A lantern for the feet of inquirers: The heuristic function of the Peircean categories

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The dry light of intelligence is
manifestly not sufficient to determine
a great purpose: the whole man goes into it.
(*CP* 7.186)

Introduction

C. S. Peirce maintained that all thought takes the form of dialogue (see, e.g., *CP* 6.481; *CP* 5.546) and repeatedly confessed that his own thinking manifestly assumed that form (see, e.g., *CP* 5.497 n.1). But the principal media of his self-addressed[1] inner conversations were not verbal but visual signs (*MS* 619; *MS* 632; cf. *CN* III, 258–259).[2] It is, thus, quite natural that he was disposed to use the metaphor of light to characterize various aspects of one of his principal philosophical concerns, the articulation of a doctrine of categories. An example of this is evident in the exasperation he expressed in a letter to William James (July 23, 1905): 'It is … entirely inscrutable to me why my three categories have been made *so luminous* to me without my being given the power to make them understood by those who alone are in a condition to see their meaning, — i.e., my fellow pragmatists' (*CP* 8.263; emphasis added).

The aim of this article is to highlight aspects of Peirce's categories ordinarily either overlooked or inadequately stressed even by his most useful commentators. My thesis is that his doctrine of the categories is best understood when this doctrine is viewed as a means by which inquirers can illuminate their footsteps,[3] especially when exploring unfamiliar territory. This is itself a point insufficiently appreciated. Its elaboration and defense require us 1) to emphasize the connection between Peirce's categories and semeiotic; 2) to trace the recursive movement of categoreal analysis so that we undertake the task of considering what the categories are *in themselves* (i.e., in their firstness), i.e., of following the lead of the category

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of firstness in the direction of considering the firstness of the categories themselves; 3) closely allied to this task, to call attention to the originary, evanescent, spontaneous, ineffable, etc. aspects of Peirce's categoreal scheme (*CP* 1.357); and 4) to make plain *how* this categoreal scheme was designed by Peirce to function as a heuristic framework. The upshot is that the Peircean categories are put forth not as a static taxonomic but rather as a dynamic interrogative framework: they are resources for posing questions.[4] Being signs, they have an inherent vitality and, thus, an inherent dynamism: they exert an agency of their own.[5]

The categoreal articulation of semeiotic/the semeiotic status of the categories

In the last several decades, Peirce's writings have won an ever wider audience, above all those writings embodying his general theory of signs.[6] But most other areas of his concern have also garnered scholarly attention,[7] including his doctrine of categories. Indeed, some of the best work in recent decades has been, in my judgment, on Peirce's lifelong efforts to refine his categoreal scheme to the point where it would be not only intelligible but also useful to other inquirers (cf. Esposito 1980 and De Tienne 1995). Though this scheme might appear to some as an abstract and useless formalism, Peirce designed his categoreal scheme for the purpose of serving as a heuristic framework (see, e.g., *CP* 1.543–1.544). In short, he intended his categories to be useful to inquirers, whatever their field of investigation. Though acutely aware of the obstacles,[8] he was tirelessly committed to the task.

His ceaseless efforts in this direction were intimately linked to his passionate preoccupation with signs (Savan 1987–1988; Shapiro 1983). Virtually all informed students of his work are aware of the fact *that* these are linked, that his systematic articulation of a set of universal categories and his investigation into the nature, species, and functions of signs are intertwined. Even so, *how* some of the strands from each were woven together by Peirce merits emphasis here. On the one hand, it is difficult, if not impossible, to miss how pervasive are the Peircean categories in his semeiotic inquiries. His doctrine of firstness, secondness, and thirdness was one of the principal tools by which he opened and cultivated semeiotic as a *field* of inquiry.[9] This point is sharply put by David Savan when he notes that: 'Although Peirce's categories play an important role in every aspect of his thought, they are absolutely vital to his semeiotic. … Semeiotic in all its definitions, divisions, trichotomies, branchings and combinations is entirely governed, according to Peirce, by categorial

theory' (Savan 1987–1988: 15). Indeed, the heuristic function of the Peircean categories is perhaps nowhere more evident than in his investigation of signs; at every turn, they are used to goad and guide inquiry, to pose innovative and fruitful questions, to imagine otherwise unsuspected possibilities and overlooked distinctions.

