

## The Human Self: A Mare's Nest

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As an undergrad, I read a lot of stuff not required for class. OK, perhaps I read a lot of other stuff *instead of* what was required for class-but whatever the historical practice, in some novel by CS Lewis I came upon the phrase 'a mare's nest'. The character was trying to explain the human self and he said it was 'a mare's nest'. From the context I surmised it was the result of a horse lying down in high grass to sleep. (I'm from the suburbs.) It would be a swirly pattern but with a hole at the bottom. The human self is a complex functionality that refers to itself in its functionality, but at the center it held a hole, an opening out onto the rest of reality. I liked this definition. Later, I learned I was probably wrong, in that the phrase is defined officially as 'an illusory discovery', like the recent discovery of a way to do cold fusion in your kitchen sink. It turned out not to be the case-much disappointment. But not for us. I think my two definitions can go together, and stand the tests of wise philosophy and stringent science. With appropriate adjustment I think we can come to understand the human self as a thing that is also a no-thing, or organized around a 'hole' in itself, and basic to this we can come to understand the self as an illusory discovery, in a very important and delightful sense. Let us start in reverse order, with the illusory discovery. This requires that we do a quick survey of the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce.

As we know, Peirce early on in life discovered that reality is constituted by three universal categories. In experience they are quality, fact and law, or regularity. In relational terms they are monadic singularity, dyadic collision and triadic mediation. Metaphysically he named them Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, and these names stand for the three dimensions of reality, namely, possibility, actuality and generality. The largest departure from Modern philosophy here is the addition, and assertion, of Thirdness or generality as real. It is

not an object, but it generates effects, as determining to some degree the qualities and facts that do occur. This makes him a Realist in a Nominalist world.

Secondly, by his searching investigation of logic in philosophy and the world in science, Peirce came to see that these real universal categories can in no way be ascribed to the mind alone, or even primarily, but “are inherent in nature, and that the constituting agent must itself be a phenomenon constituted in the ongoing process of the world” (Parker 1998, 112). As this agent, this self, is constituted by the categories in the process of the world, it is well to pay a moment’s attention to how exactly this process works-and what exactly its nature might be.

This process is of course semiosis, or sign-action. We want to think of the self as primarily a sign. Peirce contended that every sign has three parts: the sign itself, the object it represents, and the interpretant or effect it proffers to any mind that would ‘read’ (or receive) it. A vast and wonderful elaboration of this definition exists, but for our purposes we need only note three things: first, semiosis is a system –in that interpretants that are received, to whatever degree, become new signs which beget new interpretants which become new signs, etc. etc. *ad infinitum*. Thus semiosis is a continuous and infinite system with its own generative power. As Parker says, the “elements of semeiotic allow us to describe the world as a living continuum of symbols. It generates its own interpretants, thereby extending the process into the infinite future” (Parker 1997 167). Reality is the result of this process, and as the self is real, we begin to understand its context. It is part of this and so is best understood to be ...”a continuum, a sign in a continuous semeiotic flow” (Parker 1998, 122).

Second, such a system requires a broader conception of *mind*, broader than one that restricts ‘mind’ to our own brains, or selves. Mind, or ‘mindedness’ encompasses all reality. First, in terms of mind, Peirce defined mind, or ‘Quasi-mind’ as he sometimes called it, as

“anything capable of producing an interpretant of a sign” (Parker 1997 164). Anything then that can respond to signs in terms of their proffered effects is in this sense ‘minded’. Anything that does this is in this sense ‘thinking’. A quote from Peirce and a quote from Agler show the breadth of this mindedness. Peirce says that

Thought is not necessarily connected with a brain. It appears in the work of bees, of crystals, and throughout the purely physical world; and one can no more deny that it is really there, than that the colors, the shapes, etc., of objects are really there...(CP 4.551/Deacon 1976, 3).

