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2 **47 Against Preposterous Philosophies** 3 4 **of Mind**

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6 [Some] imagine that an idea has to be connected with a brain, or has to inhere in a “soul”.
7 This is preposterous: the idea does not belong to the soul; it is the soul that belongs to the
8 idea. The soul does for the idea just what the cellulose does for the Beauty of the rose; that
9 is to say, it affords its opportunity. (EPII: 122, 1902).

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11 The remark is found in the second chapter of Peirce’s *Minute Logic*, “On Science
12 and Natural Classes”. There Peirce explains that his classification of the sciences
13 is not an artificial one, conceived in aprioristic fashion, but a living or natural
14 classification, resembling rather the biologist’s classification of species. In this
15 context Peirce brings up the relation between ideas and the soul to counter
16 those who say that we first need to know the workings of the human psyche
17 before we can properly classify the things we claim to know. This is the same
18 objection that Peirce makes against psychologism in logic. Peirce’s remark,
19 however, reaches far beyond that of a proper classification of the sciences. It
20 captures a view of the mind that runs counter to the tradition in a most radical
21 way. The remark is not an isolated comment either. For instance, more than
22 three decades earlier Peirce illustrated his view by writing: “just as we say that
23 a body is in motion, and not that motion is in a body we ought to say that we
24 are in thought, and not that thoughts are in us” (W2: 227n).

25 I particularly like the quotation because it encapsulates a concise frontal
26 attack on the modern conception of the mind as it is shaped by, and after,
27 Descartes – a conception that is still very much alive even today. In fact, it
28 addresses not only the original dualistic interpretation – with its radical separa-
29 tion of mind and body – but also its monistic offspring, such as the mind-brain
30 identity theory. Whether we adhere to a dualistic or a monistic account, the basic
31 notion remains the same: our thoughts are believed to spring from some inner
32 source. Not without cynicism, Peirce observes that though Descartes’s idea of a
33 pineal gland is routinely ridiculed, “everybody continues to think of mind in
34 this same general way, as something within this person or that, belonging to
35 him and correlative to the real world” (CP 5.128). This modern conception is
36 further reinforced and intertwined with the modern conception of man as an
37 autonomous individual who enters society by choice and preformed. Our inter-
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1 action with others does not shape our mind; it merely gives it content. In the
 2 short space allotted I will say something about this attack on the modern con-
 3 ception of mind and the inspiring alternative it opens up.

4 In the quotation, Peirce calls the belief that ideas inhere in a soul pre-
 5 posterous. The *Century Dictionary*, to which Peirce amply contributed, defines
 6 preposterous as “having that last which ought to be first”, referring to the word’s
 7 origin as the combination of *præ* and *posterus*, the Latin for “before” and “com-
 8 ing after” (CD: 4697). Though over time the word accrued other meanings, Peirce’s
 9 ethics of terminology suggests he might stick to the original one. In more recent
 10 times, Jacques Barzun has been talking of the *fallacy of preposterism*. By this he
 11 means the fallacy of “seeking to obtain straight off what can only be the fruit of
 12 some effort, putting an end before the beginning”.² Susan Haack has drawn this
 13 fallacy more directly into the moral realm, stating that preposterism causes
 14 sham reasoning: One is not genuinely interested in what is true, but begins by
 15 expostulating what one wants to be true and then uses inquiry to find one’s
 16 support for it – and we all know that it is much easier to convince someone of
 17 what he already believes than to convince someone of something he does not
 18 believe, or has not yet formed an opinion about.³ The generally held belief that
 19 we have a soul, or mind, is a prime example of something that has been found
 20 important enough to invite preposterism. Historically, the reasons why we have
 21 ascribed a soul to ourselves have varied greatly. To name but a few, we have
 22 brought in the notion of a soul as a plausible explanation for how we think,
 23 feel, and put our body in motion; as a way to develop a meaningful theory about
 24 life after death; as an anchor for theories that rely on the concept of autonomous
 25 moral agents; and as the foundation for an epistemology that sought to ground
 26 all knowledge in the knowing individual – Descartes’s famous *ego cogito*. It
 27 would not be incorrect to say that typically we start with a notion of the soul
 28 that for whatever reason we know *has* to be true – that is unquestionably true –
 29 and then proceed to show that reality conforms to it. We know what we are
 30 looking for, and thus we find it.

