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PEIRCE'S MELANCHOLY

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Of Peirce's three primal ontological categories, that of firstness provides the most difficulties. While the dyadic structure of secondness, and its relation to brute interaction, seems fairly straightforward, and while the generality and law-like structure of mediating thirdness is fairly transparent, the elusive and indirectly present realm of firstness remains problematic. Just what role does firstness play in cosmogenesis, or in supporting the structures of the human process? Is Peirce's insistence on the primordality of firstness a symptom of some more pervasive categorial confusion, as argued by Justus Buchler, among others, or does it represent a strategy that is designed to provide a bulwark against a deeper melancholy that continually threatened to undo Peirce? Or, finally, is Peirce's late cosmology, with its incomplete but evocative portrayal of the divine natures, an answer to a more basic sense of loss that is manifest in a number of ways in his personal life and in his categorial structure? In attempting to shed light on these questions I rely on Kristeva's analysis of the presymbolic *chora* (enclosed space or womb), that lives as the seed bed for all forms of signification but which is itself outside of any signifying process. The *chora* is seen as the lost object that lives at the hidden origin of all forms of signification and that propels the human process backward, as it were, toward a realm that is dimly sensed on the edges of all interpretants. At the same time, I allow Peirce's own categorial structure to put pressure on Kristeva's excessively personal and anthropocentric reading of semiosis in nature. This in turn makes it possible to find a clearing between the pragmatic and psychoanalytic readings of signification.

Biographical reflection on Peirce has been hampered by an unwillingness to probe into the more destructive and community destroying aspects of Peirce's multi-layered personality. This reticence, perhaps a manifestation of a misplaced piety, works in consort with a wariness about the appropriateness of psychoanalytic categories in general, and, in particular, as they are used to confront an independent categorial scheme. The general sentiment seems to be that the correlation between Peirce's psychological demons and his almost Napoleonic categorial array is tenuous at best. Any attempt to show how his primal categories reveal fundamental aspects of his own

psycho-sexual development can be met with the charge of reductionism. Unfortunately, the misuse of such a psychological strategy can only cloud the categorical structures and blunt the equally legitimate efforts to probe into their own strength and power. Therefore, a certain caution must be exercised in what follows so that reductionism, with its own implied principle of psychic determinism, can be avoided. By the same token, the richness of Peirce's own categories must be seen in terms of their positive creative force within Peirce's own struggles toward illumination. I assume that a philosophical perspective is not only a symptom of an underlying pathology, but is, more importantly, a creative response to a distress that can be partially ameliorated through the transforming power of appropriately general categories.

To set the existential tone for what follows I quote a significant passage from Joseph Lancaster Brent III's 1960 dissertation, "A Study of the Life of Charles Sanders Peirce", where he gives his assessment of Peirce's character (p. v):

In temperament Peirce was impulsive, violent and arrogant. When speaking he habitually dropped his "g's" thereby adding to the general air of devil-may-care gentility which he affected. His style of conversation was obscure and full of riddles and paradoxes, but for the listener who seemed taken in by his manner, he felt only contempt. He indulged a corrosive rabelaisian sense of humor upon slight provocation. Peirce's oracular pronouncements, his arrogance and impulsiveness made him a suspect acquaintance and a difficult friend, but these same characteristics together with his handsome and glossy appearance made him a ladies man of considerable reputation. To the great pain of both his wives, he carried on affairs both in and out of marriage.

Peirce was constantly plagued by psychological instability. What he termed his emotional "slush" resulted in a series of nervous breakdowns and made him morbidly dependent on his second wife whom he beat violently at intervals, even, I suspect, when he was past sixty. In fact, Peirce's appearance and actions led friends to believe that he was actually insane....

Brent's analysis compels us to recognize the presence of powerful psychological forces at work in Peirce, forces that were never fully brought under the self-control that he strenuously sought and that he theorized so much about. A psychoanalytic reading would immediately fasten on his "morbid dependence" on his second wife and his apparent inability to find an integrated relation to the other woman in his life, especially as these women seem to represent flickering shadows of the lost object, the material maternal, that abides within the presymbolic realm. That is, Peirce's complex relational and emotional life is one side of his dual effort to find his way back to a primal realm in which pure possibility and pure feeling heal the breaks within his own nature. The other side of this effort is manifest in his bold categorial architectonic that wants to find the alpha and omega of the divine life, that is, to find the god of love whose own being is deeply relevant to the fissures and breaks within the cosmic order.

