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Mastering phenomenological semiotics with Husserl and Peirce

Abstract: Both Peirce and Husserl suggested that a community of scholars were needed to bring to fruition the work that they had initiated, and both (initially) termed their approach phenomenology, defining it in almost identical terms. The fact that Peirce imposed more constraints on the free variation in imagination, which is one of the principal operations of phenomenology, serves to suggest that Peircean phenomenology may be concerned with a limited domain of experience. Taking on the task both thinkers imposed on their scions, we suggest that what the late Peirce calls mediation is identical to what the Brentano tradition terms intentionality, and that Peirce's notion of categories may help in arriving at a deeper understanding of the field of consciousness, in relation to experienced reality. Since we are interested in making semiotics into an empirical, including experimental, science, we suggest that the "naturalization" of both phenomenologies is fundamental for the future of semiotics. This is why we also envisage the manner in which phenomenology may be translated into theories of evolution and child development.

Keywords: Semiotics, phenomenology, phaneroscopy, medium, intentionality

1 Similarities and differences between the Husserlian and the Peircean phenomenologies

Both Charles Sanders Peirce and Edmund Husserl assigned an important task to phenomenology in the elucidation of meaning. It does not matter that Peirce, always fond of changing his terms, later on decided to call this discipline phaneroscopy, because he did not change the way in which he characterized it. As Aron Gurwitsch (1964:176f) observes, perception carries meaning, but "in a more broad sense than is usually understood", which tends to be "confined to meanings of symbols", that is, our signs. Indeed, as Gurwitsch (1964: 262ff) goes on to suggest, meaning is already involved in the perception of something on the surface as being marks, which then serve as carriers of meanings found in words. Peirce,

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on the other hand, is famous for seeing signs everywhere. Nevertheless, in his later works, Peirce (MS 339, 1906, quoted in Parmentier 1985) observed that “all my notions are too narrow. Instead of ‘sign’, ought I not to say *Medium?*”, and he went on to claim that it was “injurious” to language to try to fit all the phenomena he was concerned with into the term “sign”, instead of which the terms “mediation” or “branching” should have been used (CP 4.3). It is a curious fact that this tardy contriteness on the part of Peirce is ignored by all his latter-day followers.

From our comparison of the Husserlian and the Peircean phenomenology, we will extract a positive result: the latter may be seen as a possible variant of the former, and it can thus be argued that it is an adequate phenomenology of a particular onto-epistemological domain. This domain, which Peirce calls mediation, is in fact the same domain that Husserl, and, in particular Gurwitsch, have described as the field of consciousness. By combining the insights of the two phenomenologies, we will get a fuller understanding of the domain which mediates between subjects and objects or, more exactly, between the subject and his/her environment (including other subjects). This can only be done at the price of overhauling parts of Peirce’s phenomenology.

1.1 An excursus on the utility of phenomenology

Before proceeding, however, we have to reflect on what use phenomenology can be to semiotics today, in particular after the latter has taken the cognitive turn, or, more specifically, has gone experimental (see Sonesson 2007a,b; 2012; 2013b). The advantage of a cognitive semiotic approach is not only that one can take experimental results from psychology, cognitive science, neurology, etc. into account in the study of semiotic phenomena, and that one can relate semiotic resources to other elements present to the mind; that has been done well before the term was invented (e.g. Sonesson 1989). What is new to cognitive semiotics, however, is the possibility to formulate and perform our own experiments, if possible inspired by those already accomplished within psychology, etc., but more specifically geared to answering questions of meaning. And this is where phenomenology is needed.

There are at least two ways in which it has recently been proposed that phenomenology and empirical studies may go together (see Gallagher & Zahavi 2008: 28 ff.). The first manner of “naturalizing phenomenology” is the one proposed by Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson, and realised by Antoine Lutz, which consists in training subjects to use phenomenological methods (i.e. the specific operations to which we turn below) and take account of the result using protocols and/or neuro-mirroring. The second approach, which is more akin to the present

proposal, is what Shaun Gallagher has called “front-loaded phenomenology” (though something like “phenomenologically loaded experiments” would seem to be a more adequate description), which consists in allowing insights from phenomenology to inform the experimental set-up. This can be taken further: phenomenological description is not only useful in preparing for experiments, but also, after the fact, to make sense of empirical findings, to relate them to the world of our experience (the Lifeworld), and, in a transdisciplinary approach such as cognitive semiotics, it is much needed to clarify concepts stemming from different traditions and carrying the heritage of these traditions with them.

