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PEIRCE AND CASSIRER – THE KROISIAN CONNECTION

Vistas and open issues in John Krois' philosophical semiotics

John Michael Krois was known as a leading Cassirer scholar, one of the world's primary experts on Cassirer's thought, and chief initiator of the impressive publication of Cassirer's considerable *Nachlass*. Less known is the fact that he was also an important Peirce scholar, finding and cultivating many interesting points of contact between Peirce and Cassirer. I never discussed this explicitly with John Krois, but I think the two of us shared the assumption that what made Peirce and Cassirer and their virtual interconnections so interesting and fertile is that they incarnate, each on their continent, the final development of philosophy before the split between analytical and continental traditions during the first half of the 20th century. Both of them constructed extremely ambitious systems with grand metaphysical ambitions – at the same time as they insisted on the close connectedness of philosophy to the ongoing development of the sciences, taken in a very broad sense – such close connections between sciences and metaphysics being one of the ties often cut in the analytical-continental split. Both of the two could be described as a sort of Neo-Kantians, at the same time vigorously transgressing the Kantian framework in order to found comprehensive theories addressing the general semiotic access to and shaping of the world – Peirce in his pragmatism and semiotics, Cassirer in his doctrine of symbolic forms. Both, furthermore, aimed at founding these ambitious doctrines on systematical ontological assumptions, Peirce in his phenomenological list of categories,

Cassirer in his little known theory of *Basisphänomene*, basic phenomena, which became a special focus field for John Krois.

This short paper aims at outlining the basic lines of the connection John Krois established between Peirce and Cassirer as well as investigating some open issues made visible by these connections. Five main themes stand out: that of sign categorizations, that of pragmatism, that of images, that of semiotic evolution and that of embodiment. As Krois emphasized, there are also points where the two of them integrate less easily – here could be mentioned mythic thought, generality, and the relation between semiotic taxonomy and evolution.

Sign Categorizations

The sign categorizations of Peirce and Cassirer agree in taking human language to be an important special case – but far from the only or even the central example of sign systems. Furthermore, both agree that signs/symbolic forms do not form an arbitrary external vehicle for thought, rather all thought is in signs (Peirce), or, all thought is mediated by symbolic forms (Cassirer). Both of them also share the idea that there are no simple beginnings, no initial intuitions on which to build semiotic forms. To Peirce, the process of growing reason and the gaining of knowledge is one with the evolution of the universe and thus took its beginnings long before human beings and their civilizations accelerated it.¹ To Cassirer, the first meaning-bearing symbolic forms are *Ausdrücke*, expressions, natural symbolisms – a special interest to Krois – but they are never simple and constitute, from the outset, complex phenomena with a perceptive as well as a meaning aspect, saturated with

¹ One of Krois' favorite Peirce quotations is the brief claim that "the idea of *manifestation* is the idea of the sign." A backbone of this short paper will be such preferred quotes in Krois. The context of this quote is as follows: "There is a recognition of triadic identity; but it is only brought about as a conclusion from two premises, which is itself a triadic relation. If I see two men at once, I cannot by any such direct experience identify both of them with a man I saw before. I can only identify them if I regard them, not as the *very* same, but as two different manifestations of the same man. But the idea of *manifestation* is the idea of a sign." Charles Sanders Peirce: *Collected Papers*, vol. 1–8 (1931–58), ed. by Hartshorne/Weiss/Burks, London 1998. In the following referred to as CP along with volume and paragraph numbers, here CP 1.346.

secondary and tertiary qualities which may only subsequently be distinguished and isolated.