His hostility toward women, exacerbated by his seeming dependence on them for some form of validation, points to a primal break within his psyche that his robust semiotic framework struggled to overcome through a form of infinite semiosis in which the abyss opened out by this loss could be filled-in with semiotic material. The

omnivorous quality of his pansemioticism betrays a deeper hunger lying at the core of the self. Thus hunger is only deepened by his psychic inflation in which his ego moves decisively away from the lost object toward an illusory independence that claims mastery of the orders of the world. C.G. Jung (1916: 143) delineates the features of such psychic inflation as they pertain to the loss of a proper sense of proportion and rational autonomy:

The term [psychic inflation] seems to me appropriate in so far as the state we are discussing involves an extension of the personality beyond individual limits, in other words, a state of being puffed up. In such a state a man fills a space which normally he cannot fill. He can only fill it by appropriating to himself contents and qualities which properly exist for themselves alone and should therefore remain outside our bounds.

The inner logic of psychic inflation, in which the ego assumes powers and potencies that lie beyond its legitimate scope, points toward a lost object that hovers on the edges of conscious awareness providing both a taunt and a lure. Insofar as the ego cannot sustain genuine independence against the forces of the lost object it will puff itself up with content from the unconscious that gives it an illusory sense of god-like independence and superiority. Peirce's legendary arrogance can be understood to represent a defense against the gnawing sense of loss felt at the core of the self. Among the many possible responses to this loss, that of psychic inflation assumes priority whenever the needs of the imperial ego cannot be met through external forms of interaction.

Peirce's unrelenting efforts to create and defend a novel and vast conceptual array represent the outward signs of his inner psychic inflation. Insofar as he cannot return to the lost object that manifests itself in the women around him he must fall back on the substitute formation of a semiotic universe in which the sovereign ego regains control of all forms of meaning and communication. The recalcitrance and sheer otherness of the world gets swallowed up by the inflated posturing of the ego. Peirce's well known dandyism, combined with his strong theatrical sensibilities, betray the psychic inflation that marked his dealings with the external world. His philosophy represents both an expression of this psychic inflation and an attempt to overcome it through a recognition that the lost object can return in a new guise on the other side of the frenzy of world semiosis (Corrington 1991).

For Kristeva, philosophy itself is a response to the inherent melancholy of the self as it longs for the lost object. This lost object is not a sign or object within the world but lives as a presemiotic or presymbolic power with its own rhythms and forms of embodiment. In her terms, this lost object, always sought but never found, is the material maternal that is first encountered in the biological mother. Her technical term *chora* harks back to Plato's *Timaeus* where Plato distinguishes among three classes of reality. The first class is that of intelligible and unchanging patterns. The second class is that of generated and visible imitations of the first class. The third class or kind is, in the words of Plato, "...the receptacle, and in a manner the nurse, of all generation". Plato's receptacle is thus the seed bed of the forms and of the material objects in space/time that imitate them. As such the *chora* is neither a form nor an object and is thus not the object or source of signification. It is the ultimate enabling condition of cosmogenesis. Kristeva alters the meaning of the *chora*, confining her analysis to

the human order, and relates it directly to the originating power of intrapsychic life and more explicit forms of signification.

Kristeva contrasts what she calls the "semiotic" with the "symbolic". The realm of the semiotic is that of the prethematic *chora* that moves outward into the forms of explicit signification. The realm of the symbolic is the realm of human cultural codes and languages. The semiotic realm is maternal while the symbolic realm represents the power of patriarchal forms of domination. A better formulation would envision the "semiotic" as equivalent to all forms of signification while the realm of the *chora* would be termed the "presemiotic". However the terms are used, the *chora* stands as a pre-positional realm that makes signification possible (Kristeva 1974: 26):

The *chora* is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e., it is not a sign); nor is it a *position* that represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not yet a signifier either); it is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position. Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm. . . . The theory of the subject proposed by the theory of the unconscious will allow us to read in this rhythmic space, which has no thesis and no position, the process by which signification is constituted.

