PRAGMATISM AND THE THEORY OF SIGNS IN PEIRCE

I

More than one reader of Peirce has complained that although the Principle of Pragmatism was put forward as a device for clarifying ideas, it is itself far from a model of clarity. The failure of Peirce to provide a systematic exposition of his philosophy as a whole has in this area its usual consequences. There are difficulties not only in interpreting each formulation of the Principle and in reconciling the formulations to each other, but also in discerning the connections between the Principle and other aspects of Peirce's philosophy. One of the most baffling problems of the latter sort is the lack of any specific and explicit connection between pragmatism and the general theory of signs, with the sole exception of a posthumously published manuscript of 1906 (5.464–496). [1]

To gain an adequate idea of the peculiarity of this situation let us recall the general character both of the theory of signs and of the Pragmatic Principle. The former purports to provide a general conception of a sign and to exhibit the essential features of all semiosis (sign-functioning). Peirce defines a sign as follows:

> A *Sign*, or *Representamen*, is a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its *Object*, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its *Interpretant*, to assume the same triadic relation to its Object in which it stands itself to the same Object. (2.274; cf. 2.92, 2.303, 1.541).

A more expanded treatment is the following:

> A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (2.228)

Insofar as this theory of what Peirce calls the "quasi-necessary" characteristics of semiosis is adequate, it should provide a general framework within which any more special or detailed consideration of sign-functioning would find its place, and should furnish a basic terminology for the state-

[1] All references to Peirce's writings are to the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1931–1935), and are made in the standard way by indicating the volume and paragraph numbers.

ment of any more specific semiotic theories. And this is just what pragmatism amounts to — a more specific semiotic theory. Although the first canonical statement of the Pragmatic Principle in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (5.388–410) does not use the term 'meaning,' but instead states (to put it succinctly) that the *concept* of any object is the *concept* of its effects which are relevant to our conduct, nevertheless even here the principle is, at least implicitly and by implication, a theory of meaning. For any limitation on the concepts we can form carries with it a correlative limitation on the verbal expressions which can be used to express concepts, i.e., on the expressions which will be counted as cognitively meaningful; and to say that all concepts are concepts of practically relevant effects is to say that the cognitive meaning of any expression can be explicated in terms of such effects. This semiotic bearing of the principle is underlined by the uses to which Peirce put it in the original article, the first of which is the determination of "what we mean by calling a thing *hard.*" (5.403) And many of the subsequent formulations which Peirce gave to the principle are explicitly couched in terms of ascertaining the meaning, or giving a definition, of concepts, affirmations, judgments, predications, etc. [2] Indeed in terms of Peirce's theory that thought is a process of the interpretation of signs and that concepts themselves form a species of signs, any assertion about the "purpose," or "content" of concepts tells us something about the meaning of at least one sort of signs.

This being the case, it is most puzzling that pragmatism is repeatedly stated and discussed in apparent total disconnection from the concepts and principles of Peirce's semiotic. In the classic formulations of the pragmatic principle we hear nothing of representamen, interpretant, ground, etc., nor are we given any explicit clue as to the bearing of the one theory on the other, or as to the place pragmatism has in the broad scheme of semiotic. Nor can this phenomenon be explained in terms of the chronological sequence of the theories. Peirce wrote his first pragmatism papers in 1877–78. Ten years earlier (1867), in his first published philosophical work, "On a New List of Categories" (1.545-559), he had worked out the first sketch of his general theory of signs, and this theory is clearly presupposed in the series of papers published in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* beginning the following year (5.213–357). In spite of this fact the pragmatic principle is stated in 1878 (in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear") in a fashion which completely ignores the basic distinctions of the semiotic.

