

“Well, thinking and discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound.” – Plato<sup>1</sup>

How is thinking possible? Or, if we understand thinking in Plato’s way, how is it possible to have a dialogue with oneself? Charles S. Peirce accepts Plato’s idea of thinking as self-dialogue, but his idea of self is quite different. He is emphatic about the idea of thought as self-dialogue,<sup>2</sup> though he does not articulate *how* this occurs – but then, neither does Plato. In this paper I will attempt to give an account of how thinking is a dialogue with the self by focusing on using Peirce’s concept of the self. I will lay down how Peirce construes thinking and the self, and then bring those ideas together to extrapolate an answer to the question at hand. What I will *not* do is compare Peirce’s theories with Plato’s; perhaps that will prove an interesting topic during the Q & A, particularly if we should have any Plato scholars in the room.<sup>3</sup>

To begin with, Peirce holds that all thinking occurs in signs.<sup>4</sup> Non-semiotic thought is an oxymoron. He asserts this early on, and maintains it throughout his life. We can only know thoughts by external facts. If I say “X is awful,” it is an expression of a particular feeling by means of a general predicate. This predicate was determined either by the thing itself or by my thoughts before the statement; in any case, something outside the predicate determined it, and the predicate is a means of knowing the feeling it conveys. Thus thoughts occur by way of one sign

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<sup>1</sup> *Sophist* 263e.

<sup>2</sup> See Colapietro, xiv–xv.

<sup>3</sup> Another avenue would have been to contrast Peirce’s view of the self with Descartes’s; Peirce himself does this, and other scholars such as Vincent Colapietro and Christopher Hookway have unpacked it fully.

<sup>4</sup> W2,207–8/CP 5:244–9 “Some Questions Concerning certain Faculties claimed for Man” (1868).

determining other signs, that is, thinking occurring *in* signs (rather than prior to signs).

Peirce argues that thinking takes time.<sup>5</sup> The process of thought involves a series of ideas one after another – in time. If we pay attention, we become aware of how ideas influence each other, and thus we see that time is presupposed in our view of thinking. Anyone will attest that we do not make inferences instantaneously – quickly, but not instantaneously.

To say thinking takes time, Peirce holds, is another way of saying that every thought must address itself to another thought.<sup>6</sup> No sign is self-determining; rather, each one determines other signs, which in turn determine still others. Since there is no absolutely unprecedented thought, there is an infinite stream of consciousness.

Thinking is also future-oriented. This means that one concept triggers several others, which are cognitive effects including one's own possible actions. "Action" here includes how we think, for Peirce regards thought as a kind of action.<sup>7</sup> For example, the idea of sulfuric acid triggers a number of ideas (its corrosive power, its chemical formula, how it reacts to bases,...). Among these ideas is "Don't touch or drink sulfuric acid." If we are handling the acid, this idea determines how we will act around the substance – keep it in a closed container, wear safety gloves and goggles, etc. If we are doing chemical equations, though, we will select the formula and determine how it reacts with, say, sodium hydroxide. In both cases the idea's significance lies in its effect on future conduct. One uses the effects as a

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<sup>5</sup> W<sub>2,207-8</sub>/CP 5.253 "Some Questions Concerning certain Faculties claimed for Man" (1868); W<sub>3,102</sub> "Chapter IV. The Conception of Time essential in Logic" (1-2 July 1873).

<sup>6</sup> W<sub>2,207-8</sub>/CP 5.253 "Some Questions Concerning certain Faculties claimed for Man" (1868).

<sup>7</sup> W<sub>3,265</sub>/CP 5.399 "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878).

rule to determine conduct. In other words, thinking must be future-oriented.<sup>8</sup> Since conduct is deliberate *self*-control of one's thought and action, it follows that thinking *already* incorporates the idea of self.