There should also be a way of “phenomenologizing natural sciences”, or at least the human and social sciences. Although Husserl certainly thought that phenomenology had to insulate itself from the positive sciences, he in fact held a continuing dialogue with psychology and, in particular, Gestalt psychology, and close followers such as Aron Gurwitsch and Maurice Merleau-Ponty went much further in that direction. Thus, the phenomenologizing of the positive sciences started much earlier than the naturalizing of phenomenology, although it was curiously never (as far as I know) recognized as such, not even by Merleau-Ponty, who for several years lectured on (the phenomenology of) developmental psychology at the Sorbonne (see Merleau-Ponty 1964: 2001). The impressive result of the work of such phenomenologists as Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty goes to show that, not only does phenomenology need experimental science, but also experimental science needs phenomenology.

1.2 Phenomenological operations in Peirce and Husserl

Phenomenology, as Peirce defines it, is that part of science that “ascertains and studies the kinds of elements universally present in the phenomenon, meaning by the phenomenon whatever is present at any time to the mind in any way” (*EP* 2, 259). Style apart, this could very well be a definition of phenomenology as understood by Husserl. Representatives of both traditions have tended to deny this, ending up with admitting some similarities. On the Peircean side, Joseph Ransdell (1989) starts out with the pronouncement that Husserl and Peirce could not have anything in common because of their different attitude to Descartes and to science, but in the end he admits that both are phenomenologists, to the extent that this “means to consider phenomena as phenomenal only, notwithstanding such apparent ‘transcendence’ – both intrinsic and relational – as they may have or seem to have.” On the Husserlian side, Herbert Spiegelberg (1956: 166ff) dedicates much time to pinpointing several differences between the two phenomenologies, but also recognizes that the “reflectiveness” of Husserl’s approach is

also present in Peirce, as is the “purity” of Husserl’s method, manifested in the independence from empirical facts and the concern for general essences.

For Husserl, the basic phenomenological operation is based on the fundamental structure of consciousness. All consciousness is consciousness of something – and that thing is outside of consciousness. This is what, in the Brentano-Husserl-tradition, is known as “intentionality”: the contents of consciousness are immanent to consciousness precisely *as* being outside of consciousness. Thus, we may describe a particular phase in the stream of consciousness as being an act in which something outside of consciousness becomes the subject of our preoccupation. In accomplishing such an act, we are directed to something outside of consciousness. When we are doing phenomenology, however, we are turning our regard “inwards”: the theme is not the object outside, but the act of consciousness itself. This is what Husserl calls the phenomenological reduction. It certainly seems to be the same thing described by Peirce as “the direct observation” of the phenomena, later the phanerons, “in the sense of whatever is present at any time to the mind in any way” (CP 1.286).

There are several other methodological moments to Husserl’s phenomenology (which I will rehearse here just for the purpose of comparing them to Peirce’s description): the *epoché*, the suspension of belief whether the object to which the act studied is directed exists or not, which seems to be implied also by the phrase “direct observation of phanerons”, in conjunction with the definition given beforehand of phenomena/phanerons. The “eidetic reduction”, i.e. the directedness to the general structures, rather than the individual character, of each given act, is present in Peirce’s phrasing according to which phenomenology serves to “generaliz/e/ observations, signaliz/ing/ several broad classes of phanerons”, although, once again, Husserl is much more precise. For Husserl, in order to attain this level of generality, we have to go through free variations in the imagination, also known as “ideation,” by means of which we vary the different properties of the phenomenon in order to be able to determine which properties are necessary in the constellation, and which may be dispensed with. There are some hints of this idea also in Peirce’s remark according to which phenomenology “describes the features of each /phenomenon/; shows that although /these phenomena/ are so inextricably mixed that no one can be isolated, yet it is manifest that their characters are quite disparate” (CP 1.286).

The difference between the Husserlian and the Peircean phenomenologies, nevertheless, becomes manifest in the final task assigned by Peirce to this discipline: “then /it/ proves, beyond question, that a certain very short list comprises all of these broadest categories of phanerons there are; and finally proceeds to the laborious and difficult task of enumerating the principal subdivisions of those categories” (CP 1.286). Husserl, of course, would also expect some very broad

categories to be established by this method. Nevertheless, it seems incompatible with his whole view of phenomenology to claim beforehand that “a short list” of such broad categories could be established. Phenomenology, Husserl stated over and over again, should be free from any prior presuppositions.¹ Peirce may seem to take for granted that we have to arrive at a small list of categories. Indeed, as Ransdell (1989) reminds us, Peirce described phenomenology as “the doctrine of categories,” or even “categorics.” To be more precise, Peirce even seems to anticipate which these categories are going to be. Peirce’s “short list” is in fact made up of triads comprising other triads, as well as some dyads and a few single terms. This is not all, for as I have shown elsewhere (Sonesson 2009; 2013a), Peirce even takes for granted the nature of these three categories, Firstness being something independent, Secondness bringing this first together with something else, and Thirdness bridging it all together. A case in point is, of course, the often quoted definition of the sign, as consisting of the “representamen,” which is Firstness lacking subdivisions, the “object,” which is Secondness, being divided into dyads, and the “interpretant,” which is Thirdness, being analysed into different kinds of triads.