This *might* be explained by the fact that this paper, which was published in *Popular Science Monthly*, was intended to have a definitely popular cast. But this explanation is not available for the still more surprising fact

[2] See, e.g., 5.9, 5.19, 5.412, 5.467.

that when many years later Peirce came to restate and amplify his pragmatic doctrines (in the Monist papers of 1905), there is the same failure to make use of the basic semiotic concepts, even for purposes of exposition; and this in spite of the fact that the intervening years had seen a tremendous development and elaboration of his semiotic. Finally it is still more paradoxical that in the Lectures on Pragmatism of 1903, which themselves contain a discussion of representamens, their varieties, etc., no use is made of this scheme when the pragmatic principle is under consideration. The only attempt to remedy this deficiency is found, as noted above, in an unpublished paper of 1906, and then, as we shall see, it is a semiotic modified in a crucial respect which is employed.

I shall make no attempt to discern the various causes — be they rooted in the structure of Peirce's thought, or be they from a philosophical standpoint accidental — which produced this strange dissociation of what unmistakably belonged together. Instead I shall go on to note that, whether by conscious or unconscious design, the formulations of pragmatism we have from 1878–1906 are nicely adapted to subsumption under the general semiotic theory, and hence are easily translatable into its terms. Let us recall that according to that theory a sign represents its object to somebody by producing or determining in that somebody an interpretant which stands to the same object in the same sort of relation as that in which the initial sign itself stands — i.e., by producing another sign of the same object. Now if we look in this scheme for some element which could be called the *meaning* of a sign, we see that the interpretant is what would be called the meaning, in one important sense of that term. For example, if someone asks me the *meaning* of a word I have just used, say 'numinous,' I will reply by saying it means the capacity to arouse such feelings as awe, fascination, and mysterious dread, and to evoke a response of worship. What I have done is to supply another sign of the same object which *interprets* the first, i.e., I have supplied an *interpretant* in the Peircean sense. Again if someone asks me what I mean by a given assertion, e.g., "The greatest human achievements are ambivalent," I might reply that what I meant was that the same achievements in science, art, technology, etc., which most fully express the glory of man's estate, also constitute the strongest temptations for self-deification, which in turn results in a fall from that estate. Again what I have done is to provide an *interpretant* of the first expression, i.e., an expression which roughly has the same reference, and which develops or elaborates that reference. Thus it would be quite appropriate to say, in terms of Peirce's theory, that the meaning of a sign is its interpretant.

In the light of these considerations the function of the Pragmatic Principle in the Theory of Signs can be expressed by saying that it specifies the kind of interpretant which must be provided if the meaning of a

cognitive sign (in Peirce's terms an "intellectual" sign) is to be explicitly grasped, and hence, at least by implication, it lays down as a condition for the possession of cognitive meaning by a term that it be capable of determining an interpretant of this sort. In the first aspect it is a theory of what the meaning of an intellectual sign 'is'; in the second it is a criterion of cognitive meaningfulness. The standard formulations of pragmatism can be restated in these terms. Thus the following statement

> 1. In order to ascertain the meaning of an intellectual conception one should consider what practical consequences might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception; and the sum of these consequences will constitute the entire meaning of the conception. (5.9)

can be reformulated as:

> 1A. Theory of Meaning
> An intellectual conception can have as its interpretant (or as one of its interpretants) [3] a specification of the practical consequences which might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception.
> 1B. Criterion of Meaning
> In order that an idea be an intellectual conception it must be capable of determining an interpretant which will specify the practical consequences which might conceivably result by necessity from the truth of that conception.

Again we can take the following formulation:

> 2. If one can define accurately all the conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept, and *there is absolutely nothing more in it.* (5.412)

and restate it in semiotic terminology in the following ways:

> 2A. Theory of Meaning
> Any affirmation of an intellectual concept will have an (actual or possible) interpretant which will define accurately a series of experimental phenomena.
> 2B. Criterion of Meaning
> In order that a statement be a genuine affirmation of a concept, it must be capable of determining an interpretant which defines accurately a series of experimental phenomena.

