


23 Peirce and Self-Consciousness
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Self-consciousness, as a philosophical concern, characterizes the early modern era. Nowadays, though, it seems as if we have lost interest in it. Once the early modern project of founding objective knowledge within the limits of subjective consciousness failed, the psychological structure itself of self-consciousness appears abandoned from almost every point of view. Paradigmatic examples of this situation can be found both within the analytic tradition and among outstanding voices of the so-called Continental philosophy. Think, for instance, of Wittgenstein’s claim in the Tractatus: “The subject that thinks, that has representations, does not exist” (5.631), or Foucault’s (1969:28) statement of the self’s death (which he applied to himself) writing in L’Archéologie du savoir: “Do not ask me who I am nor ask me to continue being invariable: it is a moral of the civil state which governs our documents.” But the phenomena uncovered by rationalists and empiricists with respect to self-consciousness cannot be so easily eliminated. As Tugendhat (1986) has argued, these phenomena can be grouped along two main axes: the epistemic one, insular as self-consciousness constitutes a domain of direct knowledge; and the practical one, having to do with the possibilities of action as an agent.

Meanwhile, the lack of a renewed theoretical approach to self-consciousness has the consequence that the empirical research on these phenomena becomes rather bizarre, ranging from the reductionist materialism that considers consciousness, in itself, as an anomaly requiring
to be explained away, analyzed in respectable physicalist terms, and the naturalism that purports to characterize the neurological mechanisms involved. Neither approach takes into account the central features of self-consciousness, the capability of setting, assessing, and modifying one's own goals, and the ability to express one's thoughts linguistically.

Certainly, some philosophers continue to adopt a traditional stance, either the Cartesian view that the self is a special substance (Swinburne, Eccles) or the Kantian position that the self is transcendental (Z. Vendler, J. Rosenberg, T. Nagel, J. Searle). To my view, such conceptions have been submitted to convincing critiques (by, for example, Hume and Husserl) that undermine their assumptions.

In this context I believe Peirce's contribution is of great value. He provided some very interesting cues to a conception of self and self-consciousness that are in agreement with an evolutionary view of human nature. By means of his semiotic conception of thinking and the role he attributed to society and language, he tried to develop an account of objectivity and self that could overcome the Kantian a priori and that went beyond the solipsistic approach in philosophy.

Peirce on Self-Consciousness

It is not my intent to gather here everything Peirce said about this subject, let alone to present it in a coherent way—a rather difficult task given the evolution of his thinking. I shall concentrate upon the most suggestive of his writings on the subject, which are contained in his papers during 1868–69. There we find an explicit effort to refute the views of Descartes and Kant on objective knowledge through Peirce's theory of thinking as a semiotic process. The development of his own epistemological view required Peirce to offer a new account of self-consciousness, not as the starting point as regards knowledge, but as the outcome of a semiotic process, linguistically mediated, that takes place during the socialization of children.

His main ideas on this theme appeared in the 1868 article "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man." The topic of this paper was a critical examination of Descartes's views on subjectivity. The principal features of Descartes's position were his concept of intuition as providing direct and immediate access to a private reality and the feeling of certainty that accompanied this kind of knowledge. Peirce's criticisms consisted of a series of arguments. In the first place, Peirce argued that founding objective knowledge upon the inner criterion of evidence entails the rejection of the possibility of finding public, positive criteria of evidence, within experience (CP. 5.214). For Peirce, the inner criterion adds nothing to the public ones. In the second place, in a quite ironic vein, Peirce equated this appeal to one's "inner authority" to the medieval practice of resorting to authorities for certainty (CP. 5.215), in contrast with the scientific method of considering exclusively experimental evidence.

In consequence, the Cartesian notion of self-consciousness is rejected. For Descartes, self-consciousness consisted in a kind of self-acquaintance, of immediate knowledge of one's self. But if Descartes's notion of intuition, the faculty through which this sort of knowledge is achieved, is no longer acceptable, then self-consciousness must be conceived within some other framework.

Toward this goal, two main ideas were available to Peirce. On the one hand, his attack against intuition was not something of secondary interest; on the contrary, his opposition to this "claimed" faculty stemmed from his own account of thinking of mental life as a semiotic process. On the other hand, Peirce had already adopted the "active" notion of belief, in the sense of the psychologisit Alexander Bain, according to whom belief and action were conceived as intrinsically connected. In this vein, mental contents are no longer to be assessed in solipsistic terms but on the grounds of behavioral evidence.

