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Comment on Richard Swedberg/3. A Few Remarks on Musement and Abduction

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Comment on Richard Swedberg/3 A Few Remarks on Musement and Abduction

by Claudio Paolucci

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It is true: among the many notions elaborated by Peirce, abduction is probably the most studied one. Richard Swedberg's essay does a great job in highlighting all the heterogeneous forms of thinking that abduction comes to imply within Peirce's "mature" thought. However, the criticisms moved in the conclusion against Peirce's way of thinking about abduction – and, therefore, about the action of theorizing – could be relieved or re-thought if one considers the evolution of Peirce's thoughts on the same issue. What is really an abduction if, as Swedberg shows very well, it is abduction itself that, according to Peirce, covers the whole process of theorizing?

Peirce himself must have been confused for a long time, if at the beginning of the Twentieth century he could write he had confused the three forms of inference "in almost everything I printed before the beginning of Twentieth century" [CP 8.227]. Actually, it seems that since the anti-Cartesian Essays (1868) it was instead extremely clear to Peirce what an abduction was. A line of reasoning that infers the minor premise of a syllogism of the type "barbara" from the conclusion and the major premise, the abduction helped to interpret a specific element as one case of a specific rule. Recalling the now classic example of beans, we have a given phenomenon ("white beans on the table") and, in order to interpret it, we subsume it under a known rule ("all the beans in that sack are white"), which allows to explain the still unknown phenomenon as a case of the rule ("these beans come from that sack"). It is a logic and formal conception of the abductive reasoning that makes an element=x the token of a specific type.

However, it is clear that such a formal conception of the abduction does not allow to cover the whole action of “theorizing.” What happens, in fact, if there isn’t a rule? How can it be constructed? Or, if we do have a rule, among many others, which one to choose in order to interpret the element= x as the case of that rule, and give it meaning? Not by chance, Peirce later put the above-mentioned confusion down to just the too restricted and formal conception of abduction he had had before the beginning of the Twentieth century.

In my opinion, the internal shift in Peirce’s thought on abduction takes place with his reflections on *musement*, that Swedberg seems to bring maybe too much back to a form of imaginative *reverie*.

As a word, *musement* covers a very wide semantic field, on the boundaries between “getting inspiration,” “fantasizing,” “wandering in thought,” etc. Peirce defines *musement* as “the power to establish connections between different objects, especially between objects in different Universes” [CP 6.455]. Given two universes of experience that look heterogeneous, the *musement* is the reasoning through which we can “get the inspiration” (“musing,” indeed) that allows us to connect them to each other and explain the one through the other. This process, whose texture “is so antipodal to vacancy and dreaminess,” is, in Peirce’s words, “Pure Play which has no rules, except this very law of liberty” [CP 6.455-8]. Here is a fundamental point: *there isn’t a rule in musement*, heterogeneous universes of experience cannot be connected on the basis of rules. They cannot be subsumed under rules. According to Peirce, the only rule presiding over this connection between universes of experience is “the law of liberty,” which is a wholly oxymoronic formulation. For those who are acquainted with Peirce’s work, however, such a formulation obviously and clearly refers to *synechism*, that is, his theory of the *continuum*, whose specificities were being outlined by Peirce precisely in those years. In the theory of *synechism*, in fact, also the liberty and the spontaneity of the event and of the springing up of something new (Peirce calls that “Firstness”) arise from regular mechanisms that have the nature of a law or a habit (Peirce calls them “Thirdness”).

In order to explain this fundamental point, i.e. what the law of liberty is, let us consider a well-known example inside the semiotic tradition, namely the feeling of pain rising from burning one’s hand with the coffee percolator’s hot handle during the morning breakfast, on which Umberto Eco constructed his theory of primary iconism in *Kant and the Platypus*. As for Eco, for Peirce the burning sensation caused by the coffee percolator is a Firstness, that is, “the springing up of something new” [CP 6.203]. However, since for Peirce Firstnesses are not born isolated, the sensation of pain in the example of the morning coffee (Firstness) is a quality emerging from a background of experiential habits (getting up in the morning, taking the coffee

percolator, putting it on the gas without putting the gas on too high, placing the percolator in the right place: a whole syntax of habits and regularities of everyday experience). Therefore the sensation of pain (Firstness) arises from a background of habits (Thirdness) which did not imply it (in the breakfast “script” it is not regular to feel pain) and it can only arise in opposition (Secondness) to such a background of habits. In other words, on the basis of a series of regularities and habits that define the laws of my morning breakfast (Thirdness), a distinctive path can arise, from which something new emerges, something that the local system’s regularity did not include and provide. Firstness is such an event, springing up in opposition (Secondness) to a regular and continuous background of Thirdnesses. This is “the law of liberty,” which represents the only constitutive rule of *musement* for Peirce.