Adapting Husserl to Peirce would mean imposing restrictions on the operation of ideation. Adapting Peirce to Husserl only requires such restrictions to be valid in some domains. In the latter case, Peirce’s phenomenology would be a member of the class of possible Husserlian phenomenologies, namely one which arrives at the result that everything comes by threes, comparable in that respect to Roman Jakobson’s work, which, at least according to Elmar Holenstein (1975, 1976), should be seen as a binary phenomenology. In Husserlian phenomenology, a distinction is made between the application of the method to different orders, or domains, of existence, such as physical objects, persons, and so on. According to Gurwitsch (1964: 382), orders of existence are

the ‘natural groupings’ in which things present themselves in pre-scientific and pre-theoretical experience as well as the explanatory systems constructed in the several sciences for the sake of a rational explanation of the world, material, historical, and social. [...] To every order of existence belong *specific relevancy-principles* constitutive of that order and by virtue of which the order is constituted

Thus, we could try out the idea that Peircean phenomenology is really adequate to some such domain of existence, which, following Peirce’s own later suggestion, could be something like mediation. But in order to find the specific relevance

¹ Already Spiegelberg (1956) noted that, unlike Husserl, Peirce did not explicitly claim his phenomenology to be free of presuppositions.

principle of this order of existence, we need to know what kind of mediation is involved. It is clear, from the context, that Peirce is thinking of something like the mediation between the subject and the world (see Sonesson 2013a). However paradoxical this may seem, both because Peirce has insisted on the continuity between mind and matter, and because, more specifically, he has repeatedly suggested that the kind of mind which his construal of the “sign” (i.e. the mediation) necessarily involves should be conceived as a “quasi-mind” (whatever this means), it is worthwhile to put this proposal to a test, all the time being aware of the fact that this can never be a question of finding out “what Peirce really meant”.

1.3 The phenomenological domain of mediation

There is yet another idea that was shared by Husserl and Peirce: that phenomenological analysis is fallible, and thus needs to be done over and over again, and ideally by a whole league of phenomenologists. The fact that different phenomenologists arrive at different results using the act of ideation, and that Husserl himself all the time modified his description of phenomena after repeating the analysis, does not show that the results of phenomenological analyses can vary arbitrarily, as is often said about “subjective” approaches. On the contrary, all who have practiced phenomenology agree on the basic structures of phenomenological experience, as is easily corroborated when comparing different approaches to the study of consciousness – excepting those which are self-contradictory, as Husserl (1913) observed, well before the likes of Daniel Dennett (1991) entered daringly into this space. And when there is no agreement, that may be because the task has not been fully accomplished, as it will actually never be. Repleteness (*Erfüllung*) is an intentional concept, just as Peirce’s final interpretant: something we will ever be striving for. Husserl repeatedly invokes the necessity of a community of phenomenologists that would be able to corroborate, or revise, existing phenomenological analyses. Peirce similarly refers to the community of researchers, needed to accomplish this work. In this sense, both Husserl and Peirce have been unlucky as far as their posterity is concerned, Husserl less so, because, in spite of the apostasy of Heidegger, Fink, Gadamer, Derrida, and others, the Husserlian kind of phenomenology has been diligently pursued by, among others, Gurwitsch, Schütz, Merleau-Ponty, Patočka, Sokolowski, Marbach, and Drummond, but, contrary to Peirce’s own expressed anticipation, his heritage has, on the whole, been safeguarded as a fixed doctrine instead of forming the point of departure for further exploration. Like Husserl, Peirce deserves his community of scholars dedicated to pursuing his project, rather than maintaining it intact. In

the following, therefore, we will try to go further in our exploration of mediation than Peirce ever did. In this way, I believe, we can be truer to Peirce's intentions than those busying themselves to find out "what Peirce really meant".

Still, we have to start out from an idea of what mediation could have meant to Peirce. Summarizing all of Peirce's different attempts at pinning down the nature of *Firstness*, we could probably say that it is something that appears without connection to anything else. It is thus prior to all relationship. *Secondness* is not only the second term that comes into play, but it is also made up of two parts, one of which is a property and the other a relation. It is something the function of which is to hook up with something already given. In this sense, it is a reaction, in the most general sense, to *Firstness*, where the first part is the connection to the property independently appearing and the second part describes the nature of this relationship. *Thirdness* is not only the third term which is ushered in, but it consists of three parts, two of which are relational; one which is hooked up to the term of *Firstness* and another which is connected to the relation of *Secondness*, together with which we find a third term describing the relationship between these two terms. It is thus an observation of the reaction.