At the basis of the two philosophers' systems, Krois never ceased to emphasize their predilection for triadic distinctions: Peirce's "triadomany", as e.g. in the icon-index-symbol distinction, and Cassirer's *Ausdruck-Darstellung-Reine Bedeutung* categories. At the forefront of Krois' research until his last moment was the critical comparison of Peirce's basic phenomenological trichotomy of Firstness/Secondness/Thirdness to the overlooked triad of Cassirerian *Basisphänomene* of life/action/work, developed towards the end of Cassirer's life and only recently being published. Krois emphasized how early versions of Peirce's triad built on the three personal pronomina in the singular *I-you-he* – just like Cassirer's "basic phenomena" did. Important problems in synthesizing the sign categorizations of the two, however, remain – we shall address a couple of them discussing semiotic evolution below.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism was another connecting line between the two theories investigated by Krois – defining it in terms of embodiment as the "embodiment of thought in signs, of beliefs in habits of action, and the 'mind' in the body".² Pragmatism, of course, is most often used as the historical classification of the philosophies of Peirce, James, Dewey and their descendants – but Krois made a strong case for the extrapolation of the term to cover also Cassirer, based on his idea of objects as being the "sum of possible and actual effects"³, and his claim that the basic schema of causality is not a primitive of understanding but is derived from action experience with tool use.⁴ Peirce's "pragmatic maxim" of 1878, cultivated further during his last large creative burst after the turn of the century, claimed that the

² John Krois: *Körperbilder und Bildschemata. Aufsätze zur Verkörperungstheorie ikonischer Formen*, ed. by Horst Bredekamp/Marion Lauschke, Berlin 2011, p. 94.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 97

⁴ *Ibid.*

meaning of a statement is equivalent to the conceived effects of it, similarly connecting meaning to conception of action – belief as “that upon which a man is prepared to act.”⁵ A related connecting line is the focus upon functions and relations at the expense of substance in both Peirce and Cassirer. Peirce was, parallel to Frege, the discoverer of polyvalent logic of relations while Cassirer emphasized functional correlations as the center of modern science at the expense of substance. The last of the Aristotelian categories, relation, was thus substituted for the first one, substance, which was relegated to a remote and provincial “Nantucket of thought”.⁶ Thus, to both Peirce and Cassirer, the relational connecting of objects in action forms the central node of semiotic and scientific meaning and world-orientation – the relation of conceiving and acting to objects being a special case of functional relation.

Images

A central semiotic issue highlighted by John Krois is that of the status of images. The preoccupation with individual images, artists, and currents in art history, on the one hand, and the emphasis on conceptual and linguistically expressed meaning in philosophy, on the other, were, to Krois, significant for an important academic shortcoming: the lack of a proper, general study of images as such. Here, again, the Peirce-Cassirer connection appeared as a pledge: Peirce’s basic notion of iconicity as a function in most signs, on the one hand, and Cassirer’s insistence upon the prominence of *Ausdrücke*, expressions, on the other, most often saturated with image-like qualities. Krois, of course, realized that this connection also involved “the greatest difference”⁷ between the two: while Peirce’s iconicity notion is very general and, what is more, involved in his semiotic doctrine of the growth of generality in the ongoing research process (as indicated in one of Krois’

⁵ Peirce quoting Alexander Bain, "Pragmatism" (c. 1906), CP 5.12.

⁶ Peirce calling the mere study of non-relational terms in logic "the Nantucket of thought", in "Evolutionary Love" (1892), CP 6.313.

⁷ Krois: Körperbilder (as fn. 2), p. 106.

favorite Peirce quotations that “individualism and falsity are one and the same”⁸), Cassirer’s notion of expression is tied to specific, bodily, ritual practices. At the bottom of Cassirer’s whole doctrine of symbolic forms lay the important notion of “symbolic pregnance”, defined in another among Krois’ favorite quotations: “Unter ‘symbolischer Prägnanz’ soll also die Art verstanden werden in der ein Wahrnehmungserlebnis, als ‘sinnliches’ Erlebnis, zugleich einen bestimmten nicht-anschaulichen ‘Sinn’ in sich faßt und ihn zur unmittelbaren konkreten Darstellung bringt.”⁹

A perceptual experience which immediately implies a non-perceptive meaning which it brings to concrete representation (*Darstellung* in Cassirer implying propositional representation with truth-claims): this convoluted description was the target of Krois’ repeated reconstructions. A recurrent example, in Cassirer, of “symbolic pregnance” was the phenomenon of blushing of shame (*Schamröte*). It is, of course, an immediate sign of shame in the person blushing and thus permits the immediate inference to the proposition ‘He is shameful’. The redness in the face has immediate Peircean icon qualities – the intensity of the red being similar to the intensity of shame – but the relation between the red color and connected social emotion is not immediately one of similarity.¹⁰ The blushing of shame as an example is interesting – it is an involuntary, automatic, bodily sign