This brings me to Peirce's idea of the self. We understand that thinking requires self-consciousness, and we usually think of self-consciousness as being immediate. But Peirce argues that this is impossible, on the grounds that ignorance and error betray our awareness of themselves – that is, the self must be *inferred*. Peirce regards the self as essentially a *corrective* mechanism, much like a pair of glasses that help correct vision. It is introduced in the network of inferences after one finds that his beliefs or interpretations are not shared by others. For example, a child is told that the stove is hot; she does not believe it, touches the stove anyway, and gets burned. What happens in this brief lesson? First, the child has two opinions to weigh, her mother's and her own. Second, she decides to test the event in order to find out whose opinion is correct. And third, she determines that her own opinion was false after all. Previously she had taken it for granted that everyone shared the same beliefs; it was only when she heard otherwise – and tested the situation – that she discovered that at least some of those beliefs is not unanimously shared. Only then does the idea of self occur to her. Since this idea of self is not direct but inferred, it is a *mediated* entity.

It's important that the child actually touch the stove; this action demonstrates that she is not merely switching allegiance from her own opinion to her mother's – she wants to know what's really the case, independent of any opinion. This shows the crucial difference of scientific inquiry versus consensus: a reliance on facts. If consensus were truly enough to fix belief, we would literally *never* need to appeal to facts. But all the sciences conduct experiments, even on apparently common-

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<sup>8</sup> W3,107–8 “Chapter V. That the significance of thought lies in its reference to the future” (Summer 1873).

sense notions, and many normal people feel the need to test popular opinions for apparently no other reason than to know that it's not *merely* an opinion. The urge to distinguish truth from opinion is powerful yet underestimated.

For this to happen, the child must know language. Children display powers of thought early on, thus showing that they have the ability to apprehend verbal signs; they learn to understand and make the sounds which constitute language. When they do this, they learn to appreciate the testimony of others – as the hot stove demonstrates.<sup>9</sup> After an experience like that, a child will listen more carefully to what her mother says.

Now it might be objected that children do have a sense of self, as when they are hungry and express a desire for food. But this is not evident; the child simply feels hunger and demands food. She does not necessarily have the concept to say, “*I am hungry.*” Another objection is that children are basically egocentric, i.e. that they view the world as an extension of themselves. But this amounts to saying they cannot be distinguish between self and other unless something opposes them, much less know that anyone thinks differently than them. This is where the significance of testimonies comes in: the child must *learn* that not everyone feels hungry when she does, nor does everyone find the flower beautiful. If we look more closely at how Peirce views appearances, this becomes more comprehensible. The child's field of appearances, what she sees and hears, touches and tastes, are all one *absolute* field. She has no other point of view to compare it against; nor does she regard the facts *as* facts, since she does not disassociate them from herself. This field of appearances is the product of many judgments, interpretations of what she perceives, including judgments about what objects are (“There's a snake in the garden”) and about the qualities of things (“The snake is

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<sup>9</sup> W2,201-2/CP 5.228 – 32 “Some Questions Concerning certain Faculties claimed for Man” (1868).

green”). Direct access to percepts is impossible, we must interpret them: you know the snake is green, not because you see it, but because you judge it so and all evidence supports this.<sup>10</sup> If we had direct access to our percepts, it would be easy to make infallible judgments on appearances; but frequently we must revise our statements (“The snake isn’t red, it’s blue”, or “Oh, it’s really a garden hose”).<sup>11</sup> Until the child receives a testimony that challenges the judgments she has made about her percepts, she simply takes her point of view for granted. It is absolute, the way things are.

Peirce maintains that the self is an inference based on ignorance and error, as evidenced by the conflict between the child’s testimony and her mother’s, followed by the appeal to experience. Because several opinions are required, the self is constituted in a *community*. Let us modify our thought-experiment to clarify this. Suppose Mom is cooking when the doorbell rings. She leaves the kitchen. The child enters and, seeing the glowing coil on the stove, touches it only to get a nasty burn on her fingers. In this case she’s learned that stoves can be very hot, but she doesn’t have anyone’s testimony to compare against her belief. Why should she believe her mother, father, or brother would regard the stove as hot and therefore dangerous? She simply learns from experience. By Peirce’s account, there is no reason to suppose a *self*, for the experience occurs without any testimonies to test.