Appearance is monadic, reaction is dyadic, and observation is triadic. Thus, it is not sufficient to say that *Firstness*, *Secondness*, and *Thirdness* correspond to a one-place predicate, a two-place predicate, and a three-place predicate, respectively, as Ransdell (1989) maintains. This cannot explain the workings of the categories. Rather, *Firstness* must be a one-place predicate with one term in the slot, *Secondness* a second-place predicate having two terms, and *Thirdness* a three-place predicate including three terms. According to Peirce, "A fork in the road is a third, it supposes three ways: a straight road, considered merely as a connection between two places is second, but so far as it implies passing through intermediate places it is third" (CP 1.337.). In this sense, the fork is not only the place where the road splits but from where it goes to different places.

If we consider the numerous and varied descriptions that Peirce gave to his categories, it might be suggested, in conclusion, that everything said about *Firstness* boils down to a meaning roughly paraphrased as "something there", that those phrases describing *Secondness* are equivalent to "reaction to the appearance of something", and that *Thirdness* can be reduced to "observing the appearance as well as the reaction to the appearance" (Sonesson, 2009; 2013a). On the basis of these interpretations, I submit, the domain of mediation can be supposed to involve the relation of the acting and perceiving subject to the world at large. In other words, the three categories describe *intentionality* in the sense of Brentano and Husserl, that is, the directedness of the mind to the things of which it takes cognizance. In so doing, nevertheless, it adds some useful details to the description of the intentional experience. It offers some qualifications to the Husserlian

idea of the object of intentionality being transcendent to consciousness, that it, being immanent as transcendent. Indeed, this is made even clearer by the kind of reaction typifying Secondness that Peirce describes in the following way:

A door is slightly ajar. You try to open it. Something prevents. You put your shoulder against it, and experience a sense of effort and a sense of resistance. These are not two forms of consciousness; they are two aspects of one two-sided consciousness. It is inconceivable that there should be any effort without resistance, or any without a contrary effort. This double-sided consciousness is Secondness (*EP* 1, 268).

Thus, Secondness is about effort and resistance or, more exactly, about *felt* effort and resistance: resistance to the world “putting your shoulder against” something, as well as the world resisting back with “a sense of resistance.”² It will be noted that Secondness is thus not at the level of a physical causality as it is often presented. It is an experience. In fact, in Husserlian parlance it would be a kind of passive intentionality, more precisely, a kinestheme, that is, a phase in our experience of the movements, positions and muscle-tensions of our bodily parts, which, according to Husserl (1973), plays a fundamental part in our perception of spatial objects. Indeed, all perceptual appearance is accompanied by a co-functioning but unthematized kinaesthetic experience, which must be presupposed if the appearances are to have an object-reference, that is, are to be appearances of something.

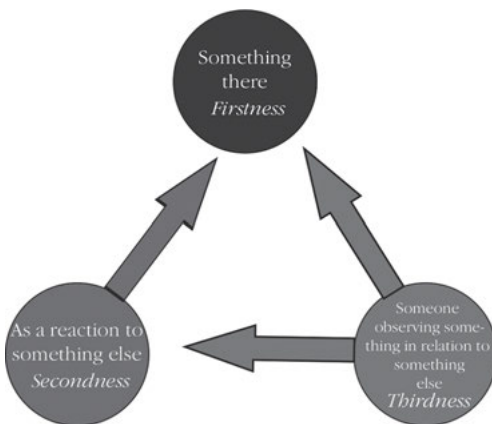


Figure 1: The interpretation of the three Peircean categories, according to Sonesson (2013a)

² It is also a category well-known in philosophy, but perhaps best known from the work of Maine de Biran.

A few glosses on these conclusions remain to be spelled out. First of all, nothing can appear without appearing to somebody, so even if Firstness, exemplified by iconicity, only appears for “a fleeting moment”, as Peirce observes, it is still a relation, in spite of Peirce’s insistence that it is not, or else it cannot even be an appearance. Still, we can recognise in Secondness a reaction in a fuller sense, something that may be an action, or also an awareness of the phenomenon. Thirdness may then either be the acknowledgment of the action or of the percept ascribed to Secondness. From this point of view, it is easier to understand why Peirce argues that Thirdness is different from Secondness, but that any higher relation is reducible to Thirdness: the observation of a reaction is different from a reaction, and so is the observation of an observation, but the observation of the observation of an observation is just another observation.

As is well-known, Peirce himself did not recognize the distinction between mind and matter, supposing the former to shade gradually into the other. Thus, he posited a “quasi-mind” at one end of the relations that he recognized. This may be a metaphysical truth, but here I am only interested in the experience given to phenomenology, in which mind and matter are very different things. Indeed, it is precisely because the mind and the body are experienced as in some sense different, that it makes sense to talk about the mind as embodied – and, correlatively, of the body as minded.