On the other hand, Peirce's doctrine of categories requires for its adequate articulation the terminology of semeiotic. Semiosis is a process of mediation and, accordingly, an example of thirdness; the *category* of thirdness, however, is (like those of firstness and secondness) a species of semiosis. Whatever else they are, the Peircean categories are themselves *signs* operating on a somewhat unusual level. Hence, the status, forms, and functions of the categories themselves are in the end only adequately comprehensible in light of explicitly semeiotic distinctions.[10] For our purposes, those distinctions needed to define rhematic signs are most relevant, since Peirce explicitly defined the categories as 'three distinct and irreducible forms of rhemata' (*CP* 3.422). While the trichotomy of, say, icon, index, and symbol is a categoreally animated and articulated distinction, the triad of firstness, secondness, and thirdness may be conceived as the result of a phenomenological differentiation of semeiotic *tones*. So, the general theory of signs is a categoreally driven inquiry, while the phenomenological derivation of the categories is a semeiotically enmeshed undertaking.

The very derivation of the categories often involved for Peirce a process of reflecting upon our employment of signs and upon what such employment entails (see, e.g., the early but important essay entitled 'On a new list of categories': also *MS* 7, 000014). Though phenomenology as a doctrine of categories is certainly not limited to reflection upon signs, it is legitimate for phenomenology to focus upon semeiosis as a phenomenon (or phaneron) from which to derive the most basic categories. Whatever the selected phenomenon, the derivation of the most general concepts depends upon the identification of the most pervasive features of our experience, while in turn the identification of these features depends upon discriminating what is excessively vague and (in certain respects) elusive. For this reason, it is appropriate to speak of the phenomenological differentiation of *tones*.[11] What warrants speaking of these tones as 'semeiotic' is better introduced below.

To describe the categories as tones is metaphorically to gesture at them in their firstness. Strictly speaking, *to conceive* of firsts or, more exactly, the firstness of these (or any other) thirds is, as such, impossible; for qualitative immediacy falls outside the reach of conceptual articulation. But Peirce's doctrine of categories itself invites us to consider what the categories are in themselves, and not only what they are in reference to

what is other than themselves (be it other orders of conceptuality or the more starkly other domain of experiential compulsion) nor in reference to the ongoing processes of quite complex mediations in which the categories as thirds (as go-betweens) can be seen in their thirdness. This doctrine is recursive (cf. Savan 1987–1988: 13),[12] inviting and even demanding that the doctrine be interrogated in reference to itself, to its others (both relevant experiential designata and rival categoreal schemes), and to the roles which it plays in processes of mediation.

Moreover, what is true of thought in general is preeminently true of categoreal interrogation. 'Thought requires achievement for its own development, and without this achievement it is nothing' (*CP* 5.594). Achievement here means, at least approximately, articulation (translation being one of Peirce's tropes for the process of articulation): 'Thought must live and grow in incessant new and higher translations, or it proves itself not to be genuine thought' (*CP* 5.594). Though the development of thought in this direction is necessary, it is not sufficient. For 'the mind loses itself in such questions [as arise at ever ascending levels of generality] and seems to be floating in a limitless vacuity' (*CP* 5.595). It is, however, of the very nature of thought and, more generally, of purpose (of which thought in the sense intended here is but an exemplification) to make themselves ever more determinate, specific, and concrete, just as it is the nature of thought and purpose to become ever more comprehensive, general, and allied. Hence, Peirce insists that 'the valuable idea must be eminently fruitful in special applications, while at the same time it is always growing in wider and wider alliances' (*CP* 5.595). The Peircean ideal of concrete reasonableness means, at the very least, the effective conjunction of these complementary tendencies.

The categories, though they are themselves principles of articulation, are in some respects ineffable. Though they are aids in making sense out of anything whatsoever, they are to some degree precariously situated on the ever shifting boundary between sense and nonsense.[13] They are more constituting than constituted signs (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1964: 19, 25); thus, they are *possibilities* of significance more than antecedently consolidated meanings or thoroughly certified usages. As possibilities of significance, they are signs in transit, in one instance wandering along a generous, welcoming path, and in the next along a narrow, dangerous ridge. Hence, at one juncture, they merge seamlessly into the flow of our everyday notions, while at another they tumble ever downward into a devouring darkness.

This understanding of the categories apparently runs counter to the understanding of them as necessities. Yet the contrast is not as stark as it might initially appear. For the Peircean categories might be characterized

as necessary possibilities, what we must suppose might be, and also as possible necessities, what we might suppose must be. However they are characterized, the link between the categories and *possibilities* of significance must be stressed.

In themselves, the categories are like all other mere Ideas, 'those airy nothings to which the mind of poet, pure mathematician, or another *might* give local habitation and a name. … Their very airy-nothingness, the fact that their Being consists in mere capability of getting thought [or in some way articulated in some medium, be that medium a mind or something else], not in Anybody's Actually thinking them, saves their Reality' (*CP* 6.455). They are might-be's. They are self-identical because they are self-differentiating; yet, in being self-differentiating, they are among the principles by which what is different from themselves might be identified *and* distinguished.