Since Peirce grounds the Self in ignorance and error, which are inevitable, and since a child always exists as part of a community, the discovery of the self is inevitable. We are neither omniscient nor perfect; the best we can do is minimize the possibility of errors and learn from the ones we do make. Errors are caused by “fortuitous variations of our actions in time.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, chance plays a role

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<sup>10</sup> CP 1.538 “Degenerate Cases” (1903); CP 5.544 “Belief and Judgment” (c. 1902).

<sup>11</sup> CP 7.626–36 “Telepathy and Perception” (1903).

<sup>12</sup> CP 6.86/RLT 217 “Causation and Force” (1898).

in everything we do; we cannot repeat an action exactly, no matter how hard we try. Because Peirce understands thought to consist of a kind of action, errors are bound to occur, which means we are faced with doubt, and hence have conversations with ourselves. We think about something because we aren't completely sure about it.

The self is posited to explain ignorance and error, and even these features are recognized for what they are. Since the self can make true statements about itself, it reveals that it is oriented toward knowledge and truth. True statements don't depend on any opinion because they refer to *real* things. Thus the self is ultimately oriented toward real things. Maybe our perception is correct but our judgments are wrong; in any case, we must distinguish between our perspective on things and the facts themselves. This way, we can fix our opinions. The self therefore has a *corrective* function, namely, to identify truth.

Now one may object that Peirce's definition of truth precludes anything beyond consensus. He famously introduces the notion that truth is that opinion all inquirers are fated or hope to reach in the long run.<sup>13</sup> That said, the long-run theory of truth is held alongside the view that a sign conforms to its object, which is his version of a *correspondence* theory of truth.<sup>14</sup> These definitions of truth are *complementary*; the ultimate opinion reached will conform to its object. Reality – independence from anyone's opinion – is the standard of inquiry, and many selves try to represent real objects correctly. When testimonies differ about something, we voice our disagreements and check them against experience. The self is thus not merely a product of ignorance and error, it is the very means of reaching knowledge and truth.

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<sup>13</sup> W<sub>3,273</sub>/CP 5.406–7 “How to Make Our Ideas Clear” (1878); W<sub>2,99–100</sub> “Venn's *The Logic of Chance*” (July 1867).

<sup>14</sup> CP 5.554 “Truth” (1906). See also EP<sub>2,304</sub> “Kaina Stoicheia” (1904), CP 5.565 “Truth” (1901), and W<sub>2,162</sub> “Questions on Reality” (Winter–Spring 1868).

At this point I should remark that despite the fact that the self is inferred, it is not an illusion. For Peirce, inference is not *mere* inference; everything we know about historical facts is inferred based on hypotheses. Here is this evidence we want to explain, and we suppose that something or someone in the past is responsible for it. To say “Napoleon was a great man” explains the many memorials dedicated to him;<sup>15</sup> even his existence is inferred from a certain body of effects. Moreover, Peirce says *all* thinking begins with a hypothesis, whose effects are anticipated and then tested.<sup>16</sup> If entities were dismissed on their hypothetical status alone, we’d never learn anything new.

