

Percept and perceptual judgment in Peirce's phenomenology

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Abstract: *Between 1900 and 1908 Peirce wrote many papers about phenomenology and theory of perception. The most important are the series of seven lectures that Peirce delivered in Harvard on 1903 and a long manuscript that he composed few months later, called On Telepathy. In those writings our perceptual experience is described as composed by two elements. The first one is the pure reaction against the blow of the external object, which is almost forced upon us; it's called percept. The second element belongs to the order of interpretation and it's called perceptual judgment.*

It's very important to find a connection between those two parts because in our experience we cannot recognize a sharp line of demarcation: the moment of reaction and passivity seems to shade progressively into the interpretation of the percept. A solution for this problem is presented in On Telepathy, where Peirce introduces a new term: percipuum. It represents our perceptual experience, considered for his essential relation with continuum. The link between continuity and perception shows itself through the link between time and perception.

Percipuum can never be isolated, but it's always spread out in a lapse of time and we know that in Peirce's philosophy time is the most authentic continuous phenomenon. If time is a continuum and time constitutes the primary structure of every perceptual experience, then perceptual experience itself will have to be continuous.

After 1903 the word percipuum disappears from Peirce's writings but the importance of continuity grows more and more, because every process of our knowledge is authentically semiotic from the beginning.

Keywords: *Percept. Perceptual judgment. Percipuum. Time. Continuity.*

Percepto e julgamento perceptivo na fenomenologia de Peirce

Resumo*: Entre 1900 e 1908, Peirce escreveu muitos artigos sobre fenomenologia e teoria da percepção. Os mais importantes são a série de sete palestras que Peirce apresentou em Harvard em 1903 e um longo manuscrito que ele compôs poucos meses depois, chamado *Sobre a Telepatia*. Nesses escritos, nossa experiência perceptiva é descrita como composta de dois elementos. O primeiro é a pura reação contra o golpe do objeto externo, que é quase forçado contra nós; isso é chamado de *percepto*. O segundo elemento pertence à ordem da interpretação e é chamado *juízo perceptivo*.

É muito importante encontrar uma conexão entre essas duas partes, porque em nossa experiência não podemos reconhecer uma linha precisa de demarcação: os momentos de reação e de passividade parecem se adumbrar progressivamente na interpretação do percepto. Uma solução para este problema é apresentada em *Sobre a Telepatia*, onde Peirce introduz um novo termo: *percipuum*. O termo representa nossa experiência perceptiva, considerada por sua relação essencial com o continuum. O elo entre continuidade e percepção mostra-se através do elo entre tempo e percepção.

O percipuum nunca pode ser isolado, mas está sempre disperso num lapso de tempo, e sabemos que na filosofia de Peirce o tempo é o fenômeno contínuo mais autêntico. Se o tempo é um continuum e o tempo constitui a estrutura primária de toda experiência perceptiva, então a própria experiência perceptiva terá de ser contínua.

Depois de 1903, a palavra percipuum desaparece dos escritos de Peirce, mas a importância da continuidade cresce cada vez mais, porque todo processo de nosso conhecimento é autenticamente semiótico desde o início.

Palavras-chave: Percepto. Juízo perceptivo. *Percipuum*. Tempo. Continuidade.

*Tradução do inglês para o português de Cassiano Terra Rodrigues.

Every philosopher who denies the doctrine of the Immediate Perception,- including idealists of every stripe,- by that denial cuts off all possibility of every cognising a relation. (EP2: 155)

Those lines are from the second in the series of seven lectures that Peirce delivered in Harvard on 1903, the title of this lecture is *On Phenomenology*.

Every student who approaches Peirce's philosophy, from his most famous papers, *On a New List of Categories*, *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities*, *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man*, knows that Peirce's gnoseology is dominated by the theory of anti-intuitionism: it's impossible to find a *primum* in our knowledge, we have no power of intuition, because every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions. Whenever we try to reconstruct the right order of our inferences to find the very first instant when we had the absolute contact with the external object, we fail because the inferences series is never ending. The starting point of our reasoning cannot be the so-called "first impressions of senses".

At this point one question arises: how could we reconcile those thesis with the sentences contained in *On Phenomenology*? What happened from 1868 to 1903 in Peirce's philosophy? Should we suppose that his thought developed so much that he completely denied his early ideas?

The purpose of my inquiry is to try to find an answer to those questions and for this reason I studied Peirce's theory of perception in his late writings, especially in those written between 1900 and 1908.