Though Peirce was a logician who prized precision, rigor, and clarity, he nonetheless maintained that: 'Logic teaches us to expect some residue of dreaminess in the world, and even self-contradictions; but we do not expect to be brought face to face with any such phenomenon, and at any rate are forced to run the risk of it' (*CP* 4.79). Perhaps the categories in themselves (i.e., in their firstness) are integral parts of the residual dreaminess inherent in the world of our experience. They are, at the very least, parts of our dream to make sense of that world (cf. Colapietro 1988), though as such they often seem like *either* fragments of a dream ever resistant to vivid recollection *or* dreams of a totality ever dispelled by irreducible plurality (cf. Rosenthal 1994).

My thesis concerns, then, the identification of the categories via the phenomenological discrimination of semeiotic tones. This involves trying to acknowledge appropriately the firstness of thirds and, thus, involves granting the possibility that the categories are in themselves so vague and general as to be ineffable in some ways. There are three texts of utmost importance for explaining the meaning of my thesis. The first two texts can be readily recalled, while the third needs to be introduced by being contextualized.

First, there is the admission in 'The guess at the riddle' in which Peirce identifies his categories as 'ideas so broad that they may be looked upon rather as moods or tones of thought, than as definite notions, but which have significance for all that' (*CP* 1.355). Second, there is his hesitancy regarding how to categorize the categories themselves: 'Perhaps it is not right to call these categories conceptions; they are so intangible that they are rather tones or tints upon conceptions' (*CP* 1.353). Three metaphors are deployed to highlight the vagueness of the categories — one drawn from the affective order (the categories as moods of thought), a second

from the auditory realm (tones),[14] and a third from our visual experience (tints). Peirce insisted that 'one, two, three are more than mere count-words like *eeny*, *meeny*, *miny*, *mo*, but carry vast though vague ideas' (*CP* 1.362). He even confessed around 1890 that 'at an earlier stage of my studies I should have looked upon the matter here set down [the formal articulation of universal categories and then their systematic application to the main fields of human inquiry] as too vague to have any value' (*CP* 1.364).

Third, there is a formally semeiotic definition of the categories in which their character as tones or tints of thought (i.e., of semiosis) is implicitly registered. This definition is found in an important paper in which Peirce takes pains to present in a clear and convincing manner the need for his logic of relatives. Diagrams assist us in discerning what different forms of relationship inherently involve and also how these different forms might be variously related to one another (including how more complex forms might be reducible to more rudimentary ones). 'Diagrams and diagrammatoidal figures are intended to be applied to the better understanding of states of things, whether experienced, or read of, or [simply] imagined' (*CP* 3.419). That is, they are designed to enhance our comprehension of whatever might be confronted by us, be the object confronted a disclosure of our direct experience or the fabrication of the wildest imagination. Whatever figures function as diagrams 'cannot, however, show what it is to which it is intended to be applied; nor can any other diagram avail for that purpose' (*CP* 3.419). That must be left to the compulsions of experience.[15] Indexical signs are those by which experiential compulsions play an ineliminable role in the always potentially hazardous course of investigation or interpretation. For 'without indices it is impossible to designate what one is talking about' (*CP* 2.295); indeed, 'indices have exclusive reference to objects of experience' (*CP* 2.305). Even so, 'it would be difficult [,] if not impossible, to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality' (*CP* 2.306).

In this paper on the logic of relatives, Peirce is eventually led to the conclusion that: 'if we find three distinct and irreducible forms of rhemata, the ideas of these should be the three elementary conceptions of metaphysics' (*CP* 3.422). Of course, he maintained that we do in fact — and by necessity — find three such forms, as did Kant and Hegel before him. He then went on to define his categories as exemplifications of such forms: 'the ideas which belong to the three forms of rhemata are firstness, secondness, thirdness; firstness, or spontaneity; secondness, or dependence; thirdness, or mediation' (*CP* 3.422).

What does it mean to categorize the categories themselves as rhemata? How does this categorization at least implicitly function as a way of

recognizing that the categories are not so much conceptions as moods, tones, or tints of conceptions? Finally, how will this help us understand better what Peirce himself identified as his one contribution to philosophy?

