Poinsot Reads Peirce on Merging with Reality by Sharing a Quality

Abstract

C. S. Peirce introduced the term "icon" for sign-vehicles that signify their objects in virtue of some shared quality. This qualitative kinship, however, threatens to collapse the relata of the sign into one and the same thing. Accordingly, the late-medieval philosopher of signs John Poinsot held that, "no matter how perfect, a concept [...] always retains a distinction, therefore, between the thing signified and itself signifying." Poinsot is touted by his present-day advocates as a realist, but I believe that, judged by realist standards, his requirement of minimal dissimilarity backfires. Poinsot thinks that, in analyzing the sign, we should stop before a full merger between sign-vehicle and object is reached. Peirce, by contrast, saw good reason to push the analysis all the way down to one isolated quality. Because such a qualitative merger can lend support to realism, I favour Peirce's stance.

> "Of course thought can be distanced from the world by being false, but there is no distance from the world implicit in the very idea of thought."
>
> (John McDowell, *Mind and World*, 2002: 27)

1. Introduction[2]

In 1632 Spain, John Poinsot (religious name John of St. Thomas) published an advanced textbook, the *Artis Logicae Prima et Secunda Pars*. Given the decline of Aristotelian logic, interest in that work has long since waned. However, Poinsot also included in that textbook a detailed discussion of signs. Given the rise of semiotics, that portion of his work is attracting growing attention – so much so that a new hardcover bilingual edition of Poinsot's *Tractatus de Signis* was published in 2013.

Bold claims are being made about that work. Poinsot, some say, is the antidote to the scepticism of Descartes (Deely 2008) and the idealism of Kant (Furton 1997). Poinsot is not just supposed to add one more

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philosophical stance to the accepted roster; rather, he is supposed to be a game-changer. John Deely, Poinsot's contemporary translator, recently published a monograph (2009) arguing that the *Tractatus de Signis* can reshape some of the most fundamental issues in philosophy, to the point of rendering traditional epistemology obsolete. Such pronouncements demand scrutiny.

Anyone trained in mainstream philosophy will indeed notice something different about Poinsot's style of inquiry. The agenda is just not the same. In contrast with his contemporary René Descartes, who self-consciously disowned his scholastic education (cf. Champagne 2008), we do not find in Poinsot's Latin writings the speculative back-flips that afterwards became necessary to accommodate sceptical worries about large-scale deception. Sadly, Poinsot's own back-flips are in the service of religious dogma. Still, according to Douglas Rasmussen, "if we are to get beyond the terms in which the current realist/antirealist debate is conducted, it is to Poinsot and the tradition he represents that we should go" (1992: 274). Semioticians who wish to see their discipline "no longer blocked by the persistent dualisms so widespread in cognitive science and philosophy of mind" (Stjernfelt 2014: 307) should therefore pay close attention.

Although the historical originality of Poinsot's ideas has been questioned by some scholars (Ashworth 1988; Marmo 1987), my concern in this paper is not exegetic. Poinsot is touted by his present-day advocates as a realist. If being a realist means believing that we can know how things really are, then Poinsot is clearly committed to some form of realism. However, I am not certain that his realism is as robust as it could be. My worry has to do with how Poinsot treats iconicity.

If we follow C. S. Peirce and define an icon as any sign-vehicle that stands for its object in virtue of resembling or being like that object, then we encounter a tension. Because similarity is a matter of degree, we can imagine, at one extreme, a situation where the relata at hand resemble each other so completely that they are in fact one and the same. In such a case, it would make little sense to speak of there being a "resemblance." The question in turn becomes whether semiotic theory should countenance such a state of unbroken unity, or whether it should make division-into-two the most basic situation attainable. I want to make this tension of iconicity explicit.

I agree that "an evaluation of Poinsot's doctrine demands a detailed and patient study exposing his doctrine to a lengthy comparison with the formal and quasi-necessary doctrine of signs of Peirce" (Santaella Braga 1991: 158). The disagreement between these major figures, though technical, boils down to this: Poinsot thinks that, in analyzing the sign, we should stop at two things, before the merger between sign-vehicle and object is reached; whereas Peirce thinks that we should push our analysis all the way down to one, where there is a merger.

