserl. I went on to consider the intuitive grounding of the three Peircean categories, maintaining that they had to be understood as very generic prototype concepts. In particular, I claimed that these categories are not sufficiently specific to define the concept of sign, which instead has to be derived from phenomenological considerations inspired in Husserl and Piaget. I went on to show that dyadic and triadic relations, as they are present in Peirce's work, may be understood (along the lines of one of) the uses of these notions within social psychology. In this sense, they serve to account for what appears to be the most fundamental character of the acts of consciousness, the emergence of something to consciousness, and this emergence itself becoming the theme of consciousness. In the final section, I returned to the issue of signs, in the proper sense of the term, trying to spell out the consequences for signs in general, and for the hypo-icons in particular. In particular, I suggested that, following upon the Peircean stand, a lot of what is normally called metaphor are really only diagrams, since metaphor requires not only the terms of the relation to be reinterpreted, but also the relation itself.

It still remains somewhat obscure how to relate the three acts of consciousness of the emergence of the phenomenon, the reaction to this emergence, and the observation of the primary observation to complex entities such as sign, let alone signs for signs such as the metaphor. I suggest that this may be the place where Peircean theory should choose to pick a tool out of Husserl's toolbox: sedimentation is the process by means of which meanings accrue to experience and remain passive and layered in the deeper recesses of a complex construct, until they are reactivated, layer by layer, in phenomenological reflection. It is in this sense in which signs, whatever else they are, remain built up of something emergent, something reacting, and somebody taking cognizance of what is going on. The whole story of these ongoing processes, which make up our cultural world, is what Husserl was later to call genetic phenomenology, when it attends to what has been synthesized in our own present life, and generative phenomenology, when it concerns constructs deriving from generation and ever more generations of human life (see Steinbock 1995; Welton 2000).

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