Categories are conceptions of the utmost generality and vagueness (cf. *CP* 5.43), so much so that their very status as conceptions is problematic. Hence, in deploying the metaphors of mood, tone, and tint, Peirce intended to evoke a sense of what the categories are *in themselves*, in their firstness. 'The idea of second must be reckoned as an easy one to comprehend. That of first is so tender that you cannot touch it without spoiling it …' (*CP* l.358).[16] In trying to grasp the categories in their firstness, then, our very grasp spoils or disfigures to some extent what we desire to hold without such effects. This demands us to concede that: 'An absolutely pure conception of a Category is out of the question' (*CP* 2.86).

Even so, the actual articulation of our most general conceptions within the narrowly circumscribed domain of human discourse will at crucial junctures inevitably become intensely reflexive. It will become a self-conscious, self-critical, and self-transforming process. The question of the ontological status of our conceptions — more precisely, of what aspects or relationships our conceptions allow us to differentiate and thus to identify — is a question around which our thought, in its more intensely reflexive moments, pivots. The continuity between how *we* conceptualize reality and what reality is becomes at such moments problematic.[17] But the supposition that an unbridgeable chasm yawns between our representations of reality and reality itself is, from Peirce's perspective, untenable. The question, hence, is not *whether* the two distinguishable orders are continuous, but *how*. The human mind partakes of the very reality it seeks to know, more fully, this reality being one to which the mind is always already attuned in some primordial way, hence with which the mind is conversant within at least a narrow range of direct involvements (see, e.g., *CP* 5.511). Our minds take part in, and are akin to, reality, because they are part *of*, and generated by, this reality; in their own unique way, they embody in themselves the most pervasive characteristics of the circumambient world. These shared characteristics make possible unbounded inquiry, open to growth in countless directions.[18] These characteristics are, when conceived as irreducible modes of being, the Peircean categories in their ontological import and, when taken as defining features of our universe, the categories in their cosmological significance.

As important as these senses are, they are derivative. The primary sense of the Peircean categories, the sense from which all other interpretations of them derive, is the heuristic one upon which I have been placing so much emphasis. In the paper quoted above, the one in which we

encountered Peirce's characterization of the categories as 'three distinct and irreducible forms of rhemata', we get at least a hint of this. At the conclusion of this essay, Peirce makes a remark about abstraction which is of utmost significance. 'The process consists, psychologically, in catching one of the transient elements of thought upon the wing and converting it into one of the resting places of the mind. The difference between setting down spots in a diagram to represent recognized objects, and making new spots for the creation of logical thought, is huge' (*CP* 3.424). Another way of making this point is to stress the difference between, on the one hand, diagramming or (in some other semeiotic way) marking what is already known and, on the other, using signs to open unexplored fields of inquiry and to mark possible but uncertified objects within these fields. The creation of logical thought is one with the opening of heuristic space and, when once opened, is one with the mapping of the conceivable contours we might encounter when moving beyond the immediate foreground of this uncharted terrain. In a certain respect, Peirce shows himself here to be an heir to both Francis Bacon and René Descartes, for his concern is principally to craft a 'logic of discovery'. The principal objective of a truly scientific logic is to provide not an economical and perspicuous way of codifying and formulating what we already know, but resources for guiding and goading investigation along untrodden paths. It is also to provide the resources for reclaiming in the presence of the most familiar objects, the best known landscapes, that degree of naiveté needed to see anew. Such resources serve to direct and sharpen attention.

An 'analogy, however fanciful, which serves to focus attention upon matters which might otherwise escape observation is valuable' (*CP* 3.470). The categories are, at the very least, sources for such analogies.[19] One irony is that while it is so extremely difficult to focus upon the categories *in themselves*, upon these rhematic signs in their utter firstness, it is virtually impossible to focus upon anything *except in light of* the categories. The categories 'must grow up in the mind, under the hot sunshine of hard thought, daily, bright, well-focused, and well-aimed thought; and you must have patience, for long time is required to ripen the fruit' (*CP* 1.521).[20] But here Peirce is speaking of the categories as philosophically identified, explicated, and defended conceptions of the utmost generality, and as neither the omnipresent features of everyday experience suggestive of these conceptions nor the irreducible modes of being suggested by our philosophical categories. In one sense, the categories do grow as the result of the radiant light of sustained, systematic thought; but, in another sense, they are themselves sources of light, and thus that by which everything is not only visible but also generated. As humanly articulated and useful

conceptions, they grow 'under the hot sunshine of hard thought'. As such, the categories are heuristically propulsive and disclosive devices; but, precisely *as* such devices, they prompt us to suspect that they are not of our own design or making. They are not inventions of ours (cf. *CP* 1.521). Indeed, they originate in something more primordial than the human psyche and operate in something less limited than human discourse. One of Peirce's most technical and, in a sense, narrow definitions of the categories (his definition of the categories as rhemata, i.e., as signs of possibilities) is akin to his characterization in terms of mood, tone, or tint.