The *play of musement* for Peirce therefore means connecting two different realms of experience without a rule governing such a connection, although there is still a regularity that is constitutive of “the law of liberty.” His being a pure play that “involves no purpose save that of casting aside all purpose” [CP 6.458] refers very clearly to the structure of the aesthetic judgement in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, where judgement is based exactly on a free play between faculties without rules, but notwithstanding it requires its own universality. It is indeed a “subjective universality” that is not valid objectively, such as the one based on rules, but rather distributively, that is, “for each one individually.” For Kant, the aesthetic judgement has just all the characteristics that constitute *musement* for Peirce: i) it is based on a “finality without purpose”; ii) it is based on a free play of thought without any rules (but based on regularities); iii) it gives rise to a subjective universality that is valid “for each one individually”, therefore it has the form of the “law of liberty.” It is certainly not by chance that Peirce has always defined himself as “the most Kantian thinker.”

This threefold reference to Kant allows us to clarify what abduction becomes when Peirce separates it “from the too narrow and formal concept of inference.” In fact, as “narrow and formal” inference, the abduction defined a movement similar to that of the Kantian reflecting power of judgement, where one case is subsumed under a rule, so that, for example, Eco [1997, 74] explicitly identified the two notions. On the contrary, Peirce’s *play of musement* is the process in which even very distantly separated things come to be connected to each other, through a free play that cannot be subsumed under rules, a process on which, instead, Kant based the aesthetic judgement. Thus, when it will be separated “by the too narrow and formal concept of inference,” for Peirce abduction will cover both these two moments (*musement* and formal inference), while in everything published before the early Twentieth century

it was identified exclusively with the second moment, that is, “subsuming under rules.” Far from being a simple logic inference, abduction will actually become “a weird salad whose fundamental elements are its groundlessness, its ubiquity and its trustworthiness” [MS 692].

On this basis, it becomes clear that such a “weird salad” cannot be reduced to “subsuming under rules.” This is only the “narrow and formal” part of the problem, from which the abduction derives its character of “trustworthiness”, but surely not those of “ubiquity” and “groundlessness.” Much more than an exclusively logic figure, abduction is something of the essence of a mixture (“salad”), and a mixture that holds together disparate things that are usually kept separate:

The abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash. It is an act of *insight*, although of extremely fallible insight. It is true that the different elements of the hypothesis were in our minds before; but it is the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation [CP 5.181].

Abduction is precisely the process of holding together things that were considered as separate before the abductive act. It is in this sense, and not in the sense of an intuitive shift, that abduction is “an extremely fallible act of insight” that comes to us like “a flash,” since it makes us see things that are connected to each other even if they were not or did not seem to be before, showing the links between them and thus identifying the intermediary representation that allows you to switch between them.

The truth is that the whole fabric of our knowledge is one matted felt of pure hypothesis [...] Not the smallest advance can be made in knowledge beyond the stage of vacant staring, without making an abduction at every step [MS 692].

Since it is “Originary Argument” [CP 2.97], that is, of the three forms of reasoning, “the only kind of argument which starts a new idea,” with the abduction Peirce gives us an idea of “growth of knowledge” that consists of keeping together things that we usually considered as separate: the new is made with scraps of old between which a link is constructed thanks to an abduction. The new ideas, whether they are concepts or theories, are Firstnesses emerging from a background of interpretative habits that are rooted in the community in which a tendency to distinguish from them is created, and this generates something new, which was not provided by the system. Such an idea of theorizing looks infinitely precious also within the social sciences, which are claimed to be founded on the ideas of language and meaning.

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Comment on Richard Swedberg/3

A Few Remarks on Musement and Abduction

Abstract: As part of the larger project of trying to revitalize social theory by drawing attention to theorizing, I analyze the views of philosopher Charles S. Peirce on this topic. I take my departure in his 1903 lecture called “How to Theorize” and note that for Peirce theorizing was closely linked to his concept of abduction. In analyzing this central concept in Peirce’s work, I suggest that we may want to look at it especially from a practical point of view. More precisely, what can we learn from Peirce in terms of concrete tips and suggestions for how we ourselves should go about theorizing? I also supplement the material from the 1903 lecture with what can be found in Peirce’s later writings.

Keywords: Theory, social theory, theorizing, Peirce, Charles S., abduction.

Claudio Paolucci teaches Semiotics and Interpretative Semiotics at the Department of Communication, Bologna University, Italy. Since 2005, he is tutor of the PhD Program in Semiotics, Italian Institute of Human Sciences and the University of Bologna. He has taught seminars at the Universities of Paris (CREA, EHESS), São Paulo (PUC), Sofia, Palermo, Toulouse, Milan, Limoges e Teramo. He is editor of the Journals VS and member of the board of Italian Society of Philosophy of Language. He has published more than 20 papers on international journals. His main work is *Structuralism and Interpretation* (Bompiani, 2010, 510 pp.).