II

The result of our investigation so far is that although Peirce unaccountably neglected to state the Pragmatic Theory of Meaning in terms of his

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[3] The pragmatic principle does not rule out the possibility of interpretants other than those detailing practical consequences. It merely locates *the* cognitive meaning of the sign in this sort of interpretant, i.e., requires that whatever other sorts of interpretants the sign have, it also be capable of having one which spells out practical consequences.

general semiotic, the formulations of that theory are preternaturally well suited to such statement. But now comes the most startling aspect of the matter. When Peirce, 28 years after the birth of pragmatism, finally came to state it in the lingo of signs and interpretants, what he said was nothing like any of the foregoing. The statement was, in its most succinct form: "The deliberately formed, self-analyzing habit ... is the living definition, the veritable and final logical interpretant." (5.491) This statement is not only divergent from the earlier formulations of pragmatism, which spoke not of a habit but of a verbal expression of a certain form as the interpretant of a sign, but it is also incompatible with the general theory of signs; for it speaks of a 'final' logical interpretant, a conception which seems to be ruled out by the Peircean definition of sign as producing an interpretant which stands in the same relation to the object as the original sign, i.e., which itself produces an interpretant, and so on ad infinitum.

What shall we say of this divergence? It is the view of Professor Justus Buchler that this later formulation, which was "motivated by the strong influence on Peirce of classical philosophic tradition as well as by his preoccupation with the mushroom pragmatism that sprang up in the neighborhood of 1900," [4] "represents a grossly unsatisfactory modification of the pragmatic view previously stated." [5] He does "not believe that the notion of an 'ultimate' interpretant is required for a statement of Peirce's pragmatism." [6] It will be our contention, on the contrary, that this identification of the ultimate logical interpretant with a habit represents a highly significant development of Peircean pragmatism, and, so far from subverting the earlier theory, strengthens it through making explicit something which underlay it all along, the failure to develop which seriously weakened its adequacy and explanatory power.

To explain and support this contention it will be necessary to examine rather closely Peirce's usual treatment of signs and determine to what extent it fulfills the functions proper to such a theory. One function which we would expect a theory of signs to perform (and this is certainly an expectation shared by Peirce) is the explication of that which constitutes the semiotic or representational character of a sign, that by virtue of which it exercises its semiotic function, that which is characteristic of it *qua* sign and which distinguishes it from non-signs. To what extent does Peirce's semiotic do this job? It tells us that a sign represents its object by producing an interpretant, i.e., another sign of the same object. But the obvious objection to this is that it does not solve the problem but

[4] *Charles Peirce's Empiricism.* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., 1939), p. 112.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 159.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 112.

only transfers it to another locus. If we want to know what there is about a sign, x, which enables it to represent an object, O, we are told that this representational function lies in the fact that x determines y, another sign of O. But this account is enlightening only if we already understand what gives y *its* semiotic function; what enables *it* to represent O. And if we ask for an account of this, we are told only that its representational character springs from determining as its interpretant still another sign of O, z. And so on *ad infinitum*. Thus the account never explains the semiotic character of any sign except by assuming that we already understand that character in some other sign. Not only is the representational function, as Peirce says, passed along from sign to sign, but also, as Peirce does not say, *the problem of what constitutes the representational function* is passed along from sign to sign without ever getting solved.

One symptom of the insufficiency of this theory is its unfitness to serve as a criterion for distinguishing a genuine case of semiosis from a pseudo-case. According to the theory, for a sign to take part in a genuine example of semiosis it is necessary that the sign be understood by an interpreter, which in turn requires that an interpretant of the sign be produced in that interpreter, at least possibly. (It is not necessary that the interpreter actually produce an interpretant but only that he be capable of doing so). Unfortunately this principle provides us no effective means of distinguishing genuine from spurious semiosis. For it is clear that I can respond to a meaningless string of symbols by uttering another set of equally meaningless symbols as a purported interpretant for the first, and this second set can in turn receive an ostensible interpretation from a third equally senseless expression, and so on as long as you like. Of course one can complain that the requirement has not really been satisfied, since the so-called interpretant, being meaningless, is not a real interpretant. But the point is that it cannot be ascertained whether the first interpretant is meaningful until it has been ascertained whether the interpreter can produce an interpretant for it which is meaningful, and the meaningfulness of this second interpretant rests in turn on a capacity to produce a meaningful interpretant for it, which in turn, etc., etc. The criterion can be applied to a given sign only by assuming that it has already been applied to another.