Conclusion: Signs of possibility/possibilities of illumination

In the very interstices of actuality there are inscribed an array of possibilities (*CP* 6.63), just as out of an unbounded series of the barest possibilities there erupts the rudest actuality, oblivious to others (see, e.g., *CP* 6.192–6.209). Yet, from our locus in nature and history, purely brute actuality is largely an abstraction, as are purely abstract possibilities. The world of our experience is one of potentialities (grounded rather than abstract possibilities), regularities, rhythms, affordances,[21] and significances as much as one of chance, disruption, opacity, surprise, and compulsion.

Out of the darkness, light. But light too can generate its own darkness or, at least, dullness. For an unvarying source of illumination tends to have a dulling effect on perception, so that our most acute observations depend upon blinking and even altering our perspective, thereby in effect varying the way light plays upon what is being observed. The series of blinks and alterations (however slight) in perspective are in effect interrogations operating beneath the level of consciousness and intention. There are aspects of both the object and the medium of encounter which solicit the ceaseless attunements of our vision to what can be glimpsed, however vaguely and fleetingly. There is, on the other side, an irrepressible drive on our part as visual beings simply to see and (as Aristotle noted) to delight in the sheer act of seeing.

What is true at the level of our visual experience is also true at the level of categoreal reflection. The world encountered, the encountering self, and the medium in and through which the encounter takes place are, each in its own way, the loci of the categories. The encounter between self and world is, in its most basic structure, a dialogue, a lively give and take in which the confrontation with an other in its irreducible otherness involves intimations of intelligibility. What allows our world to appear intelligible is analogous to what allows this world to be visible to us. Though it is

the conjoint presence of three factors (self, other, and medium), neither the self nor the other can be separated from one another, or from the medium in and through which the dialogue of experience takes place. The self is itself a sign, always already caught up in some process of investigation, interpretation, or interrogation; and the universe is a perfusion of signs. But it is the conjoint presence of all three factors, in their irreducible unity, that makes a dialogue of experience. This means that human experience is not a subcutaneous or subjective affair, taking place beneath our skin or inside our consciousness; rather it is a transactional affair, taking place among a cluster of agencies. Experience is a dialogue *between* self and world; but since the self is an inherently self-dividing being (*CP* 5.421) and the world a ceaselessly self-altering affair, the participants in this dialogue are rather misleadingly identified simply by two terms (self and world), especially when at least one of these terms (self) can suggest an indivisible being. Of course, neither self nor world is static, let alone simple or indivisible. Signs in all of their variety are the media in and through which the dialogue between self and world evolves. But they are not simply handy tools by which an already constituted subjectivity undertakes its interrogations of the world, nor simply arbitrary impositions to which a fully determinate world (more or less) allows itself to be subjected. The eye and the objects accessible to it have been shaped, in part, by the medium of light in which this organ is most effective and these objects are most visible.[22] The very constitution of the eye is, in a certain respect, an effect of light itself; so too are the objects visible to it. Light does not supervene upon an antecedently existent cosmos but contributes decisively to the generation of an incessantly evolving world.

So too do the categories in one of their guises. Peirce went so far as to claim that there is a natural tendency of the human mind to grant a high place to the ideas of first, second, and third (see, e.g., *MS* 717, 00019).[23] This was part of what he meant when he defended the traditional notion of the *il lume naturale* of human reason (see, e.g., *CP* 5.360; *CP* 5.604; *CP* 6.10). But the disposition of our minds to use, however unreflectively, some form of the categories is due to our minds having been formed by a universe in which qualitative immediacies, brute oppositions, and indeliminable mediations[24] are (however named) ubiquitous.

What is true of light as both a source of generation and medium of visibility is, *mutatis mutandis*, true of signs. For these media exert a distinctive form of agency, one issuing in offspring; moreover, they open countless fora of interrogation.[25] These interrogations themselves often issue in inquiry as a process of extended duration, since they often form a critical mass of interrelated questions of a compelling character.