Because such a qualitative merger is one of the ways in which minds

can connect with the world (cf. Champagne 2006: 29-33), I will argue that a realist should favour Peirce's stance.

2. The Tension Inherent in any Icon

Here is the problem. Whatever is going on in our heads is not an end in itself, at least most of the time. It seems fair to say, then, that a sizable portion of our mental life is directed at something other than itself. Since a sign is anything that stands for something else – "*aliquid stat pro aliquo*," in the generic medieval formula (Jakobson 1979: 16) – it is appropriate to approach such a transaction between mind and world as a semiotic one. This raises two questions: When a thinking subject represents a worldly object in her mind, can the representation she entertains truly bear on the relevant object? And, if so, how?

I will assume without argument that a successful vindication of realism would be a good thing to have, so I will answer the first question in the affirmative. The next question, however, calls for a more delicate response. What exactly does it mean for a mental representation to bear truthfully on its worldly object? In other words, if signs are in the business of relating things, how should we construe the relation involved in cases of veridical representation?

Sign-vehicles can stand for their objects in three different ways: by conventional imputation, causal interaction, or resemblance. Focusing on this last kind, it was Peirce (CP 3.359-403)[3] who introduced the term "icon" to characterize sign-vehicles that signify their objects in virtue of a quality shared with those objects. This qualitative kinship, however, makes icons a unique and potentially problematic class of signs, since it threatens to collapse the semiotic bond by merging the relata into one and the same thing. For "[s]hould the sign ever fully merge with the signified, it would no longer exist as a sign. [...] Since the sign is a substitution for another, duplication of the object into the thing itself and representation of the thing is impossible" (Furton 1995: 130).

Thus, in actual sign-action, twin constraints govern iconic representation. The relata at hand cannot be so dissimilar that they are radically alien from each other. Generalizing this insight, we arrive at Sir William Hamilton's law of homogeneity, which states that "things most unlike must in some respects be like" (Runes 1980: 129). If two (or more) objects are seen to be similar, then the extreme case of such an experience would be that of a *complete* likeness, merging two things into one. This leads to a concomitant constraint, which is that a given similarity cannot

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[3] References to Peirce follow the scholarly convention of giving the volume number of the *Collected Papers*, followed by the paragraph number(s) after a period. Thus, in the present case, "CP 3.359-403" directs one to volume 3, paragraphs 359 to 403.

be so pronounced that it effectively collapses the relation between the things. Minimally, a split or hiatus must intervene for an iconic bond to be put to use. Accordingly, Hamilton's law of homogeneity must be coupled with the law of heterogeneity, which states that "things the most homogeneous [or] similar [...] must in certain respects be heterogeneous [or] dissimilar" (Runes 1980: 126). Sign-vehicle and object must therefore remain existentially distinct, otherwise they melt into an undifferentiated unity (indices and symbols are spared this fate, insofar as both causal interaction and conventional association ensure the requisite rupture).[4]

The following can help to illustrate what is at stake. I am in this room right now. Yet, those surroundings are nevertheless not "in" my mind. The scene I am enjoying from a first-person perspective is therefore, in some sense, a surrogate or stand-in for the genuine article. I want to hold on to this truth. Nevertheless, I am not trapped in some sort of theatre and, so far as I can tell, the experiential display before me *is* an accurate representation of its object. At the very least, whatever speculative worries might cause me to doubt this would have to be imported from somewhere else. Indeed, if I abide by phenomenological honesty, I have to grant that the experiences I am enjoying are enough "like" their objects to license my confidence that those episodes are a sign of worldly things in a richer and more demanding way than my mere imputation. I do not take the initiative to bind a first-person spectacle with an extra-mental reality. On the contrary, the perceptual signs are motivated in such a way that I do not, by my very act of judgement, bring the likeness into being, but I merely add an explicit grasp to a mind-independent relation that was already there. However, I do not want this to mean that because I have a given thing before me, I own it outright. I don't – and my non-inferential access to it, no matter how thorough and convincing, must never erase that fact. The worldly thing escapes my grasp and gaze by the fact that it is not me.