2 Naturalizing the doctrine of categories – in social action, development and evolution

In his early work, Peirce explained the three fundamental categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness in terms of first, second, and third person pronouns. He did not identify the second person, however, as one may expect, with Secondness, but with Thirdness. In his view, the second person was the most important, not the first: “all thought is addressed to a second person, or to one’s future self as a second person” (quoted in Singer 1984, 83 f). In terms that Peirce took over from Schiller, the first person stood for the infinite impulse (Firstness), the third person for sensuousness (Secondness), and the second person for the harmonising principle (Thirdness). Peirce called his own doctrine “Tuism” from “*Tu*”, as opposed to “*Ego*” and “*It*,” and he prophesied about a “tuistic age,” in which peace and harmony would prevail. It is not clear, of course, whether Peirce would still accept these identifications later on, but, if he did, this would confirm my present interpretation of Firstness as “Something appearing,” Secondness as reaction to this fact, and Thirdness as the “Observer observed.”

2.1 Dyads and triads in society

In social psychology, in particular developmental psychology, there is also much talk about dyads and triads, and about some things being dyadic and others triadic (Tomasello 1999; Zlatev 2008). Thus, interactions, engagements, eye gaze, and so on, are said to be either dyadic or triadic. This terminology would seem to have originated in the sociology of Georg Simmel (1971). Dyads and triads are, to Simmel, groups of two or three individuals, respectively. Units, not relationships are counted. Between two individuals there may be any number of relationships, just as there may be between three individuals. When, in contemporary articles, we read about a “mother-child dyad,” etc., this is clearly what is meant. Interestingly, the dyads and triads of psychology, just like those of Peirce, are not only defined by their number, but tend to consist of a child, a caretaker, and some object attended to. In general, translated into the terminology of Sonesson (2000a), a dyadic situation is taken to consist of *Ego* and *Alter* (another person) or *Ego* and *Alius*, a thing or a person treated as a thing, whereas a triad includes all three types. Even more specifically, the triad tends to involve child, caretaker and a referent.

Other uses are more explicitly relational: dyadic is opposed to triadic as the relation of a subject to an object, or another subject is opposed to the relation of a subject both to another subject and another object. Thus, on one hand, there is “dyadic eye gaze: looking at object or person,” and on the other hand there is “triadic eye gaze: looking back and forth between object and person” (cf. Bates 1979). A more complex interpretation would suppose that a dyadic relation is a relation between two individuals, while a triadic relation is a relation to the relation between two individuals. This is similar to what Peirce seems to mean, according to the interpretation given above. It should be noted that such a relation to the relation between *Alter* and *Alius* is not the same thing as two relations, to *Alter* on the one hand, and to *Alius* on the other. However, in practice, the only way to know that somebody is attending to the relationship between two individuals may be to observe him or her looking first at one individual and then at the other. Perhaps we would even need to go further, introducing relations between relations as well as relation between such relations.

Clearly social psychology, in spite (or because) of being a much more practical concern than Peircean philosophy, is as unclear about what dyadic and triadic relationships are as is Peirce. Basically, however, it seems that what is involved in dyadic relations, in both cases, is a subject taking cognizance of the world, and in the triadic relations, somebody (who might be the same) being aware of what the

first subject is doing.³ Typically, in social psychology, this is the caretaker observing the child's perceptual interchange with the world – and vice-versa. In other words, it involves *Ego* and *Alter* interacting with reference to *Alius*.

Understood in this way, Peircean semiosis, which we should no longer restrict to involving signs, is not properly speaking “communicative,” in the sense of Merlin Donald (1991, 171ff), but certainly “public” or, perhaps better “spectacular.” It is available to others (cf. Sonesson 2010). Yet, for it to be available, it is not enough for it to be present, but it must be accessible to attention. The elementary meaning-giving act, at least in the case of human beings, is certainly the act of attention. Taking my inspiration from Aron Gurwitsch's 1964 ideas about the “theme” at the centre of a “thematic field”, and surrounded by “margins”, later reconceived by Sven Arvidson (2006) as different approximation to the “sphere of attention”, I have suggested that the gaze may function as an organizing device, transforming continuous reality into something more akin to a proposition Sonesson (2012; 2014). Thus, in the end, what we have in Peirce's triad is the primordial way of something becoming a theme – and the process of thematization itself being thematized (see Gurwitsch 1964; Sonesson 1989, 2007a, 2007b, 2010). In Peirce's own words, attention is “the pure denotative power of the mind, that is to say, the power which directs the mind to an object” (CP 1.547). It is the basis of *noesis* – the way something appears to consciousness. It must be even more fundamental to *noesis* than the structures uncovered by Husserl (1913) himself. In fact, more clearly than the idea of immanent transcendence, the Peircean formulation manages to recoup the idea of something being offered, and the subject embarking on the experience and then taking stock.