31 If instead we want to put first things first, where do we begin? Taking Peirce’s
 32 quotation as our guide, we should first explore these so-called ideas. When we
 33 reflect upon our thought, it is ideas that we perceive. Hence, to put the soul, or
 34 the mind, or the brain ahead of ideas is preposterous. The ideas come first and
 35 the soul, mind, or brain, as an explanation for the presence of these ideas and
 36 their interconnections, comes after. A familiar way of talking about ideas is

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38 ² Michael Murray (ed.). 2002. *The Jacques Barzun Reader*. New York: Harper Collins. 398.

39 ³ Susan Haack. 1997. Science, Scientism, and Anti-Science in the Age of Preposterism. *Sceptical*
 40 *Inquirer* 21(6).

1 Locke's. Locke uses the term to stand for "whatsoever is the Object of the Under-
 2 standing when a Man thinks".⁴ Peirce is in broad agreement with this (CP 1.285),
 3 though he objects that Locke and his fellow empiricists are preposterous about
 4 ideas. Their conception of ideas comes already pre-loaded with lots of meta-
 5 physics. Instead, Peirce develops what he calls phaneroscopy, which studies
 6 not ideas but the *phaneron* as it immediately presents itself independently of
 7 any act of the understanding, including those acts that shaped the empiricists'
 8 notion of ideas. With the *phaneron* Peirce means "the collective total of all that
 9 is in any way or in any sense present to the mind, quite regardless of whether
 10 it corresponds to any real thing or not" (CP 1.284). Connecting it all back to
 11 Peirce's classification of the sciences, phaneroscopy is, for Peirce, the most basic
 12 of the positive sciences.

13 Hence, putting first things first, it is with phaneroscopy that we must begin,
 14 not with a Cartesian *ego cogito*, or with the need for some medium that can
 15 satisfy our desire for immortality or onto which to paste our personhood. Making
 16 what he takes to be minimal assumptions about the *phaneron*, and with the
 17 help of a branch of mathematics that is virtually presuppositionless (topology),
 18 Peirce extracts from the *phaneron* three categories that are present in anything we
 19 can possibly think of: firstness (the pure quality of being what it is, positively, and
 20 independently of anything else), secondness (the unmediated opposition of a
 21 first to something it is not), and thirdness (a positive relation between two firsts
 22 that are second to each other).⁵ Suppose that after a long day of travel the next
 23 morning you wake up, slowly, in a strange bed. When in that brief moment
 24 between sleep and wakefulness you become dimly aware of a general presence,
 25 you are close to experiencing pure firstness. When you subsequently become
 26 dimly aware also of yourself as being there, an element of secondness enters as
 27 what you first experienced is now second to you. This is close to an experience
 28 of pure secondness, as the two are still unrelated. When you subsequently recall
 29 the travels of the previous day, thirdness emerges, as a positive relation is being
 30 established between you and the room. Here, I think, we see the root of our
 31 notion of a soul, or a mind, or a self, etc. as a yet undefined (phaneroscopic)
 32 opposition that can be fleshed out at the level of thirdness.

33 First, though, we need to take a step back and ask how anything can be
 34 lifted out of this *phaneron* to begin with. Peirce finds the answer in normative
 35 science. Normative science studies the *phaneron* insofar as it conforms to certain

37 ⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford:
 38 Clarendon Press, 1975), I.i.8.

39 ⁵ For a brief account, see Cornelis de Waal, *Peirce: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Blooms-
 40 bury, 2013), chapter 3.

1 ends. Hence, it says that certain things can be lifted out of the phaneron by
 2 exploring motives. As is well known, Peirce divides normative science into
 3 esthetics, ethics, and logic. In the esthetic mood we extract from the phaneron
 4 something that imparts a positive simple immediate quality of totality (CP 5.132);
 5 esthetics aims to identify what is “objectively admirable without any ulterior
 6 reason” (CP 1.191). Peirce next distinguishes ethics, which studies the *conformity*
 7 of action to something admirable. Finally, logic studies a particular type of
 8 action, called reasoning, in relationship to *its* end, which is truth, or the correct
 9 representation in thought of how things are. Normative science thus allows us to
 10 extract from the phaneron *ideas*, like “the earth revolves around the sun”, “there
 11 is a ship at the horizon”, and “we have a soul”, some of which are true and
 12 others not.