3. Poinsot's Buffer

In his *Tractatus de Signis*, Poinsot explicitly considers this tension. The Thomistic tradition he aligned himself with recognized that, unless we make our concepts the targets of higher-order reflection, those concepts will efface themselves in regular experience (Dalcourt 1994: 6; Furton

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[4] Peirce (CP 2.277) also subdivided icons into images, diagrams, and metaphors. Supposing that this subdivison holds, I am interested in the trait that binds together the genus, not the differentia that set apart its species. Images certainly connect better with a discussion of mental imagery (Dalcourt 1994). In any event, Poinsot had his subdivisons too, so we must guard against "making Peirce's doctrine an absolute touchstone of the truth" (Santaella Braga 1991: 158). To make headway, I am letting the needs of the issue, not the presence of the textual sources, determine what is relevant.

1997: 72, 121). This is because the sign-vehicles spawned by the mind do not work like the sign-vehicles crafted by the hand: "The squeak is physical sound, and the written word is ink on paper. Their signifying function is incidental to their physical being. But a concept does *nothing but* signify" (Wild 1947: 226; cf. Peifer 1952: 193). Yet, if one agrees with this, it becomes difficult to say why one should posit the contribution of a concept in the first place. Hence, in the course of his inquiry into "what conditions are required for something to be a sign" (TDS 218/29-30),[5] Poinsot comes to the conclusion that:

[T]he more a representation is one with the thing represented, the better and more efficacious is the representation. Yet no matter how perfect, a concept in us does not attain to identity with the represented, because it never attains to this, that it represents itself, but [always rather] another than itself, because it always functions as something vicarious in respect of an object; it always retains a distinction, therefore, between the thing signified and itself signifying. (TDS 228/9-18)

Voicing the caveat that such differentiation does not apply to divine revelation (TDS 233/3-25), Poinsot is keen to point out that, in all other instances of semiotic mediation, iconic likeness is never complete – and this, as a matter of principle.

Essentially, Poinsot wants to taint similarity so that *a* can never stand for *a*, since the shortcut of simply contemplating *a* would annul the "standing for" relation. Call this restriction "Poinsot's buffer." It requires that "a sign must be more known and more manifest than the significate in the representing, so that in being and in knowable rationale it is dissimilar and [unequal or] subsidiary to that significate" (TDS 217/38-41).

Going over this last sentence carefully, the three criteria adopted by Poinsot are that, compared to its object, the sign-vehicle must be 1) more known ("*manifestius*"), 2) subordinate or less perfect ("*inferius*"), and 3) dissimilar ("*dissimile*"). Although "the criterion that the sign be more known than the signified is clearly what troubles John [Poinsot]" (Furton 1995: 126), I can see why criterion (1) would hold. The "subordination" in (2) seems to be a corollary of (1). However, criterion (3) is what seems to me misplaced.

Poinsot is widely considered a realist, but I think that, judged by realist standards, his requirement of minimal dissimilarity backfires. Let me now unpack that worry.

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[5] References to Poinsot follow the scholarly convention of giving the page number of the 2013 Deely translation, followed by the line number(s) after a slash. Thus, in the present case, "TDS 228/9-18" directs one to page 218, lines 29 and 30.

4. When the Message is the Medium

Given that human minds roam across particular locations, Poinsot reasoned that sense impressions, which last only so long, must supply information that survives brief acts of delivery (cf. Marmo 1987: 117). Indeed, "the sense, by means of the bodily organs, receives a precise impression or image of the sensible qualities, which is impressed directly on the organs" (Pellerey 1989: 87; cf. Tweedale 1990: 36). The moment this happens, the mental content at hand becomes a sign of the thing(s) that spawned it. The transmission of contents across the various faculties (Fodor 1983) is thereafter sustained by forces which we would today describe in a neuroscientific idiom.