Nevertheless, dyads in the sense of sociology may well turn out to be triads, if we apply the Peircean point of view. Here it is useful to remember Peirce's point about the straight road passing through intermediate places. In the case in which the dyad consists of two subjects (*Ego* and *Alter*), it seems particularly clear that a mediation – and thus a third – is required to account for what is going on and this no doubt extends to a lot of interactions between subjects and non-persons, i.e., between *Ego* and *Alius*.

³ Or something: The mind is not necessarily a subject to Peirce, but he does admit that there is no way of explaining it, at least at present, than by reference to a subject.

2.2 Dyads and triads in child development and evolution

It was noted above that, basically, what is involved in dyadic relations is a subject taking cognizance of the world, and in triadic relations, somebody (who might be the same) being aware of what the first subject is doing. Typically, we said, this is the caretaker observing the child's perceptual interchange with the world – and vice-versa. In other words, it involves *Ego* and *Alter* interacting with reference to *Alius*. And thus we are back to the primordial scene in which Ego first meets his Other.

In another version, the basic dyad (with no obvious succeeding triad) is the scene of combat. According to the Hegel/Sartre kind of dialectic between Ego and Alter one of the participants in the combat must always lose – or, indeed, both. In this reading of Hegel, Ego can only be recognised as a person by subduing the other; but once the latter has been subdued he is a Non-person, and his recognition of the other as a person has lost its value. Like Peirce epitomizing *Tuism*, Tzvetan Todorov (1995: 34ff, 15f, 31ff), criticizing the Hegel/Sartre point of view, observes that we are always *with* the other. There is, so to speak, no moment in time in which the other is not already there with us. Thus, Todorov also criticises those who believe that man starts out alone and egotistical, and then is forced to adapt himself to a life in society. It should be noted that neither Bakhtin, nor Peirce or the tradition stemming from Mead and Cooley emphasise any antagonism in the relation between Ego and Alter. In another work, Todorov (1989: 39ff) goes on to quote evidence from developmental psychology which shows us that the first other is not a man met in combat but the mother taking care of her child. And there is no problem in being recognised as a person: in fact, already after a few weeks the child tries to catch its mother gaze and is rewarded by the mother's attention. Conflicts emerge later and suppose a third party who determines who the winner is.

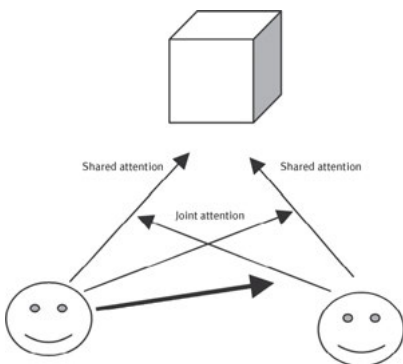


Figure 2: Shared attention: Second-order attention: “I see that you see X” (and vice versa) to which is added Joint attention: Third-order attention: “I see that you see that I see X” (and vice versa). Adapted from Zlatev (2008).

This brings us to developmental psychology, where it is always question of an infant, an object, and a caretaker – a “mother-child-object triad”. In fact, the caretaker is not necessarily a mother, not only in recent times of childcare leaves extended to both parents, but also in what seem to be the earliest times of human-kind, when allo-parenting appears to have been the normal practice (Hrdy 2009). There have been some attempts, notably by Cintia Rodríguez & Christiane Moro (1999) and by Donna West (2014), to couch early child development in Peircean terms, more specifically in terms of icons, indices and symbols. More basically, however, childcare must be a question of directing the attention of the child, or to follow up the direction in which the child’s attention is already attracted. And this is more readily framed in terms of something appearing, there being a reaction to this, finally giving rise to a gloss on this appearance together with the reaction. This process must be viewed as a cycle apt to repeat itself over and over again.

If the central issue of caretaking is the distribution of attention, then the triad (expanding to further levels) will be a criss-crossing of gazes and the recognition of gazes. Following Zlatev (2008: 226), it might be useful to make a distinction, which is not commonly made, between shared and joint attention:

When two individuals become aware that both are attending to the same object, what results is shared attention. /---/ To make a given object X fully intersubjective between you and me, I would need not only to “see that you see X”, (second-order attention), but also “to see that you see that I see X” (third-order attention) and vice versa – which is one interpretation of what it means to engage in joint attention (my italics)

Again, while the dyads and triads might be expended, there is a sense in which we cannot go beyond the threesome: attention to attention second-order attention is different from attention, and so is attention to the attention of someone’s attention third-order attention, but a further level will, in a sense, be only more of the same.

