

BOOK REVIEW

CORNELIS DE WAAL: *PEIRCE – A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED*
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With *Peirce – A Guide for the Perplexed*, Cornelis de Waal has taken on the formidable task of crafting a primer to the thought of C. S. Peirce. Although several valuable introductions to different aspects Peirce's philosophy have been published since his death 100 years ago, this book answers a genuine need for a succinct general overview – suitable for new comers to the world of Peirce – without sacrificing scholarly rigour along the way.

Of course, given the nature of this guide, it is by necessity selective, often just glossing over some of Peirce's central contributions and mostly omitting detailed discussions. Nonetheless, de Waal's slim volume can be recommended to the experienced Peirce scholar as well as to the beginning student. Although the book is focused on the fundamentals of Peirce thought, it also sketches some challenging and not altogether uncontroversial interpretations along the way. The author's sources are not restricted to readily available volumes of Peirce's writings such as the *Collected Papers*, the *Essential Peirce*, and the *Writings of Charles S. Peirce*; he also refers to and quotes from many unpublished manuscripts and letters. It is evident that de Waal knows his Peirce, no doubt a product of his long affiliation with the Peirce Edition Project of Indianapolis.

In the beginning of the book, de Waal identifies three possible paths available for introducing a philosopher such as Peirce. Firstly, there is the chronological method of following Peirce's development year by year. In effect, something of this nature is being generated by the thorough introductions to the *Writings* volumes. However, in de Waal's assessment, a developmental strategy would not be suitable here because of its

complexity. The second option would be to focus on "greatest hits" – that is, introducing Peirce by concentrating on his paramount (or at least most popular) insights and discoveries. According to de Waal, the risk of such an approach is that it can conceal the systematic character of Peirce's thought. There is also an increased danger of distortion, as the interpretation of what is valuable and what is not is inevitably informed by current perspectives; arguably, Peirce has all too often been relegated to the secondary status of an "interesting" precursor to some later philosopher or movement in the history of philosophy. So, de Waal chooses the third path – a systematic presentation grounded in Peirce's classification of the mathematical and philosophical sciences. This provides the basic framework for this guide, which mostly moves methodically from more abstract toward more concrete forms of inquiry. Still, however straightforward such a solution may seem, it is not without its complications – some of which can be seen in de Waal's reconstruction.

After a short account of Peirce's life, the book is divided into eight chapters: "Mathematics and philosophy", "Phenomenology and the categories", "The normative science of logic", "Semeiotics, or the doctrine of signs", "Philosophy of science", "Pragmatism", "Truth and reality", and "Mind, God, and Cosmos". For those familiar with Peirce's classification of the higher sciences, it is evident that de Waal here follows a given path from the echelons of pure mathematics to metaphysics and cosmology, the final philosophical stages above the physical and psychical sciences. However, it is also clear that de Waal – in spite of his systematic ambitions – puts more emphasis on the theory of signs, pragmatism, the "philosophy of science", and Peirce's conception of truth and reality than a stricter interpretation of Peirce's classification would warrant. For one thing, Peirce's mature arrangements tend to omit explicit references to "semeiotics", typically just referring to "logic". Of course, it is plausible to interpret this as "logic in the broad sense", but it is by no means self-evident how an extended semiotic

conception of logic fits into the hierarchical scheme – which may also explain Peirce’s curious reluctance to employ the term in classificatory contexts.

Be that as it may, something of a selective “greatest hits” approach can be detected in parts of de Waal’s methodical, top-down reconstruction. This may render his account vulnerable to some of the same criticisms concerning selection that have sooften been levelled at the *Collected Papers*; although by mostly focusing on Peirce’s later positions, de Waal does not commit the mistake of trying to cram all of Peirce into an ahistorical system. The classificatory, step-by-step approach seems to work best at the most abstract levels, especially in the explication in the relationship between mathematics and philosophy, in which de Waal’s book excels. However, perhaps not surprisingly, the story becomes a lot more complicated when it moves into questions concerning the phenomenological categories and logic, the areas where Peirce did most of his philosophical work for about fifty years. Some things – such as Peirce’s mature theory of perception and his logic of vagueness – are largely bypassed. While de Waal’s narrative never loses its systematic thread, it is also clear that the full range of Peirce’s philosophical interests is not always easily fitted into the classificatory scheme.

This brings us to one of the more controversial aspects of a Peircean arrangement of the sciences. Accepting Peirce’s later explanation for his method of classification, de Waal emphasises that it is intended to be a “natural” account of the occupations of scientists, not a formal organisation according to the objects of knowledge or scientific methods. That is, the primary justification for identifying anything as a science (in Peirce’s broad acceptance) should not be an *a priori* principle, but rather the actual practices of living scientists; a classification such as this should not include any imaginary disciplines, conjured up for the benefit of the system. This is certainly an attractive picture; the only

problem is that Peirce does not really practice what he preaches. Even for a sympathetic interpreter, it would be difficult to locate the requisite research communities for Peircean esthetics or phenomenology. One man does not a science make; and whatever the situation may be today, it hardly seems credible to claim that there was a social group of “phaneroscopists” during Peirce’s time. Hence, it seems more accurate to say that Peirce’s classificatory project identifies possible sciences, informed by the categorial analysis developed in mathematics and phaneroscopy and Comtean principles of hierarchy. A Peircean can still argue that such disciplines could conceivably occupy a “scientist” for a lifetime, but that hardly qualifies as a classification of actual practices; and in truth, most philosophers following in Peirce’s footsteps tend to do work in several of the Peircean sub-disciplines, without even intending to restrict their efforts exclusively to one specialised line of inquiry. The fact that Peirce may have been prophetic in certain respects – the development of semiotics springs to mind – does not alter the fact that there is this basic tension in his purported rationale for classification. This is something that de Waal, perhaps intentionally, ignores; but as the systematic organisation of his guide is rooted in this aspect of the Peircean project, it would arguably have been judicious to take a closer – and maybe more critical – look at Peirce’s principles of classification.