To examine signs in light of the Peircean categories and, in turn, to examine these categories themselves in light of crucial semeiotic distinctions can enable us to see both more finely and fully. Above all else, the heuristic function of Peirce's categoreal scheme needs to be appreciated. But this appreciation requires us to interrogate the categories in accord with questions which they themselves prompt. Such interrogation in turn leads to an appreciation of the semeiotic status of the Peircean categories, at least when these categories are viewed as essential components of the interrogative framework to which Peirce devoted so much of his life. But this characterization of them recalls one of the most poignant passages in all of Peirce's writings:

> Many a man has cherished for years as his hobby [or even his passion] some vague shadow of an idea, too meaningless to be positively false; he has, nevertheless, passionately loved it, has made it his companion by day and by night, and has given to it his strength and his life, leaving all other occupations for its sake, and in short has lived with it and for it, until it has become … flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone; and then he has waked up some bright morning to find it gone, clean vanished like the beautiful Melusina of the fable, and the essence of his life gone with it. (*CP* 5.393; cf. Grossman 1985)

His desire to erect 'a philosophical edifice that shall outlast the vicissitudes of time' (*CP* 1.1), coupled with *his* anxiety (for I read the text just quoted at length to be in some respects self-revelatory) that he would wake up one morning and find the defining object of his intellectual life gone, are important aspects of Peirce's lifelong refinement of his categoreal scheme. The extent to which this scheme could never be anything more than a dream, and moreover the possibility that such a dream (regardless of the duration of its hold) might vanish, are inelimiable aspects of such an intellectual pursuit. Peirce's own category of firstness suggests as much, as do in their own ways those of secondness and thirdness. I hope to have shown in this article the need to focus upon neglected facets of Peirce's categoreal project, in particular, to throw into bold relief what Peirce's categories are *in themselves* (in their firstness). In general, the imaginable relationships conjured by appeal to the Peircean categories, such relationships being potentially invaluable to inquirers, suggest that the function of these categories as signs of possibility (as 'three distinct and irreducible forms of rhemata') was the one to which Peirce was most deeply committed. Such, at least, is what I have tried to render plausible in this essay.

Peirce believed that: 'There is … nothing more wholesome for us than to find problems that quite transcend our powers, and I must say, too, that it imparts a delicious sense of being cradled in the waters of the

deep — a feeling which I always have at sea' (*CP* 8.263).[26] The context in which he wrote this makes it clear that he took his search for the categories to be one such problem. In general, the discovery of such problems is not solely an intellectual task. It is ordinarily an integral part of some great purpose, no matter how dimly conceived. For the framing of such a purpose, the 'dry light of intelligence is manifestly not sufficient' (*CP* 7.186; cf. *CP* 7.595). The total character of the person is needed. Such, at least, is what we discern in Peirce's absorption in the problem of the categories.

Notes

1. In one text at least, Peirce appears to define the mental in terms of the self-addressed (*CP* 5.424n1). This does not stand in tension to his insistence that: 'There is no reason why "thought" …. should be taken in that narrow sense in which silence and darkness are favorable to it' (*CP* 5.420). Though thought is not to be identified with a private operation within an individual consciousness immediately — and transparently — accessible only to itself, the commonplace facts of our everyday experience (doing sums 'in our head' or performing experiments in our imaginations) cannot be gainsaid; nor did Peirce deny, even by implication, the reality and importance of such operations (see Colapietro 1989: ch. 5). All thought is dialogue, though some thought relies entirely upon imaginary signs addressed by the self to the self. Though darkness and silence are not necessarily favorable to thought, thought does often take place in the inwardly performed, reflexively addressed operations hidden from the thinker.
2. On the one hand, Peirce construed experimentation as a form of dialogue: 'An experiment … is a question put to nature. Like any interrogatory, it is based on a supposition' (*CP* 5.168). On the other hand, he conceived his own self-addressed suppositions and interrogations, couched in the media of imaginary visual signs, as themselves experiments upon diagrams (see, e.g., *CN* III, 258–259). Experimentation is dialogic, just as dialogue is experimental.

   In *MS* 683, Peirce makes some intriguing remarks about visual signs under the rubric of 'Graphical Signs'. He supposes that reasoning is dependent upon such signs. 'By "graphical" I mean capable of being written or drawn, so as to be spatially arranged. It is true that one can argue *viva voce*; but I do not believe one can go very deeply into any important and considerably large subject of discussion with calling up in the minds of one's hearers mental images of objects arranged in ways in which *time*, without *space*, is incapable of serving as the field of representation, since in time of two quite distinct objects one must be antecedent and the other subsequent. Of course, the one temporal relation can be spatially imaged in various ways. But the combined field of space and time seems [alone] to be adequate to the imaging of Lorentz's explanation of the famed experiment of Morley and Michaelson [sic.], etc.' (00059–00060). Important issues regarding the relative merits of diachronic versus synchronic representation are teasingly broached here. Peirce's manuscripts abound in such suggestive observations regarding visual (or graphical) signs.
3. Peirce himself used this image in another connection: 'Take for the lantern of your footsteps the cold light of reason and regard your business, your duty, as the highest

thing, and you can only rest in one of those goals or the other' — Americanism, or the worship of business; or monasticism, sleepwalking in this world. 'But suppose you embrace, on the contrary, a conservative sentimentalism … then what do you come to? Why, *then*, the first command that is laid upon you, your quite highest business and duty, becomes, as everybody knows, to recognize a higher business than your business …' (*CP* 1.673).