The possibility of tracking functional relations between sensory inputs and motor outputs creates a temptation to understand all cognitive processes solely in terms of efficient causation. In the Thomistic account, though, "[t]he sequence of signs from sensible reality to abstract concepts is founded on the validity of the Similitude and on the necessity of the cause-effect relation" affecting our sense organs and brain (Pellerey 1989: 103). We can use an analogy with a seal of wax to explain how this action has both an iconic and indexical component. The seal and the malleable substance must at some point collide, so in that respect one can be taken as the index of the other. Still, the wax, once impressed, is an icon of the convex seal and can therefore continue to stand for that object even when detached from its original causal encounter (TDS 254/1-255/15).

There is no denying that, like the seal pressed on the wax (or the wax pressed on the seal?), our experience of the world involves impacts of sorts (Champagne 2014a). Yet, if the qualitative stand-ins that result from such situated impacts can also tether minds to the world, why would anyone committed to realism refuse the prospect of a perfect similarity?

I think that what prompts Poinsot to add his *dissimile* clause is Aquinas' thesis that "[a]lthough it is necessary for the truth of cognition that the cognition answer to the thing known, still it is not necessary that the mode of the thing known be the same as the mode of its cognition" (*Summa Contra Gentiles*; translation by Rasmussen 1994: 417). A default recommendation to tease these two elements apart can certainly benefit inquiry in most instances. The problem, however, is that in iconicity *what* we know is precisely *how* we came to know it.

There is more at stake here than individual knowledge. If my semiotic constitution is such that I can approximate but never fully match a given quality (say, the taste of cilantro), then you and I can never use this quality to fully share our state(s) of mind (cf. O'Dea 2002: 177). Trying to achieve intersubjective agreement by jointly attending to evidence thus becomes an inherently flawed communicative strategy.

Since this would be a major concession, let us look at an influential semiotic theory that does make room for a complete qualitative merger.

5. Peirce's Merger

Charles S. Peirce did not know of John Poinsot's writings, but he had a working command of the philosophical literature of the medieval period (Boler 2004; Beuchot and Deely 1995; Tiercelin 2006). Indeed, "[w]hatever agreement we find between Peirce and Poinsot is based upon them independently discovering the same things about the nature of thought-signs" (Maroosis 2003: 157-158). Peirce agrees with Poinsot that, since a sign stands for something *else*, "one and the same thing never represents itself; for this identity cancels the rationale of a sign" (TDS 234/4-5). Interestingly though, Peirce differs from Poinsot by making room for a complete merger in what he called "Firstness," which is the state one gets when one subtracts a relation between relata so as to obtain only a lone relatum (the term "relatum" thus becoming a misnomer).

The important idea is this: *If any two objects X and Y are similar in some respect, then X should possess that "respect" all on its own. Hence, were Y to vanish, X would retain the feature that made a comparison by similarity possible. Obviously, this applies to Y too. Yet, when we focus only on the relevant quality, we make ourselves unable to ascertain whether it is X or Y that is the quality's bearer. Hence, at the proper level of analysis, whatever makes Y and X similar to each other is indifferent to where it is found.*

The core observation motivating Poinsot's buffer remains correct: lack of difference robs the minimal relation (and sense of direction) that allows us to properly taxonomize something as a sign. But, as a logician specialized in cataloguing relations, Peirce recognized that the complex (triadic) relations involved in semiosis subsume simpler (dyadic and monadic) ones. Hence, there should be no logical obstacle to supposing some parts of the sign absent.

Most of the confusion regarding "phenomenal qualia" in philosophy of mind stems from the fact that such abstract deletions (Champagne 2009) can be carried past the point of numerical distinctness – even if it means that, in this impoverished state, signification vanishes. A quality *would* stand for anything like it, but that potential lies dormant if all we have before us is the quality itself. In that regard, icons are transparent and opaque,[6] depending on how we view the situation. This vacillating semiotic/non-semiotic status is rendered soluble by keeping track of how many things one is countenancing in a given analysis. The Peircean category of Firstness is meant to remind us that, with one sign-vehicle in complete isolation, there can be no actual sign-action.