In his most recent book, Michael Tomasello (2014: 54ff) suggests that, both in phylogeny and in ontogeny, human beings start out being special when using the pointing gesture (which is only used by apes when enculturated), that is, as he also says, indexical signs, but that then, before arriving at language or any other symbolic signs, human beings also singularize themselves by using iconic signs, more exactly iconic gestures, which, as he rightly points out, are susceptible of being categorical, that is, to correspond to types rather than tokens, and thus, in a way, preparing the way for symbolic signs. Indeed, he even intimates that a precursor to the subject-predicate organization found in language consists of an indexical sign, serving to anchor the thought in reality, and either an iconic or a symbolic sign, both categorical, which serve to add a qualification to that which

is pointed out. Here he – inadvertently, it seems – recaptures an idea earlier formulated, in somewhat different ways, by both Husserl and Peirce.

Tomasello’s description of the emergence of propositional structure could also be mapped onto Merlin Donald’s (1991; 2001) vision of human specificity, as it emerges in evolution: from episodic memory over mimetic memory, giving rise to tool-making, imitation, and gesture, and mythic memory, which originates language, to theoretic memory, which brings about pictures, writing, and theory. If iconicity and indexicality (and perhaps even symbolicity) in the sense of specific kinds of mediations precede the real sign function – which allows the emergence of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, as I have suggested elsewhere Sonesson (2007a,b; 2012) – they may, already at the level of perception, comply with some kind of quasi-propositional structure.

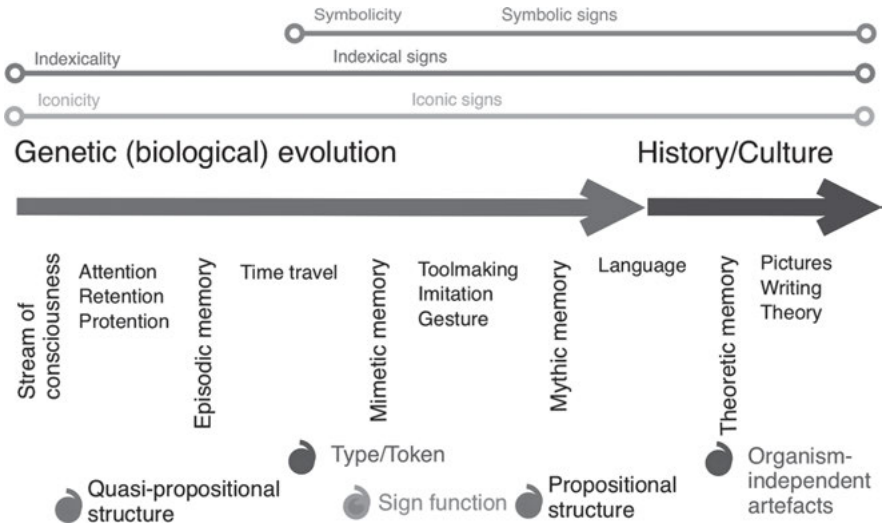


Figure 3: Donald’s vision of human specificity in evolution, with some additions by the present author: 1. attributions of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity to the different kinds of memory (Sonesson 2007a,b); 2. relations to type/token, sign function and organism-independent artefacts (Sonesson 2007a,b); 3. the distinction between stream of consciousness and episodic memory, as well as the features of these two stages (Sonesson 2015)

3 The quasi-propositional nature of perception

Both Peirce and Husserl are clearly committed to the idea that, since we do talk of (and use all other kinds of signs to refer to) reality as we perceive it, there must be

some sense in which this reality can be mapped onto propositions, in the sense of properties being ascribed to things, the implication being that these propositions may possibly be mapped back onto perceptual acts (see Stjernfelt 2014; Sonesson 2014). To Peirce, as he is usually presented (and no doubt cogent with his position before he realised that his use of terms was too narrow) perceptual reality itself is made up of signs, and in this capacity it may also contain *Dicisigns* (i.e. propositions or perhaps even assertions). To Husserl (1939), on the other hand, the perceptual world is pre-predicative (or ante-predicative, as Merleau-Ponty has accustomed us to say). It is certainly not itself made up of signs or representations in any other sense.

The world of perception, in fact, is the primary stratum of the Lifeworld, the world that precedes every other experience. Husserl (1939: 3ff) points out that the domain of logic is much wider than predication, and that, before predication, there is already a binarity, separating something that serves as a fundament (“Zugrundeliegendes”) and that which is said about it (“von ihm ausgesagt is”). Since we are at the pre-predicative level, the saying that is going on here might just as well be at the level of mere thinking or perceiving; that is, it just involves taking cognizance of a thing as having one particular property. This means, first of all, that the thing must be given as a thing embedded in the inner and outer horizons of the Lifeworld; that is, integrated in the world at large, and offering up its surfaces and perspectives for further exploration (Cf. Mohanty 1976: 139 ff). Husserl thus seems to agree with Peirce that there is a very generic kind of organization which may pertain to the perceptual world and which obligatorily appears in the proposition: the division into some entity and a property that is ascribed to this entity. But to Husserl this organization is passively pre-given, and the borders between the parts are not explicitly drawn up but merely sketched out in anticipation.