Not only are there reasonable grounds for positing the self, it is confirmed by the facts. Indeed it is the *most certain* fact around, since facts are relative – to the self. Facts are identifiable precisely because they relate back to ourselves;<sup>17</sup> we distinguish ourselves from them by saying, “It’s not just me, it’s a fact.” Opinions cannot be checked, facts can. In fact *two* things are tested: the testimonies in question and the idea of the self. Since we posited a self to explain conflicts among testimonies, and that supposition is itself a hypothesis, it too gets put to the test of experience. The more *facts* we determine, the more we distinguish ourselves from appearances, hence the more our own existence is confirmed. A by-product of scientific inquiry, then, is an increasingly stronger sense of self.<sup>18</sup>

Man is a sign, according to Peirce.<sup>19</sup> Life is a continuous series of thought, for living organisms relate in ways never found among inorganic things. For instance, monkeys are tool-users, but no stone is; robots do not give, people do. All thinking

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<sup>15</sup> CP 2.711–4/W4,421–3 “A Theory of Probable Inference” (1883).

<sup>16</sup> MS 754:05 1907, quoted in Ketner, *His Glassy Essence* 294; see also W5,296 “One, Two, Three” (Summer–Fall 1886).

<sup>17</sup> W2,169 “Questions on Reality” (1868).

<sup>18</sup> I mean “scientific inquiry” in the broadest sense, not merely involving people in lab coats.

<sup>19</sup> W2,241/CP 5.314 “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” (1868).

is in signs, and so life occurs in signs. Now man himself is a living, thinking being, therefore man is a sign.

Herein lies the rub. Man, the self, is a sign, and any sign determines other ones. No sign is self-determining. But when you think, you talk to yourself, reflect on some notion, and even revise it. How then do you, a person, have a conversation with oneself? I suggest that *time* must be accounted for: when you think about something now, you are addressing a *future* self. It is like a child walking down the street, tossing a ball up into the air and catching it: the moment the ball leaves her hand comes before the moment she catches it. The child knows full well that nobody else is involved in the game, it's just her. Interestingly, she is not concerned about throwing the ball *ahead* – she's simply tossing it up. For her, it's all here and now, but in fact she and her ball are moving through time as well as space. The ball arcs forward a second as well as a pace. Thinking to oneself is like that: at the moment you determine your own conduct, you refer to a person in the future in terms of conduct. That person in turn refers back to yourself in interpretation; that is, the posited future person is interpreted as yourself. No matter how close together the instants are, they always occur within the present; you might even say the present consists in this connection of past and future, rather than some mathematical point on a timeline. While this is not Peirce's literal definition of the present – he says it is “the existing state of things”<sup>20</sup> – this situation of connectedness is his view of the state of things. English speakers recognize this when using the present continuous tense: when you say “I'm reading a great book right now,” I understand what you mean even though you may not have the book in your hand. The present is less like a mathematical point, and more like an elastic bubble.

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<sup>20</sup> NEM 2/248 (n.d.).



How do we correct ourselves? Thinking is a conversation, that is, a dialogue with oneself; you talk to yourself *as if* to another. In other words, there is a community of one. But if thinking takes time, you correct yourself by addressing an alternative testimony to the future self. The principle determining your future conduct is to test your different testimonies by checking the facts. Thus the self is confirmed twice over. On the one hand, you believe your opinion a moment ago was wrong, and suppose another one; you address a future self in the course of this supposition. On the other hand, by checking the facts you recognize them *as* facts, that is, you recognize them as relative to yourself. Thus experience shows that you constantly prove yourself to exist by the very fact that you must keep checking your own testimonies: you may be sometimes find you're mistaken, but you will always recognize yourself as the one conducting the inquiry.

To sum up: thinking is possible because we become aware of ourselves in a community. A child emerges in the stream of signs, a reasoning but un-self-conscious being. Only in the face of conflicting testimonies does she hit on the idea of self, which is then affirmed through subsequent facts; the idea of the self enables her to recognize facts. By its very nature, the self makes possible the identification of truth, which refers to reality: consciousness of self enables consciousness of reality, and vice versa. The only alternative to this would be to have direct apprehension of reality, which evidently we do *not* possess. Self-correction therefore involves a community of thinkers, which may consist of one individual at two moments. Supposing two conflicting testimonies at two different moments, the self tests them both and determines which (if either of them) is true.

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