When, for whatever reason, the stream of consciousness which associates one thought to another ceases and is submerged in a unique

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[6] The terms "transparency" and "opacity" are borrowed from vision, but they mark a pass/stop distinction applicable to all the sense modalities (cf. the smell discussed in Champagne 2014b: 151-152).

thought, the semiotic potency inherent in that paused qualitative state cannot be actualized without something *else* entering the picture. Peirce writes that "in contemplating a painting, there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it is not the thing, the distinction of the real and the copy disappears [...]. At that moment we are contemplating an icon" (CP 3.362). This is the state I am in when I transparently take my experience to *be* what is experienced, when I partake of my environment so completely that I lose it and myself. Of course, aside from pharmaceutically-induced vegetative states, such a qualitative merger of "I" and "it" is never fully consummated; otherwise, as Poinsot put it, this would "cancel the rationale" of the sign (TDS 234/4-5). Still, Peirce is distinguished from Poinsot in making allowances for this possibility. Indeed, Peirce concludes that, in theory, pure "[i]cons are so completely substituted for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them" (CP 3.362).[7]

In short, careful study of the conditions for the possibility of signification reveals a ground-level where similarity becomes so pronounced that it eradicates that *with which* the quality is similar. If we were to put these results in the technical terms used earlier, we would say that while actual sign-action is indeed constrained by Hamilton's twin laws of homogeneity and heterogeneity, such actual semiosis logically implies a possible semiosis free from the constraint of heterogeneity.[8]

Poinsot holds that "a sign must be dissimilar [to its significate], [...] otherwise, if it is equally manifest, there is no reason for this to be a sign of one thing rather than a sign of some other thing [...]" (TDS 218/13-17). If, however, the ground of any experience is likeness to the point of complete merger, then when one subtracts the divide between sign-vehicle and object, one obtains a communion between knower and known that is as close as close can be (Ransdell 1979).

6. Differences and Similarities

Do Poinsot and Peirce really differ on this point? John Deely (1980) suggests that the notion of "formal sign" we find in Poinsot is analogous to the contemporary notion of icon. Thus, in his translation, Deely proposes the term "icon" as substitute for the Latin term "*idolum*." In Deely's estimate, "[t]he closest English word to Poinsot's use of *idolum* is the term 'icon' as defined semiotically by C. S. Peirce, c. 1903" (TDS 241/fn3). However, since Poinsot's system does not contain anything

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[7] Interestingly, Peirce's commitment to Firstness may owe something to pharmaceutical aids (cf. Brent 1998: 14).

[8] Metaphysically, this analysis recommends, not just an ontology of relations (*pace* Bains 2006), but an ontology of relations *and relata* – where the standing of a relatum is orthogonal to the distinction between matter and mind (cf. Paolucci 2011: 90-94).

analogous to Peirce's category of Firstness, I am not entirely convinced that their respective texts support the neat agreement that Deely and others (e.g., Maroosis 2003: 160) look for. I think the closest Poinsot comes to a pure icon in his *Tractatus de Signis* is when he mentions (only once) a "*similitudo virtualis*" (TDS 258/46), which is presumably the modally prior "principle *whence arises* a formal similitude and formal awareness" (TDS 258/45-46; emphasis in original). However, the term "virtual" will not be helpful until it is unpacked into something more tangible. The Peircean account does just that: to be an icon is to enjoy a monadic relation with an object, which is to say no relation at all (cf. Champagne 2014b: 153fn91).

By jettisoning one of the ways we have of getting in touch with things, Poinsot has access only to a correspondence theory of truth that turns on "correlation," not "congruence" (Kirkham 1997: 119-120). Congruence uses similarity, but correlation does not require that the veridical correspondence involve any kind of isomorphism between truth-bearer and truth-maker. I think a realist should favour congruence, because it can let subjects directly experience qualities. For example, the flower I smell does not activate in me, say, a mental image of a square, which I then manipulate whenever I recollect or make inferences regarding the odour. Even if one could conceivably learn something informative about the world's structure by means of such one-to-one couplings (cf. Pylyshyn 1973), a more intimate bond with the environment is established when one enjoys an experiential likeness.