According to a common view, pictures are unable to make assertions. If so, one would expect perceptual reality to be even more devoid of an assertion function. Elsewhere, I have observed that the picture is evidently incapable of affirming anything, if one defines affirmation as something that is done by using language (cf. Sonesson 1996; 2012; 2014). We have to start by acknowledging the difference in nature of the semiotic resources at the disposal of the picture and those used by the verbal argument. However, if the assertion is more generally defined as a transaction, by means of which a specific property is assigned to a particular entity, then it is possible for the picture to make affirmations in the way of a picture. It is in the nature of the iconic sign to posit at the same time its resemblance and its dissimilarity to the object depicted: by the first stroke, the sign creates the expectancy of an identity that, by the second stroke, it must necessarily disappoint.

Even if pictures are able to predicate, however, there are two important differences between a picture and perceptual reality: first, a picture allows for a comparison between itself and that piece of reality which it invokes, but percepts cannot be compared to anything else; in the second place, a picture involves a frame, which also means that it has at least an elementary mechanism for shedding parts of reality which are not relevant and for organizing reality within the frame in terms of focus and margins, whereas perceptual reality has no determinate limits (it has ever more *outer horizons*), and its focus is vague and/or continuously shifting. Let us call the first difference the *comparativity requirement*, and the second the *framing requirement*. The ordinary Lifeworld given to our immediate perception does not fulfil any of these requirements. Nevertheless, even in the perceptual world there are no doubt portions that comply with one, or both, of these criteria. A shop window as well as an artistic “installation” fulfils the framing requirement and if they consist of objects that are arranged in a way that is clearly different from that of ordinary life, they also fulfil the comparativity requirement (cf. Sonesson 1989; 2010; 2014). Besides, both framing and comparativity can be obtained for free, if somebody behaves in an extraordinary way in an ordinary situation; because then the behaviour stands out against what is expected, as was the case with the Decembrists discussed by Juri Lotman (1984), or the (imagined) behaviour of the surrealists (cf. Sonesson 2000b).

This may be the case when ordinary reality is somehow organized into a message by the addresser, whether on purpose, as in the cases considered above, or unwittingly, but still open to the interpretation of the addressee, as in the case of traces left by an animal passing by. More commonly, however, the pre-predicative structure of our experience is no doubt initiated entirely from the receiving end. It is, I think, an important modification brought to the phenomenological model employed, most directly adopted from Roman Ingarden, when Jan Mukařovský (1974) and his followers in the Prague school of semiotics set out to define the act of meaning from the point of view of the addressee, not from that of the addresser, contrary to the now well-established pragmatics paradigm. Such an approach makes it understandable that traces left by an animal on the ground, or clouds harbouring rain, can be signs in equal measure to words and pictures (cf. Sonesson 2012).

The elementary meaning-making act, at least in the case of human beings, is, as observed above, the act of attention. Taking my inspiration from Gurwitsch's (1964) ideas about the “theme” at the centre of a “thematic field”, and surrounded by “margins”, I have suggested that the gaze may function as organizing device, transforming continuous reality into something more akin to a proposition (Sonesson 2012; 2014). I think, however, that Gurwitsch's (1974: 254ff) criticism of Husserl, according to which the predication (“X is red,” and so on) which Husserl

conceived to be a “synthesis,” really is an “analysis”, applies to pre-predicative experience as given in perception, rather than to the full-fledged logical formulation of a predication. Whereas the latter may really be an adjunction of new properties, perception is always an ‘explicitation’ of what is already contained in the horizons of the perceptual thing – which is, by the way, what Husserl himself claims when describing perception. In the case of the die, this would mean that pre-predicative experience consists in something like “this die (which, apart from obligatory die-properties, is red, worn on the edges, rather big for a die, etc.) is red”. Thus, unlike a predication, perceptual experience starts out from the whole and goes on to particulars, that is, it narrows down the perceptual focus. Pre-predicative experience always consists of a theme, a thematic field, and a margin, though different parts of the thing may assume these functions as the explicitation goes on.

If it can be said that the act of attention directed at different portions of the perceptual world is the antecedent of the proposition, I think already the observation of such an act of attention by somebody else can be a precursor to the assertion of a proposition. It is a curious fact that human beings are practically alone among all animals in possessing the white of the eyes, the presence of which in other fellow human beings is what allows us to see more clearly than any other animal what another person is looking at. It could therefore be said that it is the act of attention as such that constitutes a proposition (or, better, a quasi-proposition), but that only the act of attention that is attended to by another subject (in the sense of a person) makes up a quasi-assertion, thus manifesting third-order attention. And this brings us back to mediation in the Peircean sense: the observation of the observer for whom something is there.

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