With respect to the first point, I shall only outline the main traits. Peirce's semiotic approach resulted from his "critical realism" as applied to meaning, according to which the Kantian notion of "recognizable things-in-themselves" is semantically incoherent and therefore can be eliminated. Cognizability, understood as symbolic meaningfulness, constituted the domain of possibility: "Over against any cognition, there is an unknown but knowable reality; but over against all possible cognition,
there is only the self-contradictory. In short, cognizability (in its widest sense) and being are not merely metaphysically the same, but are synonymous terms" (CP 5.257).

Objective knowledge of reality, then, can be achieved, not because of the structure of our consciousness, as in Kant, but "in the long run," through a process semiotically mediated of inferences. Every thought, because of its semiotic character, brings another, even unconsciously (CP 5.253). What must be established is the right pattern of these inferences, so that the advancement to truth can be guaranteed. It is in this context that Peirce's interest in logic becomes paramount. He conceived the study of the different types of valid inferences (deductive, inductive, and abductive) as the study of the right patterns of reasoning. Moreover, its semiotic character implied that their meanings (or "interpretants") were a matter of a public process of interpretation. Actually, Peirce understood thinking through the metaphor of "inner dialogue," as internalization of the public process of interpretation. 5

As for the second point, Peirce accepted and brought to its limit Bain's idea of the intimate relation between belief and action, without blurring the first within the second, as behaviorism did. For Bain, what one believes is what guides one's actions and directs one's "volitions." Accepting such a conception, which was to develop into his notion of "habit," Peirce provided himself with an important source of public evidence to use in assessing mental content: "If belief is taken in the active sense, it may be discovered by the observation of external facts and by inference from the sensation of conviction which usually accompanies it" (CP 5.242). The "sensation of conviction" was also understood by Peirce in a behavioral manner, so that its validity can be ascertained through observable criteria.

This sketch of the conceptual resources available to Peirce will help us to understand the kind of account he gave of self-consciousness. To begin with, the thought of one's self as a "self" was conceived by him as an inference from the thoughts of others, not an exceptional thought, as in Descartes. Therefore, no special faculty must be postulated to account for it. Furthermore, this thought must also exhibit a practical dimension; that is, it must be, to some extent, empirically observable in behavior. Finally, and as a consequence of this last point, he is required to give a developmental account of self-consciousness, since public evidence—as in the use of personal pronouns, particularly the first-person "I"—makes it obvious that infants lack such self-acquaintance.

Thus, what is required is an account of the semiotic process through which such a thought develops in the child, an account that could explain the role played by the society in which the process takes place. Moreover, it is an account "from outside," that is, without appealing to criteria of subjective evidence, but appealing to observable behavior, thus providing a basis for ascription of self-consciousness.

Peirce articulated such an account through two main stages, one prelinguistic, the other linguistic. The first moment in this process would be the discovery of one's own body, by means of perceptions and volitions, which could make possible the appearance of a rudimentary notion of "one's self": "A very young child may always be observed to watch its own body with great attention. There is every reason why this should be so, for from the child's point of view his body is the most important thing in the universe. Only what it touches has any actual and present feeling; only what it faces has any actual color; only what is on its tongue has any actual taste" (CP 5.229).

Peirce considered what could be inferred by children from causal interactions with their environment as a result of their will. He thought the thinking powers in children were sufficient to establish a connection between their actions and the changes such actions could provoke.

The child, however, must soon discover by observation that things which are thus fit to be changed are apt actually to undergo this change, after a contact with that peculiarly important body called Willy or Johnny. This consideration makes this body still more important and central, since it establishes a connection between the fitness of a thing to be changed and a tendency in this body to touch it before it is changed, (CP 5.231).

Thus, a first sense of one's self springs as an inference from the bodily interactions with the environment. But then the child learns to understand the language, and a more advanced stage in the process begins. What is most remarkable in this moment is that the child receives information through a new source. Up until that moment, the child's own body
and senses were the only channel of information input, but language makes communication possible. This influence is so strong, Peirce observed, that linguistic information enjoys a preeminent status for the child, as "the best evidence of fact." The upshot, as Peirce envisioned it, will be a conflict between what is perceived and what is heard, solved in favor of linguistic information, that is, information provided by other people. The importance of such conflicts is that they give rise to new experiences of error and ignorance, whose role in the appearance of the self is determinative.