13 How does this all relate to our notion of a soul or mind? In the late 1860s,
 14 Peirce addresses the issue as follows (W2: 202): Though at birth the child is con-
 15 scious, he does not yet have what Peirce calls a self. The latter is acquired in the
 16 interaction with others and with the environment more generally. Peirce gives
 17 the example of a mother who warns her child that the stove is hot. The child –
 18 whose experience with hot and cold is restricted to what he immediately feels –
 19 disbelieves what he hears because the stove does not feel hot to him. It is only
 20 upon touching the stove that the child discovers that his mother’s testimony was
 21 a better sign of truth than his own experience. Hence, the child becomes aware
 22 of error and ignorance, and in effect he responds to it by positing, not deliberately
 23 but as a matter of course, something like a self, mind, or soul, in which those
 24 errors and his ignorance can inhere. Our initial notion of the self thus emerges
 25 from our experience of opposition – from things being different than we think
 26 them to be. In attempting to get a better understanding of this predicament,
 27 various questions can be asked. Is this hypothesis of a *single* self not premature?
 28 Why not say that the various experiences of discord lead to a multiplicity of
 29 selves? If there is a single self, what constitutes its unity? Can we somehow
 30 gain direct access to its innards? How does self relate to consciousness? Is there
 31 more to self than an accumulation of error and ignorance – of our idiosyncrasies,
 32 of our not fitting in? Etc.

33 Given how the self enters the scene, the most obvious answer is that we
 34 come to know it through a prolonged interaction with it. This is pretty much
 35 how we come to know anything. Questions like the unity of the self, or its
 36 persistence through time, could also find an answer this way – we come to
 37 know it like we come to know the unity or persistence of everything else that
 38 enters our experience, whether grapefruits or train stations, namely through
 39 our interactions with it. Some have argued that we have an immediate access
 40 to the self because we are conscious of it. Peirce, however, sees serious problems

1 with identifying our mind or self with our consciousness of it. Though our nervous
2 system happens to exhibit both the phenomenon of consciousness and that of
3 mind, this does not prove them identical, and the discovery of unconscious
4 mind is a clear strike against it (CP 7.364). Peirce sees the relation as follows:
5 When we are conscious of something – for instance, that rose bushes have sharp
6 thorns – this is merely the inward aspect of what is essentially an outward fact.
7 And it would be a mistake to confuse the former for the latter, or to simply
8 assume them equivalent. Peirce argues further that how we are conscious of
9 our own thoughts is not in any essential way different from how we are con-
10 scious of common facts, like seeing a tree down the road, hearing a train cross
11 a bridge, or smelling that the toast is burnt.

12 Peirce's response lies in his semeiotics. We appear to ourselves – as every-
13 thing appear to us – as a sign, that is, as something that stands for something
14 else in some respect. Every perception, including the products of what is com-
15 monly called introspection, is an interpretation of something (i.e., a sign) that
16 is made determinate by something it is not (the object the sign is a sign of). We
17 do seem to have immediate experiences, say, when we experience an unex-
18 pected blow against the head, but that is merely a limiting case. What makes it
19 immediate is not some direct insight, but that it is not (yet) determined by some-
20 thing it is not – say the stray baseball that was responsible for it. All meaningful
21 perception is mediated; it is the result of an abduction, conscious or unconscious,
22 in which it appears as a plausible hypothesis – that is, as something worthy of
23 being lifted from the phaneron. This is true also for our experience of self.

24 It next becomes our task to flesh out this hypothesis, and to do so independ-
25 ently of anything else we want our selves to be. Because space is limited, I can
26 only give the very beginnings of a brief sketch. Since we appear to ourselves as
27 an (admittedly complex) sign, we appear to ourselves as second. The result is a
28 duality that manifests itself as an inner dialogue wherein we constantly chase
29 our own tale without ever catching up: we endlessly replace our self with a
30 new interpretation of our self. The sign that we are to ourselves is thus always
31 a sign external to the new self that is being generated in the interpretation of
32 our old self, and which itself emerges as a sign to be interpreted. Seen this
33 way, there is no essential difference between my being in dialogue with my self
34 (or myself) and my being in dialogue with some other self. The issue is merely
35 one of access. In the dialogue we carry on with our self we have accustomed
36 ourselves to suppressing our vocal cords, thus creating a silent conversation
37 that only we can hear. Moreover, through our memory we have access to infor-
38 mation, however dubious at times, that others have not. These differences, how-
39 ever, are inconsequential. There are inaudible dialogues between others as well,

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1 and there is a great variety of sources of information, all with their own restric-
2 tions on who can access them and when.