Poinsot, as I mentioned, exempted a privileged subset of cases from his *dissimile* requirement. Specifically, he held that "the Divine Word is excluded from the rationale of sign" (TDS 233/3-4) because it supposedly "attains to identity with the represented divine essence" (TDS 228/21-22). Lifting the buffer was intended to spare scriptures and sacraments from being mere symbols. Interestingly, Joseph Ransdell (2003: 229-231) speculated that the present discomfort regarding of iconicity in mainstream debates might be a hold-over of religious controversies. Are there any religious implications in the idea of "optimal" iconicity that I have been exploring?

Realizing that indices like "this" causally locate referents but fail to convey their qualitative feel, Mark Johnston (1992) proposed the term "revelation" to capture our direct appreciation of qualities like colours. That choice of word certainly courts non-secular readings. However, all that Johnston wants to convey is that "[t]he intrinsic nature of canary yellow is fully revealed by a standard visual experience as [*sic*] of a canary yellow thing" (1992: 223). Surely this is not far-fetched.

Of course, on the analysis I have championed, focusing on a yellow quality at the expense of all relations is by no means a "standard" affair. To get there, one must artificially trim away quite a bit of lived experience (cf. Champagne 2014a: 226-228; 2014b: 146-149). The merger of sign-

vehicle and object countenanced by Peircean semiotics constitutes what Frederik Stjernfelt calls "optimal" iconicity, a limit case that, by definition, "remains without any practically conceivable consequences" (2014: 230). Still, given that the qualitative unity we find in iconic signs logically underpins the human cognitive situation as a whole, I have endeavoured to account for it in a way that does not veer into philosophical (much less theological) extravagance.

7. Conclusion

Poinsot and Peirce clearly partake (from afar) in a common semiotic project. "If C. S. Peirce can be said to give us a chemistry of sixty-six sign-compounds, John Poinsot, suitably revised, gives us the basic physical laws of motion that bring sign, object, and mind into relation" (Murphy 1994: 569). The divergence I have been exploring essentially stems from the fact that the simplest sign would be no "compound" at all.

No one complains that, once obtained by means of a particle accelerator, a quark no longer exhibits the properties it had when it was part of a more complex molecule. The situation in semiotic inquiry, where the icon does not actually stand for anything else, should be no more troubling. What Poinsot has to say about the "motion" of semiosis remains valuable. Similarity remains relevant for cognitive functions that are not static, since shared qualities are partly what license the manipulations of "diagrammatic reasoning" (cf. Pietarinen 2011). Yet, if one opts to attend solely to the intrinsic character of a given item, one has thereby artificially impoverished one's object of study to such an extent that the resultant quality is no longer related (inferentially or otherwise) to any object.

I should underscore just how close Poinsot's semiotic hugs the asymptotic limit of complete likeness. He acknowledges that "in intentional or representative existence the formal sign is said to make one thing with the object, not only as do those things which coincide in one common rationale, but rather because it totally contains and represents the numerically same being that is in another" (TDS 233/43-234/2). But, he immediately adds that "this fact itself supposes that the representing and the represented are distinct" (TDS 234/2-3). If Poinsot's buffer is in place, then strictly speaking his semiotic theory does not contain any icons, only symbols and indices. Very similar indices perhaps, but indices nonetheless.

Some philosophers (Bains 2006: 39-58; Deely 2001; Rasmussen 1994; Veatch 1952) have claimed that the semiotic of Poinsot has the technical resources to pre-empt sceptical/idealist worries. However, I think that, by preserving a minimal qualitative dissimilarity between mind and world, Poinsot deprives the realist quiver of a useful arrow. One of the tenets of

Poinsot's account is that, insofar as it acts as a sign, a concept "as such does not stand in need of some scheme, linguistic or otherwise, to relate it to reality" (Rasmussen 1994: 410). I agree. However, I have argued that this is because, on some level, a sign-vehicle *just is* its object.

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