The *chora*, part of the unconscious of the individual, is pre-positional and presemiotic in its rhythms. It serves to eject signs from its core but refuses to become a semiotic order in its own right. For Kristeva, this deeply heterogenous and rhythmic presence underlies all symbolic positions and forms of language, making them possible in the first place. At the same time, the kinetic and bodily presence of the *chora* reminds the now alienated ego that it comes from a lost source that continues to manifest itself on the edges of symbolic life.

What I argue in what follows is that there is an indirect correlation between the *chora* and Peirce's category of firstness, and that this correlation is most dramatically manifest in Peirce's attempts to find his way to an adequate conception of the divine life as manifest in agape.

In "A Guess at the Riddle", written c. 1890, Peirce examines the various locations and manifestations of his three categories among the innumerable orders of the world. Our immediate concern is with how firstness relates to cosmic structure and the emergence of concrete actualities. Peirce states (c.1890: 1.373):

The first is full of life and variety. Yet that variety is only potential; it is not definitely there. Still, the notion of explaining the variety of the world, which was what they [i.e., the pre-Socratics] mainly wondered at, by non-variety was quite absurd. How is variety to come out of the womb of homogeneity; only by a principle of spontaneity, which is just that virtual variety that is the first.

Firstness is a homogeneity that also contains the restlessness of spontaneity which makes firstness self-othering. Without this internal momentum firstness could not spawn seconds, nor prepare the way for the emergence of forms. In his own reconstruction of Plato, Peirce argues that Platonic forms are emergent from firstness,

but that they are fully developmental and can never stand fully detached from the orders of the world (cf. 1898: 6.194, "The Logic of Continuity".) Firstness is an energized receptacle that gives birth to its own other through a series of spontaneous irruptions that have no intrinsic teleological patterns. Purposes are emergent from the realm of firstness, but it would be saying too much to say that firstness, as pure possibility, is itself purposive. I use the quasi-Hegelian notion of self-othering deliberately here as it is the means by which firstness can spawn orders of relevance that come to form the manifest world.

In his 1891 *Monist* article, "The Architecture of Theories", Peirce makes further claims about the inner momentum of firstness and its relation to subsequent emergents within a continually evolving universe (1891: 6.33):

It [i.e., Cosmogonic Philosophy] would suppose that in the beginning--infinitely remote--there was a chaos of unpersonalized feeling, which being without connection or regularity would properly be without existence. This feeling, sporting here and there in pure arbitrariness, would have started the germ of a generalizing tendency. Its other sportings would be evanescent, but this would have a growing virtue. Thus the tendency to habit would be started; and from this, with the other principles of evolution, all the regularities of the universe would be evolved. At any time, however, an element of pure chance survives and will remain until the world becomes an absolutely perfect, rational, and symmetrical system, in which mind is at last crystallized in the infinitely distant future. [6.33]

Many commentators concentrate on the images of the final sentence, which states that the realm of thirdness will attain a harmonic integrity in the infinite long run. There has been some discussion as to the status of secondness and of novelty at the consummation of history, and as to whether or not a perfect crystal of attained thirds can allow for spoiliative or vagrant traits. Whatever one concludes about these issues, it is important to note that the originating power of pure spontaneity is not something that 'happens' once and for all at the beginning of cosmic history. Firstness is always available in its pure form, as there can be no case of degenerate firstness according to Peirce, and will 'surround' any order of relevance, providing a continual realm of possibility for that order. I do not see the realm of firstness as being a Leibnizian possible world because it is actually efficacious and operative within the world, surrounding everything from interpretants to objects, to the sign using organisms themselves.

The correlation between cosmogenesis and the depth dimensions of the human process are hinted at in Peirce's c. 1893 manuscript "Short Logic", that deals, among other things, with the structures of consciousness and feeling. Moving toward what might be called a conception of the collective unconscious Peirce states (c.1893: 7.558):

Thus, all knowledge comes to us by observation, part of it forced upon us from without from Nature's mind and part coming from the depths of that inward aspect of mind, which we egotistically call *ours*; though in truth it is we who float upon its surface and belong to it more than it belongs to us. Nor can we affirm that the inwardly seen mind is altogether independent of the outward mind which is its Creator.