Rocks respond to the effects of the physical processes that create them; crystals respond to the effects upon them in terms of their own molecular structures, as self-generative, and bees do their directional dance, in response to the effects upon them of their environment, and they do this in terms of their own internalized semiotic code, which works, as other bees go off in the right direction. Reality, as semiotic, is so minded, and so active, and so are we.

This leads us to a better understanding of the process of the world and how we come to know it. It is that the *“principles of signification.... are more fundamental with regard to the unity of consistency than the particular consciousness in which it occurs or any human will that it is associated with...”*(Agler 2006, 3). In reference to Kant’s issue of uniting the sense-manifold by judgment, Peirce found that the key to knowing the world is to recognize that the faculty of representation-of the world to oneself-is constituted by the same capacity already present in the world at large. The unity of manifold we achieve by interpreting the world according to our concepts stands under the standard of the unity already present. Our achievement of any mental unity is the recognition of some portion of this already present unity; or if it is not, this unity will initiate ‘push-back’ to correct our apprehension. If I decide for instance that these four poodles are dogs, the world will concur; if I decide that these three poodles and this iguana are dogs, the world will push back. The self as knowing is here.

Our third point is that the end or goal of this 'mindedness' will take the self beyond itself *natura naturans*, that is to say, its own nature will be to surpass the nature it so far enjoys, as part of the power of signification itself. The only thing to add here for the sake of clarity is how semiotically this 'surpassment' does occur. It is not mysterious and by no means always exalted. Plainly put, Peirce said that in terms of the effect upon any quasi-mind, the interpretant could take one of three forms. It could be either emotional (a feeling), energetic (an action) or logical ("a habit, or general rule that governs future actions" (Parker 1998, 166). For instance, how does a thirsty dog feel when it gets to a river? Emotional effect. What does a thirsty dog do when it gets to a river? Energetic effect. And what will a thirsty dog do whenever it gets to a river? Logical effect. The point here is that the logical interpretant, the habit or general rule, is the most important. As present, it is the basis of present feeling and act, and as threatened, or as in need of change or expansion, it is the goal toward which they tend, and the context of their success or failure. Peirce shows this in one of my favorite lines. He says the "stream of water that wears a bed for itself is taking a habit. Every ditcher so thinks of it" (CP 4.492/Parker 1998, 166) and the ditchers are right. Water, in responding to the effects (and especially the habitual effects) of the environment around it, will wear for itself a habitual course of flow, and the stream will then *be*. The self will do the same, in a vastly more complex manner, and we will touch upon this in a moment, when we speak of *personality*. Here we only remember that even personality and its process are not separate from the semiotic process itself. We are signs (self-conscious signs) in a sign system, the only question left on this level is that if there are different kinds of signs, what kind of sign we specifically are.

We can answer this In terms of how a sign can be related to its object. Peirce found three possibilities, and so three kinds of sign. If the sign is related to its object by *resemblance*, it is an *icon*. The signs shares qualities with its object-(for instance, the printer button has a little

picture of a printer on it). If the sign is related to its object by some *connection of (existential) fact*, it is an *index*. Peirce's classic example is a weathervane-the little arrow points toward the source and direction of the wind. If the sign is related to its object not by resemblance, nor by existential connection, (though these are necessarily prior and in the background) but by *a set of 'conventions'*-general concepts and practices in a combinatory functionality that prescribe the uses and expectations of the sign and its object, then the sign is a *symbol*, and we are that.

Peirce defines a symbol thusly.

A symbol represents its object in virtue of a convention that governs how the symbol will be used. The only connection between the symbol and its object is that it will be associated with the object in an interpretant; it is "a law, or regularity of the indefinite future" (CP 2.293, 299/Parker 1998, 157).