The first result of my research is that we can find only an outward contradiction in Peirce's studies about perceptual experience. The first paper I would consider is *Pearson's Grammar of Science*, written in 1900. In this article Peirce maintains the same opinion about sense impressions, but he explains clearly the reason why he disagrees with every kind of intuitionism.

He (*Pearson*) tells us that each of us is like the operator at a central telephone office, shut out from the external world, of which he is informed only by sense-impressions. Not at all! Few things are more completely hidden from my observation than those hypothetical elements of thought which the psychologist finds reason to pronounce "immediate", in his sense. (EP2: 62)

If we build our knowledge on sense impressions we'll weak the link between the subject and the reality, and we reduce this link to a fragile nerve stimulation. Anti-intuitionism in its authentic meaning doesn't want to deny the possibility of a true knowledge. On the contrary it is a useful instrument to demonstrate the deep isomorphism between human reason and universe.

The relation between man and nature is also the condition of possibility for our great successes in science and knowledge. We can discover the laws of nature not only by using sense impressions, but especially by using abductive reasoning; the source of abduction is the original analogy between our reason's categories and nature's categories.

Peirce repeatedly examines this problem during the Harvard Lectures. Here, especially in the third and in the fourth one, he is interested in demonstrating the reality of Thirdness and this category is presented from a twofold standpoint.

- On one hand it is the active general principle, really operative in nature as a law. The nature is not made of blind contrasts of objects. The fact that I'm absolutely

sure that a stone will fall to the floor when I let it go, testifies that there is a kind of uniformity in nature that corresponds to a reality.

- On the other hand Thirdness is the category that dominates our reasoning. It is the representation, the character of mediations that is present also in the very first steps of our knowledge, in the first perceptual experiences.

The demonstration of this second feature of Thirdness is the purpose of the deep perception analysis that Peirce undertook in 1903.

Which science could accomplish the difficult task of studying our perceptual experience?

For sure this science must be Phenomenology or - as Peirce called it after 1902 - Phaneroscopy. This discipline has a paramount importance in the classification of sciences. It occupies the second place, just after mathematics. It's the initial great department of whole philosophy, preceding ethics, esthetics, logic and metaphysics. It's an inquiry into the most elementary conditions that allow experience to appear the way it does.

What we have to do as students of phenomenology is simply to open our mental eyes and look at the phenomenon and say what are the characteristics that are never wanting in it. (EP2: 147)

We have to pay attention to the method of phaneroscopy. This particular method is the pure observation, free from every kind of preconceived interpretation. The phaneroscopist should simply observe and describe what is present in every appearance. We immediately realize that this is one of the most difficult tasks for the philosopher and we have to inquire whether such description activity is possible or not. We must prove that whenever we observe an object our sight is not a mere passive looking, but in the same time is neither a complete semiotic process.

If every description of our experience is an interpretation, totally determined by our mental processes we'll have to admit that phaneroscopy is a part of semiotic.

Peirce is extremely clear about the relation between phenomenology and semiotic in his writings. Those two disciplines are completely separated: semiotic is built on phaneroscopy. If this classification has to be taken seriously, then it'll imply that in our experience we can find something "before" semiotic, a moment that comes before interpretation. For this reason we should find also in perceptual phenomena a character of interpretation, a part that belongs to the order of signification (and this is the third category), but also a part that comes before interpretation, that has no generality; it's a pure reaction against the blow of the external object and it's almost forced upon us (the second category).

In the Harvard Lectures the first aspect is called **perceptual judgment**, while the second one, the passive and blind one, is called **percept**.

The most interesting problem we have to solve now is about the nature of the borderline between those two elements. We know that in our experience we cannot distinguish an instant n° 1, of brute compulsion, and an instant n°2, when the judgment about the percept is already done.

Then how shall we describe the relation between percept and perceptual judgment? We have to admit that the Harvard Lecture's distinction looks quite rigid.

Peirce himself thought that this explanation was not sufficient to solve the problem, so he wrote a paper few months later, *On Telepathy*, where he examines more closely perceptual phenomena. Here Peirce resolves the duality of percept and perceptual judgment by the introduction of a new term: **percipuum**.

I propose to consider the percept as immediately interpreted in the perceptual judgment, under the name of *percipuum*. (CP 7.643)

It's obvious that this definition by itself is not perfectly clear, so we have to infer the complete meaning of *percipuum* from the context of *On Telepathy*.