The concept of mind, whether that of nature or of the illusory human ego, conjures up conceptions of thirdness, but I suspect that there is a strong element of firstness implied, and this is not simply the firstness of thirdness, but actually points back to the realm of pure feeling and spontaneity that is presemiotic even while 'hungering' to manifest itself in semiotic orders of interaction. The *chora* or receptacle is found not only at the beginning of cosmogenesis, but at each step of the process of the growth of concrete reasonableness. By the same token, so I would argue, it is found in the depth dimensions of the psyche and lives at the contact point between nature's mind and the human ego. Peirce's position in this manuscript is similar to that of Aristotle in his *De Anima*, where the correlation between *Nous* and the soul of living things, especially rational and intelligent things, is hinted at. Were I to speculate further, I would find an intimate correlation between the alpha and omega point of the divine life and the depth dimensions of the human psyche. Underneath both of these actualities one can point to the eternal self-creating of an evolving universe (cf., 6.502 & 6.506). Firstness would thus be seen as the primal ejective and self-othering power that is 'behind' cosmogenesis, the growth of the divine natures, and the depth dimension of the self.

Peirce's search for the realm of pure feeling, pure possibility, and pure spontaneity manifests itself as well in his phaenoscropy where the basic self-giving traits of the phaeneron are sought. If pure firstness can only be 'found' through a process of prescinding, it follows that it has only an elliptical presence within experience and manifests itself through elusive traces that appear on the edges of awareness. Why, one could ask, did Peirce return again and again to the notion that all manifest traits within the world are emergent from something only indirectly manifest? There are certainly passages in the later Peirce that lend themselves to a neo-Platonic reading in which whatever is manifest is a concrete emanation seeking to return to its hidden yet still felt origin. In fact, Peirce goes so far as to argue that god must push us away from the powers of origin precisely because we struggle to return before we are ready (cf., 6.507 where he refers to the work of Henry James Sr.).

The inner momentum of the ejection of reality from a hidden origin and the movement outward, and perhaps backward, toward a reconciliation is stated clearly in Peirce's 1893 *Monist* essay, "Evolutionary Love" (1893: 6.288):

The movement of love is circular, at one and the same impulse projecting creations into independency and drawing them into harmony.

Agape moves in two directions. Its initial impulse is a direct form of firstness in which it ejects creations into their own autonomy so that they can experience the dyadic and brute interactions of secondness. Its secondary act is to take those very same now autonomous creations and gather them together under the power of continuity which is the ground and motor force of thirdness. Eros works in the opposite direction and moves from the imperfect, the created orders of the world, toward the more perfect. The more perfect infects the less perfect with desire, a position adopted by both Plato and Aristotle, and energizes the movement toward harmony. Agape, at least in Peirce's reformulation, is more basic than eros in that it underlies the very principle of individuation that makes uniqueness possible in the first place. While it would be a violation of the subtlety of Peirce's argument to equate

agape with firstness, it is important to note that there is a similar argument animating his accounts of the depth dimension of the psyche, of cosmogenesis, and of the role of love in the orders of creation. I am not persuaded that Peirce believed in creation out of nothing, as he argued that the concept of creation is one that is not confined to a pretemporal or prematerial stage and is thus fully operative in each stage of cosmogenesis (cf. c.1906: 6.506). The ejective power of agape is commensurate with that of primal firstness and has the same hunger to generate offspring.

Of course, for Kristeva, the *chora* is deeply heterogenous and engages in a continual process of self-fission in which its contents are being continually spilled out into the realms of signification. The symbolic realm, the "name of the father", is what it is precisely because it represents a flight away from the dark and heterogenous realm of the *chora*. Once a sign has emerged from the bodily rhythms of the *chora*, it cannot return and must earn its keep by moving from the original position (representamen) toward the innumerable interpretants that await it in the social and cultural orders. Kristeva ignores the natural enabling conditions of semiosis in the realms of biosemiotics and phytosemiotics and privileges the human standpoint to an almost absurd degree, but she has probed successfully into the inner logic of the *chora* and its relation to its own alienated products. By now the connecting links to Peirce should be more obvious.