Peirce described the experience of ignorance in the following way:

A child hears it said that the stove is hot. But it is not, he says; and, indeed, that central body is not touching it, and only what that touches is hot or cold. But he touches it, and finds the testimony confirmed in a striking way. Thus, he becomes aware of ignorance, and it is necessary to suppose a self in which this ignorance can inhere. So testimony gives the first dawning to self-consciousness. (CP 5.233)

And as regards error, Peirce introduced in the description of this experience a new range of phenomena: the emotions. What is peculiar about them is that they are related to the body which experiences them in a different manner than to those people who merely observe them. As a result, their attribution to somebody is frequently denied. This is the origin of experiencing error:

These (emotional) judgements are generally denied by others. Moreover, he has reason to think that others, also, have such judgements which are quite denied by all the rest. Thus, he adds to the conception of appearance the actualization of fact, the conception of it as something private and valid only for one body. In short, error appears, and it can be explained only by supposing a self which is fallible. (CP 5.234)

Peirce concluded his account with a rather cryptic remark: "Ignorance and error are all that distinguish our private selves from the absolute ego of pure apperception" (CP 5.235).

We can understand such a remark, in accordance with the general approach adopted by Peirce, as an expression of the rejection not only of Cartesian dualism and its claimed special mental faculties but also of Kantian transcendentalism—the unexperienceable self, which is presupposed by every experience—but saving what is most original in Kant's theory: the self as a formal condition, as a structure, the principle of the unity of consciousness. From this perspective, moreover, we can shed light on the mechanisms by which error and ignorance give rise to a "self"-thought. The principle of unity of consciousness requires that contradictory inputs be reconciled, unified. The conflicting thoughts that originate in communication and perception cause the dawning of self-consciousness, because this way there is no contradiction in reality but in the representation of it that the self builds within the domain of representation the conflict is located and solved.

Spreading the Theory

Peirce did not claim to have said the last word on the subject. He was well aware that his account was only one attempt to explain the process involved and, as such, could merely be considered as a plausible hypothesis: "The only essential defect in this account of the matter is, that while we know that children exercise as much understanding as is here supposed, we do not know that they exercise it in precisely this way. Still the supposition that they do so is infinitely more supported by facts, than the supposition of a wholly peculiar faculty of the mind" (CP 5.236).

Interestingly enough, nevertheless, recent empirical findings in social psychology offer an unexpected support both to the general approach to the subject matter—the self as a social product, linguistically mediated—and also (though only partially) to the sort of stages in the development of self-consciousness Peirce argued for. No doubt, the influence of symbolic interactionism, especially the work of G. H. Mead in Mind, Self, and Society, which concerned itself with an account of the social character of the self in its origins, is not alien to this outcome—and may be a linkage between Peirce's insights and current research. My purpose, in the remainder of this paper, will be to expand Peirce's views by presenting this new evidence. In so doing, I expect his view on self-consciousness and self to be improved and brought to the foreground of philosophical discussion.
First of all, as Peirce claimed, the presence of a sense of "one's self" in the prelinguistic child has been experimentally demonstrated. As Peirce thought, this rudimentary "self" is closely related to the sense of one's body, both perceptively and by means of the ability to influence the environment through one's movements.

The first stage in the awareness of the self is somatic, organized around kinesthesia, proprioception, and other bodily activity. The infant soon discovers that external objects—especially those moving, vocalizing, variable ones that are persons—are instrumental in relieving bodily stress. Reafferent feedback provides the child with its first evidence that an event may be contingent on its own performance. When it closes its eyes the world disappears. When it cries a face appears. (Crook 1985:251)

This primitive, prelinguistic self-awareness has been detected using behavioral tests, as Peirce required. One of the most important experimental designs to this goal has been the use of mirrors (Lewis and Brooks 1979). The procedure consists in confronting the infants with their mirror images, after having marked their noses surreptitiously with rouge, and observing subsequent behavior. Self-directed behavior—that is, behavior directed to one's own body, particularly the face—is considered a sign of a rudimentary self-concept. As a matter of fact, such a behavior involves not only self-recognition, in assessing the mirror image as an image of one's self, but also an ability to show surprise in discovering something unexpected. The results confirm what Peirce claimed: before mastering the language (which occurs at about twenty-four months), children reach a concept of self. "Below 12 months almost no infant responded to the red mark as a result of observing itself in the mirror, but beyond this age there was a rapid development in nose-directed behavior (25 percent of 15–18 month-old infants, 75 percent at 21–24 months)" (Crook 1985:251–52).