Starting at the top of Peirce’s classification also entails that the problem of why we inquire in the first place is postponed until the branch of logic Peirce called “rhetoric” or “methodeutic”; in de Waal’s book, the sixth chapter on Peirce’s “philosophy of science” covers most of this ground. However, while it is true that Peirce was sceptical of “natural history” accounts of logic, it is also a fact that he paid a lot of attention to questions of the roots, the motivations, and the nature of scientific inquiry. Not only is it often difficult to find a satisfactory slot for some of Peirce’s better known writings in the

classificatory scheme (“The Fixation of Belief”, for example); it would also have been possible to introduce Peirce’s thought from this point of view – that is, by focusing on his key interest in the practice and logic of social inquiry. If we were to set out from this direction, it would be natural to begin or frame the story with an account of what one might describe as regulative principles of inquiry, such as fallibilism, the critical common-sensist view of doubt and belief, the principle of continuity – even Peirce’s oft-ignored anthropomorphism (which de Waal, to his great credit, does discuss). I would even argue that this approach constitutes a fourth - “rhetorical” or “methodeutic” - path to the world of Peirce, one suggestively captured in his claim that in philosophy, we “must not begin by talking of pure ideas, - vagabond thoughts that tramp the public roads without any human habitation” (CP 8.112).

By this I do not mean to insinuate that de Waal would have yielded to the temptation of over-systematisation and excessive abstractness – certainly a very real danger when dealing with a philosopher such as Peirce. Quite the contrary: one of the true delights of de Waal’s writing is the way he provides appositely down-to-earth explanations of some of the most abstruse conceptions in Peirce’s thought without succumbing to debilitating “sops to Cerberus”. Adopting a methodeutic starting point would have led to a different book, with some difficulties of its own – but with the possible advantage of providing a better understanding of the motivations behind Peirce’s concerns and the prospective scope of his findings. As de Waal points out, Peirce tended to view logical advances as products of actual problem solving. It also might help us make sense of the seemingly incongruous fact that Peirce on the one hand portrays the relationship between the sciences as strictly hierarchical, so that “lower” sciences cannot provide principles to “higher” disciplines, while he on the other hand seems to elevate a metaphysical insight such as the

continuity-thesis of “synechism” to a leading principle of logic. De Waal’s solution to this particular dilemma is to place synechism in rhetoric. This seems plausible, but it also raises some interesting questions about the possible primacy of rhetoric/methodeutic in scientific inquiry, which de Waal does not address. At any rate, I would argue that a more substantial, reciprocal give-and-take is going on between different levels of philosophical inquiry (and between philosophy and some of the special sciences, and perhaps even between philosophy and mathematics) than Peirce’s compartmentalisation, strictly interpreted, appears to permit.

Yet, this does not diminish the value of de Waal’s book as an overview of the would-be systematic product of Peirce’s multifarious – if not always perfectly methodical – labours. The path that de Waal has chosen is certainly perfectly legitimate, as it is anchored in a structure actually conceived by Peirce. In an introductory volume, it would be very difficult – perhaps almost impossible – to combine it with elegantly with the kind of alternative approach I suggested above. But to get a fuller picture of Peirce’s systematic approach, both perspectives may be needed.

I will conclude this review with some minor critical observations. Mostly, de Waal has chosen his Peircean terms wisely, neverwading too far into the quagmires of Peirce’s terminological experiments. However, in what appears to be an attempt to find a compromise in one of the ongoing quarrels in the field, he has opted for “semeiotics” rather than “semiotic” or “semeiotic”, the two alternatives Peirce mostly uses as names for the theory or doctrine of signs. Although de Waal’s choice is understandable and by no means erroneous, this is unlikely to satisfy either of the two warring factions – that is, Peirceans that (following Max Fisch) swear by “semeiotic” as a proper designation and the later semioticians who (following Thomas Sebeok) argue for the superiority of “semiotics”. More puzzling, perhaps, is

de Waal's claim that the application of Peirce's "tone-token-type" distinction to the sign produces the "qualisign-sinsign-legisign" division. In all instances that I am aware of, these were alternative names Peirce gave to basically the same concepts. Here, the analytic afterlife of the type-token distinction may be at play. Likewise, the claim that the "dynamical object has an indexical component" (p. 86) feels a bit confused, as indexicality is more correctly described as something that characterises a relation between sign and object.

One could also question de Waal's claim that Peirce's "On a New List of Categories" (1867) contains Peirce's first presentation of his theory of signs. Although this seminal article certainly introduced some key semiotic concepts in print for the first time, it hardly amounted to a full account of "semeiotics"; and as a matter of fact, Peirce had already introduced the idea of semiotic as "the general science of representations" in lectures and manuscripts a couple of years prior to the "New List".

Some of these comments may feel rather pedantic; but it is really a homage to de Waal's accomplishment that it is to such details that one must go to find points to criticise. Overall, de Waal's *Peirce* delivers an admirably balanced account of a frequently perplexing but always rewarding thinker; it is an enjoyable read, the flow of the narrative marred only by a couple of infelicities that should have been corrected in proofreading. Given the numerous challenges involved in interpreting Peirce's writings and assessing his legacy, de Waal really has done a remarkably good job in producing the best brief guide to Peirce on the market today. This volume will no doubt be used as a basic textbook in many courses on Peirce's philosophy in coming years; and seasoned travellers in the world of Peirce will also find it to be a guide well worth consulting.