For Peirce, the realm of interpretants moves in and through the intelligible continuities of thirdness. To be an interpretant is already to participate in some thirds, however muted or degenerate. The original position of the representamen is underway toward thirdness and has its own teleological fulfillment in the realm of interpretants. Firstness is both an ejective ground, a ground that combines homogeneity with heterogeneity through the principle of spontaneous production, and an always available seed bed of possibility that surrounds any given sign with a penumbra of available meanings and powers. I think that it is a mistake to see firstness as simply the place from which an object or a sign has come. Peirce's formulations suggest that firstness is also the place toward which things are moving.

In what sense, then is firstness the lost object or the material maternal and how can this correlation shed light on Peirce's existential crises and on his categorial structures which are, at the very least, a sustained response to these crises? A few words from Kristeva are in order here (1987: 13 & 43):

Let me posit the "Thing" as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated. . . . Signs are arbitrary because language starts with a *negation* (*Verneinung*) of loss, along with the depression occasioned by mourning. "I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother", is what the speaking being seems to be saying. "But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her I have not lost her (that is the negation), I can recover her in language".

The lost object is the origin of all difference and haunts the autonomous self as a reminder of the essential loss of the mother. The promiscuous and expanding realm of interpretants represents a flight away from the lost object. Yet the logic of this momentum is more complex. The flight from, or murder of, the lost object makes the

life of signification possible. Yet this negation of the hidden origin, an act that is renewed over and over again, is tinged with a primal melancholy that reminds the signifying self that its autonomy and its life among thirds is a betrayal of the originating bodily rhythms of its life. By an ironic and tragic logic, the self attempts to return to the material maternal via the plenitude of signs that mark its outward involvements with cultural codes and, so I would add, natural semiotic systems. On a deeper level it is possible to see the drama of creation in these same terms. We are reminded of St. Paul's vision of creation as groaning and living in travail as it awaits transfiguration.

I am persuaded that Peirce felt this melancholy in an especially acute way. His struggles to shape and define a concept of firstness, as pertinent to all orders of the world, represent his drive to overcome the "name of the father", that is, the realm of cultural codes and interpretants, and return to the lost origin that continued to haunt his categorial speculations. This lost origin, this pure firstness, is not only an antecedent structure, both logically and temporally, but a presence that awaited Peirce in the future, in the omega point where god's love would gather up the broken self outside of the tragic diremptions of secondness and outside of the intelligible judgments of thirdness. In this sense, firstness lives in what Ernst Bloch called the *noch nicht sein*, the not yet Being, that comes to the self from the open future.

Existentially, Peirce's failure to remain faithful to either of his wives, and his repeated and often tragic conflicts with the women in his life, reenacts the drama of the lost object and its continual hold on the self. If the lost object cannot be found in the plenitude of interpretants, then it will be sought in the concrete expressions of the material maternal that promise a release from melancholy. At the same time, these persons will fail to wash away the melancholy that seeks pure firstness and will in turn become the object of rage. In the words of Kristeva (1987: 5):

The disappearance of that essential being continues to deprive me of what is most worthwhile in me; I live it as a wound or deprivation, discovering just the same that my grief is but the deferment of the hatred or desire for ascendancy that I nurture with respect to the one who betrayed or abandoned me.

Peirce's melancholy is thus manifest in two ways. First in his quest for the bodily presence of the material maternal that will free him from the wound of autonomy, and second, in his aggressive drive to fill the universe with a complex semiotic, tied to a triadic categorial structure that is consummated in a vision of a loving god who awaits both the self and the creation at the end as well as at the beginning of time.

Psychic inflation, manifest in the ironic tension between the flight away from and yet toward the lost object, gives way before a transformed vision in which the Gospel of love overcomes the Gospel of greed. The inflated self is not so much overcome as it is brought into intersection with other selves who are now no longer mere masks for the material maternal. Insofar as Peirce was able to enter into the implications of his own communal theory, and thereby to break momentarily free from psychic inflation, he found a more genuine answer to his melancholy than the illusions of frenzied semiosis. The answer comes from the spirit of love. Let us give Peirce the last word (1893: 6.289):

Everybody can see that the statement of St. John is the formula of an evolutionary philosophy, which teaches that growth comes only from love, from I will not say self-*sacrifice*, but from the ardent impulse to fulfill another's highest impulse.

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