At a first sight we could think that *percipuum* is a kind of macro-perceptual-phenomenon, a big container from which we can abstract by precision percept and perceptual judgment. Actually its assignment is to keep together all the elements of perceptual experience, but if we read carefully *On Telepathy* we'll realize that this interpretation it's reductive. Percipuum is treated in *On Telepathy* as a self-sufficient concept: it represents our perceptual experience, considered for his essential relation with continuum. The link between continuity and perception shows itself through the link between time and perception.

We never experience one singular percipuum, which corresponds to one singular instant of our encounter with the object, because our consciousness is not instantaneous.

In the present moment we are directly aware of the flow of time, or in other words that thing changes. (CP 7.649)

The percipuum can never be isolated, but it's always included into the triad *antecipuum- percipuum- ponecipuum*. *Antecipuum* is the unconscious recent memory of what we perceived one instant ago that still remains in the present instant, while *ponecipuum* is the near anticipation of what's going to happen, unconscious as well. There is no sharp line of demarcation between those terms and Peirce adds that percipuum can be defined as an extreme case of *antecipuum* and an extreme case of *ponecipuum* (CP 7.648) They are completely melted into the present moment.

There is no span of present time so short as not contain something remembered, that is, taken as a reasonable conjecture, not containing something expected for the confirmation which we are waiting. (CP 7.675)

The connection between perception and continuity now is clear, because in Peirce's philosophy time is the most authentic continuous phenomenon. If time is a continuum and time constitutes the primary structure of every perceptual experience, then the perceptual experience itself will have to be continuous.

We have to remember that in 1903 Peirce considered true continuum as the relation of the parts of an unbroken space or time. It's composed of pure possibilities, with no singular points on it.

it seems necessary to say that a continuum, where it *is* continuous and unbroken, contains no definite parts; that its parts are created in the act of defining them and the precise definition of them breaks the continuity. (CP 6.168)

There are two important consequences of this definition.

The first one is that flow of time cannot be composed by singular instants.

Kant squarely hit the nail on the head when he said that every part of a lapse of time was a lapse of time. But here as in many parts of his philosophy, Kant did not quite understand himself, and imagined that in saying that every part of a time is a time he had only said that time is infinitely divisible. He spoke wiser than he

knew. To say that every part of time is a time is to say that time contains no absolute instant, no exact date; for such instant, or date, would be an ultimate part of time. (MS 881:57)

The second one is that mathematical analysis doesn't study the true continuum, but its most authentic meaning can be known only by the observation of our experience.

The perceptual analysis contained in *On Telepathy* is the most complete study on this topic that Peirce ever did. Now I would briefly examine what happened to those same problems in the following years. After 1903 the word *percipuum* totally disappeared from Peirce's writings and *percept* and *perceptual judgment* are used very rarely. We could think that Peirce suddenly disinterested himself in those subjects and surely we have to admit that the great American philosopher changed his standpoint, because between 1906 and 1909 semiotic became once again his main interest. Nevertheless we have to take a good look to those manuscripts where study of perception is still present.

In those writings, especially in manuscripts n° 609, 298, 299, the role played by continuum in perceptual experience grows more and more. The third category permeates every single moment of our knowledge, even the percept, which was the totally blind and passive element of our experience. Should we think then that there is no room any more for the second category, for the pure observation, free from every interpretation, that simply reacts against the blow of the external object? If we read carefully those pages it'll be impossible to accept this hypothesis. One of the most frequent words used here by Peirce is "experience" and it means our mind's powerlessness before the force of external object. It's something even stronger than Secondness.

(...) the sense of externality in perception consists in a sense of powerlessness before the overwhelming force of perception. Now the only way in which any force can be learned is by something like trying to oppose it. That we do something like this is shown by the shock we receive from any unexpected experience. It is the inertia of mind, which tends to remain in the state in which it is. (MS 299: 19)

How can we reconcile those two opposite elements, continuity and experience?

Under "experience", we include not merely perception, but the sequence of one perception upon another; and even a generalization of the character of such sequence; this generalization being limited to the direct cognisance of a single person. (MS 299: 66).

We have to realize that we cannot find a logical/chronological line between the second and the third category. Every process in our knowledge is semiotic from the beginning, because we can only reason with signs, but at the same time if the sign is not embodied in an event, which is the object of our experience, we'll never be able to know it. The event is totally compulsive and it's the starting point for every continuous sign reference. The sign embodied is something unexpected for our mind, and it guarantees growth of our knowledge, because it's totally new, unpredictable. Continuity and experience are absolutely melted in knowledge and at the same time they are both essential.

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