On the contrary, if the mark was placed in other parts of the body, apart from the face, the results were completely different, without such self-recognition. This could indicate the adaptive pressure in a social species to solve the problem of identification of its members and the important function played by the capability to discriminate different faces—one's own included.7

Similar phylogenetic reflections arise in considering the results of these same experiments performed with rhesus monkeys and chimpanzees. In an identical experimental situation as that of children, rhesus monkeys showed no sign of self-directed behavior, while chimpanzees touched their noses, evidencing a degree of self-recognition and the ability to detect a change in the normal appearance equivalent to that of children (Gallup 1972).

All this suggests that this prelinguistic concept of self, this rudimentary self-consciousness, shared both by chimpanzees and children below two years old, is to a large extent phylogenetically fixed, as a consequence of the social nature of anthropoids. At the next stage of the development of self-consciousness—the linguistic one—where human self-consciousness in its whole richness appears, we can find the clues for an understanding of the phylogenetic process that culminated with the dawning of humanity in evolution. In other words, to deal with the problem of the origin of self-consciousness in evolutionary history, in its full, specifically human sense, we must be concerned with the problem of the origin of language, since, as Peirce also suggested and as human ontogeny shows, it is through the mediation of language that self-consciousness arises. I do not mean it to be an instance of the principle that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, at least without qualification. This is the subject of another study. Let me simply say here that any nativist view of the origin of language is inadequate, because language develops only through linguistic stimulation in social interaction.

It is time, therefore, to address the linguistic stage in the process to self-consciousness. Peirce relied upon the experiences of error and ignorance to account for the appearance of a full notion of self at this moment. I want to present the account developed by Harré (1987), which, though placed at a more abstract and sophisticated level, strongly resembles Peirce's remarks. Although his work takes into account recent findings in social and developmental psychology, Harré himself acknowledges his debt to Mead and Vygotsky (another psychologist concerned with the social character of the human mind) in considering language as a tool that, in addition to the function of communication, serves the
function of thinking, through a process of "internalization." Harré follows a similar tactic as that used by Peirce; the idea of "self" is not immediate and direct but is a social product, the result of inferences, motivated by the social relations in which others are involved, carried out frequently through language. Harré contends that the unifying notion of "self" stems from the social concept of "person." He tries to show how the concept of person can appear without presupposing an inner self. He distinguishes three types of situations in that process: "First, people treat babies as persons from the moment of their first appearance. . . . Second, by copying every word and gesture as best he can, a baby seems to be treating those around him as persons. Third, among the ways of speaking and acting that a baby imitates is the way in which other people treat him as a person" (Harré 1987:101).

The key notion in this account is that of "treating babies as persons." Harré spells it out in three modes of linguistic interaction. First, there is the practice of naming. Second, there is the "psychological symbiosis" phenomenon, studied by developmental psychologists (Shotter and Newson 1974), which consists of adults, particularly mothers, who interact with their offspring in terms of psychological attributes that they assign to the infant" (Harré 1987:101), including cognitive capabilities, preferences, character, and sensibility. Although the scope of this phenomenon is greater, it involves an obvious linguistic dimension: adults "talk" to infants, attributing to them such psychological traits, long before their mastering of language. Third, treating somebody as a person involves judging his or her actions, preferences, and decisions. The outcome of being treated in such ways is that the child becomes a member of the group, a unique individual, and recognizes himself or herself as a person.

How is it possible, then, to go from the mastering of the concept of person, through the different situations just sketched, to that of a self? In Harré's view, the use of proper names and pronouns to refer to one's self—the "I," in particular—learned in the process of being treated as a person and used by the child as well, gives rise to a special kind of problem: that of "epistemic warrant." When a child says, "I'm tired," he or she must face the possibility of being contradicted or disbelieved; doubts about what was said may arise among the child's interlocutors.