4. Recall one of Peirce's own examples, that of a diamond. He insists that the 'diamond's condition is not an isolated fact. There is no such thing; and an isolated fact could hardly be real. It is an unsevered, though precise [i.e., an inseparable though in some way(s) distinguishable] part of the unitary fact of nature' (*CP* 5.457). The categories are resources for investigating the nexus of relationships in which any identifiable being is embedded (see, e.g., *CP* 3.421–3.422).
5. After claiming that the 'mind delights in triads' Peirce states that: 'A concept is the living influence upon us of a *diagram*, or *icon*, with whose several parts are connected in thought an equal number of feelings or ideas' (*CP* 7.467). It is just this vital, thus generative influence of the categories that I want to highlight in this article.
6. There are of course various contributing factors here, among the most important being the translations of Peirce into German, French, Italian, Spanish, etc.; the attention given to Peirce by prominent philosophers and scholars (e.g., Jürgen Habermas, Karl-Otto Apel, Umberto Eco, Hilary Putnam, and John E. Smith); the work of the Peirce Edition Project; and the Sesquicentennial International Congress (Harvard University; September 5–10, 1989) and the subsequent volumes gathering together papers originating as presentations at this Congress: Moore and Robin (eds.) 1994; Parret (ed.) 1994; Moore (ed.) 1993; Colapietro and Olshewsky (eds.) 1996; Houser, Roberts, and Van Evra (eds.) 1997.
7. See, e.g., the range of Peirce's interests indicated simply by the titles listed in note 1.
8. In a letter to William James dated June 8, 1903, Peirce confessed that: 'It rather annoys me to be told that there is anything novel in my three categories; for if they have not, however confusedly, been recognized by men since men began to think, that condemns them at once. To make them as distinct as it is in their nature to be is, however, no small task. I do not suppose they are so in my own mind; and evidently, it is not in their nature to be as sharp as ordinary concepts' (*CP* 8.264). (It is, in fact, this aspect of their nature upon which I want to focus in this article.) Around this same time, he admitted in a letter to Victoria Lady Welby that he was disposed 'to throw all ideas into the three classes of Firstness, of Secondness, and of Thirdness'. But he immediately added that: 'This sort of notion is as distasteful to me as to anybody; and for years, I endeavored to pooh-pooh and refute it; but it long ago conquered me completely' (*CP* 8.328).
9. 'I am, as far as I know, a pioneer, or rather a backwoodsman, in the work of clearing and opening up what I call *semiotic*, that is, the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis; and I find the field too vast, the labor too great, for a first-comer' (*CP* 5.488).
10. To insist upon this point does not preclude acknowledging that the categories are also adequately comprehensible only in light of the ontological and cosmological interpretation given to them by Peirce. The categories designate modes of being and, in addition, ubiquitous features of our evolving cosmos. Yet, precisely as *designators* of the irreducible modes of being and the pervasive features of our world, the categories are those signs by which the most far-reaching and deep-cutting distinctions can be drawn. Hence, even with respect to their ontological and cosmological significance, their semeiotic status and heuristic function need to be considered.

