

PEIRCE, THE SELF, AND THE SELF-DIALOGUE OF THOUGHT

Well, thinking and discourse are the same thing, except that what we call thinking is, precisely, the inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself without spoken sound. – Plato¹

How is thinking possible? Or, if we understand thinking in Plato's way, how is it possible to have a dialogue with oneself? Charles S. Peirce accepts Plato's idea of

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

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

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

Thinking is also future-oriented. This means that one concept triggers several others, which are cognitive effects including one's own possible actions. A ction here includes how we think, for Peirce regards thought as a kind of action.⁷ For example, the idea of sulfuric acid triggers a number of ideas (its corrosive power, its chemical formula, how it reacts to bases,...). Among these ideas is DonB "s s.

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

This brings me to Peirce's idea of the self. We understand that thinking requires self-consciousness, and we usually

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

Peirce maintains that the self is an inference based on ignorance and error, as evidenced by the conflict between the child's testimony and her mother's, followed by the appeal to experience. Because several opinions are required, the self is constituted in a *community*. Let us modify our thought-experiment to clarify this. Suppose Mom is cooking when the doorbell rings. She leaves the kitchen. T

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

The self is posited to explain ignorance and error, and even these features are recognized for what they are. Since the self can make true statements about itself, it reveals that it is oriented

At this point I should remark that despite the fact that the self is inferred, it is not an illusion. For Peirce, inference is not

is in signs, and so

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

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

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