It is at this point that the Pragmatic Principle appears as a way out of the dilemma. Let us recall that the usual formulation of that principle says in effect that it is a certain kind of expression, viz., one detailing practical consequences (the sorts of results which follow from certain lines of conduct), which constitutes the crucial interpretant of an intellectual sign; it is this sort of interpretant (which, following Buchler, we can call a 'pragmatic interpretant') which the interpreter must have a capacity to produce if real understanding is to take place. In terms of this pragmatic supplementation to the general theory of signs, we can discri mi-

nate genuine semiosis from spurious by noting whether the capacity to produce an interpretant of this sort is present. And the representational function of a sign can be seen to lie not just in the production of any interpretant, but in the (at least possible) production of a pragmatic interpretant.

This appears to dispose of the difficulty until we ask about the semiotic status of the pragmatic interpretant itself. As an interpretant, it is a sign and hence claims a semiotic function. Perhaps the question of the genuineness of the semiosis in this case can be waived by taking signs of this sort to be meaningful by definition, rather than requiring a test of their genuineness by examining the meaningfulness of their interpretants. But granting the reality of their semiotic status, we are still faced with the task of understanding this reality. What is there about a pragmatic interpretant which enables it to function as a sign of some object to some interpreter? It would not be enlightening to give the same answer here which we gave for other signs — viz., that it represents its object by virtue of being interpreted by a pragmatic interpretant; for this would simply raise the same question for the *same kind* of sign, and the inquiry would not have been advanced. Hence if the whole explanation just elaborated is not to crumble, we must find some ground of the meaningfulness of pragmatic interpretants which is itself non-representational, and which therefore does not itself need an explanation of its meaningfulness — a first interpretant uninterpreted.

It is in its provision of this ground that the identification of the ultimate logical interpretant of a sign with a habit has its chief significance. In speaking of an *ultimate* logical interpretant Peirce is not, as some of his commentators suppose, [7] contradicting his previous insistence that every sign determines an indefinite series of interpretants and the anti-intuitive theory of knowledge based on this. This indefinitely extended series is left intact by the later theory of the ultimate interpretant. What this later theory adds is the insistence that however much a given sign may be translated, developed, clarified, illuminated, etc., by subsequent interpretants which are themselves signs, including pragmatic interpretants, we can only understand the semiotic function of this whole series of signs or of any of its members provided that behind and beneath this "living inferential metaboly of symbols," there exists an ultimate interpretant which gives all the members of the series their representational force without itself needing to derive that force from still another interpretant. It is only if there be such 'ultimate' interpretants that we can really understand any case of semiosis.

[7] See Buchler, *op.cit.*, pp. 157 ff, and George Genry, "Habit and the Logical Interpretant," in *Studies in the Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Philip P. Wiener and Frederic H. Young, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard, 1952), pp. 75–90.

In order to discover such an ultimate interpretant Peirce had only to make explicit something which was implicit in the earliest statement of pragmatism. There the assignment of meaning to any conception or assertion in terms of practical consequences was based on the following argument. All thought is directed to the production of belief, which essentially involves a habit of conduct. Now since a conception is nothing apart from thought, it must have an essential reference to whatever is thought's function. Hence all genuine conceptions are conceptions of those aspects of things which are relevant to deliberate conduct. [8] Put these considerations into the terminology of semiotic, in the light of the realization of a need for an ultimate interpretant, and we have the following. Any intellectual sign is essentially capable of expressing a belief, or forming part of a larger sign which expresses a belief, for belief is the fundamental act of thought, that to the formation of which all other thought is directed. And a belief essentially involves a habit of conduct. Hence any intellectual sign has as the essential condition of its semiotic function a certain relation to a habit or habits, which can be expressed by calling the habit the ultimate logical interpretant of the sign. [9] But this is just the statement of pragmatism we get in the paper under discussion. Thus as soon as Peirce recognized that his semiotic requires the kind of supplementation expressed by the phrase "ultimate logical interpretant," he was in a position to give a statement of the pragmatic principle in semiotic terms which makes explicit what lay at the root of the principle all along. For, as the above cited arguments show, the basis of Peircean pragmatism was the conviction that all cognitive use of signs has as its essential function the guidance of conduct; so that what renders a sign cognitively meaningful (gives it its referential function, enables it to be *about* something) is its relevance to habits of action. And to say that the ultimate logical interpretant of a sign is a habit of action, is simply a concise way of putting this point.