Symbols then are to be understood primarily as signs of law or regularity. The 'mechanics' of the symbol can be better understood by understanding what Peirce exactly means by 'convention'. Terrence Deacon writes that

Peirce thus describes a symbol as related to its object solely by the convention (literally, "meeting" or "covenant") or rule that, independent of any intrinsic character of either, is shared by both by the very fact of their being convened within the sign relation. In this sense the metaphor of a "covenant" may be helpful, since a covenant is itself not intrinsic to those who are bound together by it, but is rather some idea or agreement that causes persons to join together. (Deacon 1976, 20)

Actually, the point of a symbol is not only to recognize the generality that mediates the sign to its object (which are symbols as well), but to respond to this generality in this situation in terms of its own growth and expansion. "Democracy" for instance, is a symbol-in this case a general idea-that brings individuals together for the sake of self-government, and makes of them citizens. But as a general concept it has its own active capacity in relation to other symbols. So for instance if we understand citizens (at first) to be "white men of property" because only they can think, or only they matter, or they're just the only responsible people we know-democracy

will initiate “push back” and its meaning will (sooner or later) grow. (Here the ‘push-back’ is on the level of law or general concept, in the prior instance it was on the level of fact.) Under its auspices, further feeling and fact will show us that poor people think too, and maybe even matter. After this, further feeling and fact may even begin to suggest that women and black people think too, and we are headed toward crazy land-but with the blessing of democracy. At no point has this symbol contradicted itself, and at every point it has grown in meaning by relating itself to other symbols. This is the best level of semiotic success. Symbols grow by growing together, and they do this by application to other symbols, to the point finally where they beget new symbols, and all of this changes the meaning of the signs involved. In this example, I am a better citizen now, now that democracy is more developed-‘citizenship’ means more, it is more just and truthful. This for Peirce is an example of logical interpretant, logical effect. The self is a symbol, and it is a symbol of this. Agler summarizes this in terms of ‘person’, he says

The person is a symbolical unity: a symbol growing into another symbol. It is a process embodied in existence, one that directs, influences, but never forces the index towards an end through the organization and selection of the possibilities that are found in it. (Agler 2006, 8)

We, as individuals, with our personalities, are the indexes. We as individuals are engaged in this personal quest which is also our context, and our goal, in a manner wherein ‘our’ and all else are continuous.

It is at this point that we should discuss personality and experience, as individual. We remember our context. In terms of Peirce’s categories, individuality and existence are moments and examples of Secondness. But they are such within the semiotic process. The semiotic process is fundamentally phenomenal, or sign-based, and this ‘phenomenality’ both is and is responsible for whatever else is and will so become. Individual experience in this sense is the phenomenality we experience by our own private processes, the semiotic habits that have been

built, or that we have built, or that we are building or should build, within ourselves. All phenomena are triadic signs of prior triadic signs, as described above, and as such are representations of representations. The point of personality is that the human, symbolic self has evolved its own set of rules of transformation which come into play in terms of the rest of the real. As Parker says, the “result of any process of representation is determined both by what is represented and by the rules of transformation that are applied to that kind of representation” (Parker 1998 126). These rules of transformation are ‘personality’. This definition pretty much explains why the “meaning a situation has...depends largely on the personality of the interpreter” (Parker 1998 126) in our individual experience. But it does not allow us to dissociate these rules of transformation from the rest of the semiotic world. “The general rules that shape the significance of any phenomenon” (Parker 1998, 126) are the semiotic substance of the self, but they are always relationally participant in the project of semiosis itself. Triadic functionality will out-this fact is the basis of the all the confirmation and all push-back, as described above. This situation allows us to say one last thing about the nature of the self, and that is that in terms of fulfillment, the self is a *developmental teleology*. It is to be understood primarily as destined-rightly and without violence-to embody this symbolic growth as this growth requires.