⁸ The more complete quote goes as follows: “When we come to study the great principle of continuity and see how all is fluid and every point directly partakes the being of every other, it will appear that individualism and falsity are one and the same. Meantime, we know that man is not whole as long as he is single, that he is essentially a possible member of society. Especially, one man’s experience is nothing, if it stands alone. If he sees what others cannot, we call it hallucination. It is not ‘my’ experience, but ‘our’ experience that has to be thought of; and this ‘us’ has indefinite possibilities.” (CP 5.402)

⁹ Ernst Cassirer: *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 3, *Phänomenologie der Erkenntnis*, Darmstadt 1982, p. 235.

¹⁰ Which was probably one of the reasons why Krois tended to reject Peirce’s repeated definition of iconicity as similarity between a sign and its object. Krois pointed to a quote where Peirce says there is **no** similarity in representing a call for sobriety by means of the picture of a drunkard: “It may be questioned whether all icons are likenesses or not. For example, if a drunken man is exhibited in order to show, by contrast, the excellence of temperance, this is certainly an icon, but whether it is a likeness or not may be doubted.” (CP 2.282) – but immediately after that, Peirce adds that “[t]he question seems somewhat trivial [...]” (probably because the example mentioned can be analyzed as similarity plus the rhetorical device of inversion). Krois, sometimes, took the radical consequence of seeing instead iconicity as pertaining to the material qualities of the sign vehicle, taken in isolation, apart from any connection to the sign object. I do not find this interpretation helpful – in that case, all signs will be iconic per definition.

Comment [- 1]: I do not have Cassirer's book with me here but I am sure the single quotation marks around 'symbolischer Prägnanz' etc. in this quote were not added by me. So I think they should be there.

and by no means subject to human convention (even if the situations prompting it are, of course, subject to such conventions). Still, Cassirer – and Krois – took it as a very basic example of natural symbolism, thereby extending the notion of “symbolicity” beyond the limits of human culture. This idea is in conformity with the Peircean idea that symbols are defined by “habit” – of which human convention forms but one, especially developed type. Expression and interpretation habits acquired in the slow adaptation process of biological evolution (cf. the blushing example) form another type of symbols – for instance the typical perceptual appearance of a species by which it is recognizable for fellow specimens (and for related predator and prey species). Just like blushing of shame, the striping of the zebra or the flashing pattern of a firefly have an immediate iconic quality – and the inference it makes possible to the concept of the zebra species with all its stable characteristics of behavior is a piece of natural symbolism.¹¹ Thus, the core Krois-Cassirer concept of symbolic pregnance embeds iconicity in primitive, symbolism facilitating, stable inferences.

Semiotic Evolution

Cassirer’s concept of evolution is to some degree what could be called secularized Hegelianism – it mainly addresses the development of human civilization through history – finding, below that, an abrupt jump between closed animal *Umwelten* characterized by signals only and human freedom beyond it.¹² Cassirer’s notion of mythic thought is the fertile ground of all such subsequent semiotic development in civilization – characterized by the ubiquity of expressive function and *symbolische Prägnanz*, emotionality, ritual, built from bodily orientation and

¹¹ The analysis of the blushing of shame/striping of zebra examples might focus upon the whole of which the appearing sign is a part: the totality of the psychophysical shame event has the blushing as an aspect, just like the whole of two zebras interacting has their striping as an aspect. In that analysis, the blushing and the striping may be seen, immediately, as an icon of the whole.

¹² As to Cassirer’s inspiration from von Uexküll and his *Umwelt* notion, see Frederik Stjernfelt: Simple Animals and Complex Biology. The Double von Uexküll Inspiration in Cassirer’s Philosophy, in: *Synthese* [179/1 \(2009\)](#), pp. 169–186.

action, immediate “moodiness” of the natural symbolism of all things perceived. Only later in the process, the aesthetic aspects of mythic thought may become independent as art and the qualitative individuality of artworks (just like the other symbolic forms only gradually become institutionally independent during civilization). With respect to semiotic evolution, Peirce, by contrast, is a continuist, pan-evolutionist Darwinist seeing no limits between biological evolution and physical evolution “below” it and historical evolution “above” it.