11. But tones can be quite definite in import, as Peirce himself explicitly noted. 'In ordinary life, all our statements, it is well understood, are, in the main, rough approximations to what we mean to convey. A tone or gesture is often the most definite part of what is said' (*CP* 5.568).
12. In his excellent study of the complex development of Peirce's categoreal theory, Joseph Esposito stresses that: 'What is … striking is that Peirce should have thought that a theory of the categories could be recursive and dialectical in nature, rather than based simply upon a taxonomy of language, or on a table of logical judgments' (1980: 79).
13. '… categorial concepts serve to mark off, at a basic level, what makes sense from what makes nonsense …' (Walsh 1967: 54).
14. Of course, tone might be taken to describe aspects of our visual rather than our auditory experience. Even so, it is important to insist upon at least the possibility that the metaphor here supplements that of tints and moods.
15. 'Experience is that determination of belief and cognition generally which the course of life has forced upon a man. One may lie about it; but one cannot escape the fact that some things are forced upon his cognition. There is an element of brute force, existing whether you opine it exists or not' (*CP* 2.139).
16. Peirce claimed that may-be's, along with must-be's, are 'very delicate objects for thought to handle, and propositions concerning them that sound absurd sometimes express plain facts' (*CP* 6.182).
17. As Max H. Fisch notes in reference to Peirce, the 'world does not consist of two mutually exclusive kinds of things, signs and non-signs, each with its subdivisions, yet with no subdivision of the one overlapping any subdivision of the other. … The fundamental distinction is not between things that are signs and things that are not, but between triadic or sign-action and dyadic or dynamical action (5.473). So the fundamental conception of semeiotic is not that of sign but that of semeiosis …' (Fisch 1986: 329–330).
18. This point needs to be juxtaposed to Peirce's acute appreciation of the quite restricted character of human inquiry, both in terms of its present capacity and historical achievements.
19. Indeed, the context in which Peirce makes this remark about the value of analogies, however fanciful, can easily be read as one encompassing the categories as rhemata.
20. The horticultural metaphor is an important one in Peirce's writings. In one place he suggests that 'our logically controlled thoughts compose a small part of the mind, the mere blossom of a vast complexus, which we may call the instinctive mind …' (*CP* 5.212). In another text he recalls how ordinary speech recognizes both that 'a judgment is something that *ripens* in the mind' and that an important feature of any ripe judgment is suggested by the vernacular phrase 'I says to myself, says I' (a phrase indicating, to Peirce at least, a self-critical attitude towards one's own judgments). In a famous text, he maintains that: 'It is not by dealing our cold justice to the circle of my ideas that I can make them grow, but by cherishing and tending them as I would the flowers in my garden' (*CP* 6.289). Finally, in a book review, he notes how 'vigorous minds' bring forth 'genuine flowers of thought, bright, delicate, and *redolent of suggestion*, and not mere fabrications of tissuepaper, needing wires stuck through them to hold them in shape' (*CN* I, 167; emphasis added).
21. This is a term used, if not also coined, by James Gibson to designate the respects in which the environment supports, facilitates, and even invites certain activities of humans and other organisms. The world of our experience not only frustrates our endeavors; it also *affords* opportunities for a vast range of organic activity.

22. Peirce makes this point more generally when he suggests that 'man divines something of the secret principles of the universe because his mind has developed as a part of the universe and under the influence of these same secret principles' (*CP* 7.46). 'There can … be no reasonable doubt that man's mind, having developed under the influence of the laws of nature, for that reason naturally thinks somewhat after nature's pattern' (*CP* 7.39). 'It is somehow more than a mere figure of speech to say that nature fecundates the mind of man with ideas which, when those ideas grow up, will resemble their father, Nature' (*CP* 5.591).
23. 'A man must be a very uncompromising partisan of the theory of the *tabula rasa* to deny that the ideas of first, second, and third are due to congenital tendencies of the mind' (*CP* 1.374).
24. In one of Peirce's most important statements regarding thirdness, he suggests that 'the conception of the absolute first eludes every attempt to grasp it; and so in another sense does that of absolute second; but there is not absolute third, for the third is of its own nature relative [or relational], and this is what we are always thinking, even when we aim at the first or second' (*CP* 1.362).
25. It is appropriate to point out here that central to Peirce's opposition to nominalism was his contention that nominalists tended unduly to circumscribe our powers of interrogation. In one important characterization of this position, he claimed that: The 'nominalistic metaphysics, the most blinding of all systems, as metaphysics generally is the most powerful of all causes of mental cecity, because it deprives the mind of the power to ask itself certain questions, as the habit of wearing a confining dress deprives one's joints of their suppleness' (*CP* 5.499).
26. He made this remark in a letter to William James. It seems especially appropriate here to recall that it was James in his lectures on *Pragmatism*, delivered not too long after Peirce's lectures on the same topic, who described these earlier lectures 'as flashes of brilliant light relieved against Cimmerian darkness!' (James 1975: 10). It was no doubt Peirce's attempt to explain, in conjunction with his pragmatism, his doctrine of categories, that prompted this remark by James. While James took the categories to be the largest part of this Cimmerian darkness, Peirce took them to be the lightning itself by which our darkness is occasionally illuminated. Shortly after his lectures on *Pragmatism*. James wrote to Peirce, confessing that: 'I myself can't get hold of, or use your "first," "second," and "third," distinction, but no matter' (7 November 1908). It is not too difficult to imagine how irritated and even aggrieved Peirce must have been by the jaunty manner in which this sentence concludes — 'but no matter'! For Peirce's categories were, in his judgment, one of the most momentous matters to which he devoted himself, from the time he was an undergraduate at Harvard College until he was a virtual recluse in his last years at Arisbe.

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