Given all this, we can finally see how the self is an illusory discovery-the second part of our Mare’s Nest definition. In so far as we desire it to be only of an objective nature, we will be disappointed. And in so far even that we desire it to be ultimately independent and individual, the magisterial subject over a passive world, we will be doubly disappointed. The self is objective, and it is subjective, but neither characteristic nor their sum explains the self that is a person, not ultimately. Deacon sums it well. (The ‘dyadic epistemology’ he refers to here is the

Nominalist understanding of the world as being only real quality and fact, without real generality or law.) He says

Perhaps the most important consequence of the pragmatist positions is the recognition that the notion of an individual mind, the solipsistic cogito, is an illusion produce(d) by analyzing mind through the constraints of a dyadic epistemology. For Peirce, it must be understood in terms of a complex sign-process whose identity or “personality” is experienced as a continually evolving seme (that is, an initially qualitative presence) within this process. From this perspective it is nonsensical to regard personhood as something distinctly individual or even in any important way isolated (from) the world. As a sign a person is that which mediates between signs, being brought into existence by and bringing into existence other signs. As Peirce points out, signs are punctuations or instances of the general continuous character of the thought process, or more generally, semiosis (Deacon 1976, 33-parenthesises mine).

The human self is called to be this person, and to be personal in this semiotic manner is our joy, or at least the unavoidable basis of it. The delight of this is that we are, and can consciously be, lead participants in the semiotic project that has constituted and fulfills our human nature, our self. Meaning, on this level, is inevitable, and meaninglessness is inevitably some failure of knowledge or nerve. Reality, as semiotic, can be trusted. It is perhaps doubly delightful, in that at no point is any thought of God required for this understanding, but neither is it disallowed. (This is another paper.)

We may now lastly turn to the first part of our Mare’s Nest definition, that the self is a swirl of functionality around a hole or absence at its center. It receives fine treatment in another essay by Terrance Deacon entitled “The Re-emergence of Emergence”<sup>i</sup>. (Unfortunately, time and space here require the shortest possible presentation.)

Deacon is concerned with the nature of evolution, and the nature of emergence in it. He presents evolution as a three-stage, hierarchical complexification process, animated by emergence, which he defines as a qualitative change and a higher order functionality. Specifically he says that emergence is “Unprecedented global regularity generated within a composite system by virtue of the higher-order consequences of the interactions of composite



parts” (Deacon 2006, 122). Quickly put, the whole is greater than the parts, and qualitatively different from them. But in each case the new whole is organized around a more complex possibility, a more complex “is not”, which will shape what it is in terms of its future development. He calls it ‘the hole at the wheel’s hub’ in that it provides and explains the wheel itself. In these terms he says about the human self that

Human consciousness-with its features of autonomous causal locus, self-origination, and implicit ‘aboutness’-epitomises the logic of emergence in its very form. Like something coming out of nothing, the subjective self is, in effect, a constitutive absence for the sake of which new constitutive absence is being incessantly evolved. In this sense, there is some legitimacy to the eliminativist claim that there is no ‘thing’ that it is. Indeed this must be so. The locus of the self is, effectively, a negative mode of existence, that can act as an unmoved mover of sorts: a non-thing that nonetheless is the locus of a form of inertia-a resistance to change-with respect to which other physical processes can be recruited and organized (Deacon 2006, 149).

The self, as what has been semiotically achieved as habit, is objective, and it does resist change. Subjectively we know and act on its basis, but we do so on the basis of the constitutive absence appropriate to our nature, which he elsewhere calls ‘the next conceivable possibility’. The human self is a wonderfully unstable stability, oriented (self-consciously even) to ‘the next conceivable possibility’. Obviously, this is the opening at the bottom of the Mare’s Nest, and it is as much a part of the self as all else-and it is the reason for which the self functions. This level of teleology is readily admitted, so we may finally understand this “Mare’s Nest” to be both semiotic and from this, teleological in its development. This is the basis of all experience, and so all experience has the backing and the presence of all else that is, and from this, all that will be, within it. I am hopeful that this presentation has made clear the innate dignity of the self, and what is at moment in every moment of its life.

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Quotations from CP from within Parker are given separated by a "/", as in

CP 4.27/Parker 1998 25.

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