Thus, *contra* Buchler, the latter formulation of pragmatism in terms of an ultimate logical interpretant is more basic and illuminating than the earlier ones. Its superiority lies not only in its being couched in more adequate semiotic terms than those which would be appropriate to the earlier forms, but also in the fact that it constitutes the explanation and ground for the validity and significance of the earlier versions. The "prag-

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[8] See 5.394–402. The same kind of argument for pragmatism occurs elsewhere, e.g. 5.196, 5.546–548. Note also Peirce's assertion that "pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary" from "Bain's definition of belief as 'that upon which a man is prepared to act.' " (5.12).

[9] This of course involves a certain extension of the term 'interpretant,' since it was heretofore only applied to *signs*; but the basic meaning of 'interpretant' – that feature of the interpreter by virtue of which he is capable of interpreting the sign in question – remains constant in this extended usage.

matic interpretant" in the earlier sense — i.e., the *expression* which specifies practical consequences — holds the crucial place it does among the possible interpretants of a given sign only because it is the verbal representation of the habit which is the fundamental ground of the cognitive meaningfulness of the original sign and all its interpretants.[10] The pragmatic interpretant is a condition of meaningfulness because meaningfulness depends on a relation to habits of action, not vice versa. Thus the later statement is more fundamental in that it specifies the feature of the semiotic process which give verbal expressions of practical consequences their crucial place in the meaning-situation.

III

It must be admitted that when pragmatism is stated in this way, new problems arise which are not encountered as long as one merely talks about translating one set of expressions into another. Increased complexity, and even perplexity, normally accompany the drive toward greater profundity. For one thing, as soon as we seek the ultimate basis of semiosis in the connection of cognitive signs with habits of action, we are faced with the necessity of specifying the sorts of habits involved in various sorts of semiosis. Of course where a statement is believed, we can say that the habits which function as the interpretant are those which constitute (or form part of) the belief. But what about semiotic situations where a statement is understood without being believed — where it is simply considered, contemplated, doubted, etc.? Here the habits which constitute belief in the statement are *ex hypothesi* absent. What habit is it, then, which is present and which makes possible an understanding of the sign? And what sort of habit underlies our awareness of the meaning of a single word or sub-sentential phrase? In the second place, there are difficult questions, in each sort of case, as to what connections there are between the habit and the sign by virtue of which the former acts as an interpretant of the latter. When a new sentence is believed on first acquaintance, we can say that the interpretation of the sentence involves the production of certain habits (those which constitute belief in the statement) in the interpreter. The sign is related to its ultimate interpretant as (partial) cause to effect. But what about the understanding of this believed sentence on subsequent occasions? This understanding cannot consist in the *production* of the belief-habits in the interpreter, for they were produced previously and have been there all along. What change is introduced in the habit structure of the individual at the moment the sign is apprehended, by virtue of which we can say that the sign is being interpreted at that

[10] See 5.491.

moment rather than some other? Similar questions can be raised as to what constitutes the understanding reaction to a sign, the understanding of (but not belief in) which has been acquired earlier.

Peirce himself has nowhere provided an answer to questions of this sort, nor, so far as I know, have contemporary pragmatic semioticians, such as C. H. Morris, given adequate attention to them. If an adequate semiotic is to be built on the Peircean foundations, questions such as these must be faced and satisfactorily answered.

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