An important difference here between the two is the relation between semiotic taxonomy and history. Cassirer’s *Ausdruck-Darstellung-Reine Bedeutung* triad is, at the same time, conceived of as a schema for large phases in man’s historical development. Expressions are taken to be pre-(or proto-)propositional, pre-conventional, rooted in mythical thought as expressed in bodily action and ritual, only secondarily given **shape** in linguistically **shaped** **mythical** thought systems. Propositions are taken to arise only in the *Darstellung* phase with language, facilitating the distinction between subject and predicate and so introducing the notion of substance – which is, later again, disappearing in favor of *Reine Bedeutung* which focuses on function only in the development of science. Peirce, by contrast, does not project his semiotic triads onto large-scale semiotic development.¹³ To Peirce, pre-propositional meaning exists only marginally, if at all: “no sign of a thing or kind of thing – the ideas of signs to which concepts belong – can arise except in a proposition; and no logical operation upon a proposition can result in anything but a proposition; so that *non-propositional signs can only exist as constituents of propositions*”.¹⁴ The Peircean idea that all thought is in signs implies that thought signs are propositions which connect by means of logical inferences¹⁵ – even what is usually, by psychologists, called

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Just for variety’s sake: Would *linguistically molded* [UK: *moulded*] be alright with you, too?

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¹³ Krois, however, in some respects follows Terrence Deacon in taking icon-index-symbol to be projectable onto semiotic development so the three sign functions evolutionarily should appear in that order, with symbols as a special human privilege.

¹⁴ An Improvement on the Gamma graphs, 1906, CP 4.583 (My emphasis.)

¹⁵ “Such being the nature of reality in general, in what does the reality of the mind consist? We have seen that the content of consciousness, the entire phenomenal manifestation of mind, is a sign resulting from inference. Upon our principle, therefore, that the absolutely incognizable does not exist, so that the phenomenal manifestation of a substance is the substance, we must conclude that the mind is a sign developing according to the laws of inference.” (CP 5.313)

“associations” is analyzed as inferences, importantly broadening the Peircean concept of inference to encompass thought processes using non-linguistic sign types like images, gestures, diagrams, etc.

Many Peirce scholars fail to realize the central role that propositions play in Peircean semiotics, and John Krois, too, sometimes tended to underrate the position of logic in Peirce’s framework.¹⁶ The important thing to learn from Peirce is not that semiotics transcends logic – rather, the conception of “logic as semiotics” gives Peirce a broader, semiotic understanding of logic than most other logicians, especially with regard to which signs are able to embody logical relations and functions. This is especially important regarding propositions, or “Dicisigns”, in Peirce’s terminology. The proposition “ must, in order to be understood, be considered as containing two parts. Of these, the one, *which may be called the Subject*, is or represents an Index of a Second existing independently of its being represented, while the other, *which may be called the Predicate*, is or represents an Icon of a Firstness [or quality or essence].”¹⁷ Importantly, this analysis immediately includes images: Dicisigns may consist of a picture with a legend, of a diagram with text, of two combined gestures, or even, in some cases, of one picture only – one and the same picture fulfilling the S and P functions of a Dicisign (this requires that the observer is able to recognize the subject of the picture from “collateral knowledge”). If we go back to Cassirer’s much-quoted definition of “symbolical pregnance”, we recall it gave rise to “immediate, concrete *Darstellung*” (propositional representation). So, it seems, also Cassirer realized that the mythic, emotional, immediate “expressions” incarnated implicit propositions (which, it is true, were only later made linguistically explicit in his second category, *Darstellung*). If that is the case, we might propose the following welding of the semiotic systems of the two and attempt to translate Cassirer’s categories into Peircean terms.¹⁸

¹⁶ Even to the extent of claiming that Peirce “broke with the belief that philosophy is based upon logic [...]” Krois: *Körperbilder* (as fn. 2), p. 101.

¹⁷ Syllabus, 1902. (CP 2.312)

¹⁸ We do not, however, thereby solve the evolutionary issue of projectability of semiotic taxonomy on history.