3 Our discussion shows that the conversation with one's self is derivative.
4 We are not born talking to ourselves but only acquire this trait by having first
5 conversed with others. Hence, in our exploration we should begin with the com-
6 munal mind, the mind that we come to partake in after birth, as it is from this
7 that our so-called individual minds, or souls, are subsequently distilled. It is the
8 ideas that shape our self, not our self that shapes our ideas; we learn to speak
9 about ourselves by being spoken to, sometimes with disastrous consequences.
10 Earlier we saw that we begin to attribute a mind, self, or soul, to ourselves (the
11 terms vary) when we come to realize that sometimes there is a discrepancy
12 between what we think and how things are. This consciousness then comes to
13 suggest what belongs to this mind and what does not. We realized, however,
14 that this rests upon us confusing the thought, or the idea, with our being con-
15 scious of that thought. This being conscious of the thought is merely its inward
16 aspect – something that accrues to the idea without belonging to its essence.
17 Put in semeiotic terms, albeit not Peirce's, it is part of the sign vehicle without
18 being part of the sign proper. Take a weathervane that signals the direction of
19 the wind. This weathervane has many elements that enable it to act as a sign –
20 afford it its opportunity as Peirce has it. These elements, however, are not essen-
21 tial to the weathervane acting as a sign because they could have been very
22 different – the weathervane could have been made of different material, have a
23 different colour, shape, size, etc. Thus, if my thinking that the earth revolves
24 around the sun constitutes a sign (because at that moment this is how I appear
25 to myself), my being conscious of it has the same relationship to the thought as
26 the chicken on a weathervane has to the direction of the wind. It is part of the
27 vehicle that enables that particular sign action to occur without being essential
28 to it. One and the same thought-sign – say that the earth revolves around the
29 sun – can reside in anything that enables it to act as that sign. Though this surely
30 includes individual human consciousness, it is certainly not limited to it. It can
31 be written in a book, carved in stone, painted on canvas, or displayed with a
32 Java app on a website. In fact, Peirce is keen to observe that it makes far more
33 sense to say that an author's thought resides in his books, of which countless
34 copies are printed, than in his brain. In determining its meaning it is not the
35 intention of the author that counts, nor the consciousness that generated or
36 accompanied the thought, but the interpretation by others, including the author's
37 future self, and this is a result of the sign action of the thought on paper. Once
38 the book is printed, the author too becomes a reader.

39 Now what can we say of the unity of the self or rather, of ourselves, or of
40 its persistence through time? I believe that I am the teenager that played rugby

1 at eighteen, the journalist that covered the fall of the Berlin Wall in his late
2 twenties, the philosopher that wrote a book on Peirce, etc. One way of stating
3 this is that all those moments belong to one and the same person. If the self is
4 how we appear to ourselves, then we can look at personhood as a consistent
5 thread through a multiplicity of selves – both synchronic and diachronic –
6 which together constitute a sign that elicits interpretation. We can even look at
7 the body, with all its changes and transformations, as its sign vehicle. Note,
8 though, that such personhood is not an isolated, internal affair. It is a public
9 affair, even though for much of it I am the only witness; it includes what others
10 say or think about me, even without my knowing it. Given what is said, it is not
11 necessary that everything that forms a consistent thread through a multiplicity
12 of selves, and would thus be a person, be all connected to a single body or
13 follow a single temporal train. A football team, and even a book or a theory,
14 could be a person. The term might apply even to a bulky report on global warm-
15 ing written perhaps by a hundred experts of whom none has a clear picture of
16 the issue at hand or of all that the text in a broad sense entails.⁶

17 All of this at best hints at some most rudimentary beginnings of a criticism
18 of the traditional conceptions of consciousness, mind, soul, self, person, etc.,
19 with its semeiotic alternative – both suggested by Peirce’s writings and inspired
20 by the above quotation.

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39 **6** For a fuller discussion see Cornelis de Waal’s *Science Beyond the Self: Remarks on Charles S.*
40 *Peirce’s Social Epistemology. Cognitio: Revista de Filosofia* 7.1 (2006): 149–63.