Once again, we can recognize the similarity with Peirce in the fact that the conflict is placed completely at the linguistic level, instead of between the perceptual and the linguistic. At this point, Harré presents an explicit account of how this confrontation leads to the concept of self.

In effect, in being contradicted, Harré argues, children are forced to reflect on, and justify, the basis for their assertions; and to express the outcomes of their deliberations, they must use a language game in which, instead of one pronoun, there appear two: "I'm sure I'm tired," or "I have no doubt I'm tired." The problem now is that while the first pronoun refers to the child as a public person, what about the second? Harré (1987:105) describes the consequences this question may have for the child in the following way:

I am quite used to keeping my thoughts and feelings, sensations and opinions, to myself. For me, the distinction between public face and private being is routine. No wonder, then, that I am inclined to slip into following the model all the way, and am likely, therefore, to fall prey to the idea that there is an inner self to which my private thoughts and feelings are annexed.

Self-consciousness, accordingly, is the result of becoming competent in the use of certain grammatical forms, that of "direct knowledge," required in the normal practice of linguistic interaction and consisting of a certain unifying perspective. As for Peirce, though less cryptically, the conception of the self that emerges for Harré opposes the traditional ones—Cartesian and Kantian—in favor of the notion of "self" as inner entity. It is conceived as "a centered organization of thought, feeling, actions, and memory" (Harré 1987:105); in other words, the "unity of consciousness" principle again but without any transcendental dimension.

In my view, Harré's argument can be paraphrased for the other aspect of self-consciousness, the practical one. It is not only in questions of epistemic warrant that such "special" judgments take place; they also take place in justifying wantings, decisions, desires ("I wish I were a better player," "I have decided X because I want Y," "I did such-and-such because I believe so-and-so to be good," etc.). Acknowledging this can be the first step toward the development of a nonreductionist theory.
of action, according to which behavior is not just a mechanical consequence of "efficient mental states" but the outcome of a deliberative process of critical assessment of opportunities, values, and goals.

The fact that the self is a social product does not entail a kind of determinism of the subjective sphere, in the sense that whatever is thought is externally determined. As Peirce remarked, thinking is a semiotic process, that is, a process driven by the meaning of the symbols involved, so that external facts can influence thinking only through the meanings the subjects attach to them. What is socially determined, accordingly, is the symbolic world characteristic of a society, and socialization can be understood as the process of acquiring competence in such a world—of learning the rules, the norms, the rites, and the rites that constitute the society.

Therefore, we do not need a metaphysical notion of "free will" (parallel, for Kant, to that of "transcendental self," both being "truths of the practical reason") to guarantee the personal dimension of action we are so familiar with. Our becoming persons brings about our development of a self, of a personal perspective, which allows us to decide, to some extent, who we want to be and what we want to do.

To sum up, Peirce's views on self-consciousness as a mental structure resulting from the social dimension of mind and the semiotic character of thought can still shed light on the nature of our conceptions of self. As a matter of fact, his conception has recently received support from the unconnected work of developmental and social psychologists. My contention, therefore, is that the study of Peirce's views of the self should not be seen as merely "backward history"—honoring thinkers of the past for ideas that have been developed only recently. On the contrary, considering the unsatisfactory situation concerning the current views on the consciousness of the self, I have tried to give credit to the originality and insight of Peirce's views on this subject.

Notes

1. See Jackendoff 1987, a recent representative of this attitude, where the main "solutions" to this "problem" are presented and criticized and his own alternative account is developed.

2. A distinguished example of this approach is Underwood and Stevens 1979.

3. An interesting review of the claims of these thinkers is Harraway 1988.

4. Such an attempt has been made by Singer (1982).


6. Peirce took this observation from Kant, but he failed to develop the role of pronouns in the development of self-consciousness.

7. Chomsky (1980:chap. 5) argued for the existence of an innate faculty designed for this specific purpose.

8. This is the standard notion of behavior explaining in cognitive science, what is called folk psychology: "X did p because he or she desired that q and believed that if p then q." One of its most influential defenders is Davidson (1969).

References