- *Ausdrücke* – implicit propositions
- *Darstellungen* – explicit propositions
- *Reine Bedeutungen* – propositions translated into relational logic

Embodiment

Cassirer's concept of "symbolic forms" emphasizes the external storage of human endeavors embodied in ritual, myth, language, sciences, institutions, books, artworks, technology, etc. – with the corollary that the individual's access to general insights and actions (and thus transgression of his individuality) goes via his reintegration of such results of civilization. This constitutes an early version of what is now called the "extended mind" – the dependence of individual minds on external storing and action technologies for its functioning.

As Krois realized, Peirce has a partially similar doctrine of the embodiment of signs: reasoning is supported by diagrams with which we interact by means of (bodily or imagined) experimentation. Diagrams comprise graphs, maps, algebras, schemas, linguistic syntax ... – all of them sign structures that offer experiments as a road to gaining information. Diagrammatically represented knowledge provides experimental devices, and, when externalized, expand their scope considerably as well as they become collectively accessible by many subjects.

The issue of embodiment – as investigated during recent decades of cognitive science – was a special field for John Krois' unification of Peirce and Cassirer. Peirce insisted that universals must be conceivably embodied in facts, ideas in signs, and signs in replicas – while Cassirer added an emphasis on the specificities of the human body, taken as a basic reference system for the construction of symbolic forms.

Krois' notion of embodiment is wide and encompasses both the necessary incarnation of meaning in symbols – the most widespread embodiment notion in Peirce and Cassirer taken together – and the connection of signs to the human

body processing them. This latter doctrine, however, is rarely, if ever, addressed in Peirce¹⁹ – while figuring prominently in Cassirer, especially in his doctrine of expression and mythical thought. This comes forward in yet another of Krois’ favorite quotes: “Der menschliche Körper und seine einzelnen Gliedmaßen erscheinen gleichsam als ein ‘bevorzugtes Bezugssystem’, auf das die Gliederung des Gesamtraumes und all dessen, was in ihm gehalten ist, zurückgeführt wird.”²⁰ In this connection, Krois often refers to Cassirer’s example of cosmic directions in Australian aboriginals which are defined not abstractly but with reference myths pertaining to bodily practices like the orientation of burial processions, the location of the afterlife in cosmos, etc. This example is revealing: the Australian cosmic directions do not spring directly from the physiology of the human body but are mediated by mythic and ritual bodily activity. In general, Krois refused embodiment doctrines entailing relativism and their taking the human body to constrain knowledge to such a degree that changes in bodily abilities would completely change knowledge. What interested Krois was rather the immediacy of expression interpretations coming as ingrained capacities of the human body: our ability to decode the symbolical pregnance of blushing of shame – and, in general, the enormous semiotic foundation inherent in such expressive natural symbolisms, easily quoted and brought to functioning in iconic signs like images.

Perspectives

John Krois’ much too early death cut short his ambitious program of developing a unified doctrine of signs, images, and bodies, based on an integration of Peirce’s

¹⁹ A traversal of the Peirce MSS gathered in the Collected Papers, for instance, shows a wide use of the notion of “embodiment”. The term here covers three things: the embodiment of general laws in particulars; the embodiment of thoughts in signs, and the embodiment of signs (e.g. symbols) in material replicas of those signs. In all cases, thus, Peirce’s embodiment notion refers to the fact that general notions of all kinds must (at least possibly, conceivably) incarnate in particulars if not to be void. Peircean “embodiment” thus does not refer to the human body; indeed the wording “human body” is a *hapax* in the Collected Papers; the only one time it appears is in a discussion of scholastic terminology.

²⁰ Ernst Cassirer: Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken, in: Schriften zur Theorie der symbolischen Formen, ed. by Marion Lauschke, Hamburg 2009, p. 45.

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and Cassirer's philosophies. Both Peirce and Cassirer, however, insisted that human knowledge is a collective phenomenon – as implied by Cassirer's integration of *I*, *thou*, and *it* in his doctrine of “basic phenomena”. As quoted by Krois: “Das Wissen von ‘mir’ ist nicht vor und unabhängig vom Wissen des ‘Du’ und ‘Es’, sondern dies alles konstituiert sich nur miteinander.”²¹ John Krois set some important milestones, pointing out a direction of research which I hope many of us will be able to continue.

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²¹ Unpubl. MS; quoted in Krois: *Körperbilder* (as fn. 2), p. 181.