

2. Dialogue and Human Nature

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Mirrors

Continuing our story, then: late in 1945, an appalling amount of energy was released from its bondage in matter, fulfilling the prophecy of Einstein that $E = mc^2$. On the other side of the world, a pile of old books was released from its confinement in a stone jar, liberating words ascribed to Jesus that the Church Fathers apparently found appalling. In between *The Day the World Ended* and the resurrection of the Nag Hammadi Library, this writer's tenure as an earthling began. Meanwhile, life and death were taking other turns. World War II was still coming to an end, and on that day (6 September 1945) the formal surrender of Japanese forces in southwest Asia took place in the Bismarck Archipelago, off the coast of New Britain, aboard the British aircraft carrier *Glory*. As Humpty Dumpty said to Alice, "There's glory for you!"

'I don't know what you mean by "glory,"' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't – till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice

knock-down argument for you!”

‘But “glory” doesn’t mean “a nice knock-down argument,”’ Alice objected.

‘When *I* use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’

— Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Which is to be master – maybe that’s the question when it comes to war, but there must be more to meaning than that, no?

In this bit of Carrollian dialogue, as in a Zen *koan* or a parable of Jesus, we look *through a glass darkly*. This is the natural human condition, according to St. Paul in *1 Corinthians* 13:12: we see δι’ ἑσόπτρου ἐν ἀνίγμᾳτι, through a mirror in riddles. But, dear reader, how do you look *through* a looking glass?

Concept and conversation

Let us begin by looking into the meaning of *dialogue*. Unlike Humpty Dumpty, i’m assuming that you do know what it means before i tell you. You have a history with the word: you’ve crossed paths with it before, and thus developed a *concept* connected with the word. You might say that the word is the name of this concept, and the concept the meaning of the word. Obviously it’s *your* concept, having developed through *your* personal history of encounters with the word. Yet surely you feel that the *meaning* of the word belongs to the word, and not to you. You don’t feel entirely ‘master’ of it as Humpty Dumpty does. Why not? Because communicators have to co-operate with the conventions of whatever sign system they share, and this entails that you don’t treat words as private property. As a user of language, you naturally believe that language has a life of its own, independent of any particular user’s life. In other words, words have *real* meanings, not subject to the whims of would-be masters.

That's how language has to look to users like you and me. But to a third person, an observer looking *at* the user or *into* language use, things look a little different. She would see, for instance, that your concept of *dialogue* – which is the habitual meaning of the word *for you* – must be embodied in *your* mind. And what's more, this habit of yours is still under construction, and has been ever since you heard the word for the first time. Your concept was doubtless extremely vague back then (which may be why you don't recall the occasion), and it's been growing more definite ever since, with each usage refining its implications while specifying more precisely its location among the constellations of your conceptual universe. By the time you came across it in Chapter 1 of the present text, your usage habit was probably well entrenched, having been reinforced by many conversations in each of which it played its role without a hitch. Chances are you have never had to look it up in a dictionary. Yet when you focus on it, as we are about to do, there's still room for further clarification.

So far in this text, we've been using the word *dialogue* interchangeably with *conversation*. The original meaning of *conversation* in English, according to the OED, was 'the action of living or having one's being *in* a place or *among* persons.' The word was also used figuratively 'of one's spiritual being.' *Conversation* has also been used as equivalent to *consorting*, *intercourse* (in every sense), *society*, *intimacy*; also *conduct* (manner of living), *occupation* and *engagement*. The usage eventually settled into the more restricted sense with which we are now most familiar, but the history of the word serves to remind us that a human life is a *social* life, embedded in a context of *community*. This same sense is implicit in *dialogue*, especially in its contrast with *monologue*. It takes two (or more) people to carry on a dialogue – even when the other person for you is your future self.

In order to *talk together*, you and i must be *both similar and different*. First, we must have at least some common ground of experience, of both living and language. Language gaps can often be bridged by translation or interpretation, but not without some *inner sense* (or sensemaking process) at both ends of the bridge, and not without some collaboration or collusion in the construction process. Yet there must also be a difference between us: *one* can do nothing *together*, it takes at least two. The space

opened up by this difference is where meaning lives; messages and information move *through* it. In everyday talk it is taken for granted that you don't say what your partner already knows; words communicate only when they stand out against the ground of the currently understood. I can't *inform* you of what you already know – unless you manage to forget that you know it and I manage to remind you; and even then, your knowing would be *different*. If I were you, you'd have nothing to say to me, would I?

Dialogic

Though dialogue requires difference, it must also have its own unity. Two paths or secret missions do not become one by simply crossing, or even by moving together in parallel. A real dialogue has its own mission, inhabited by all participants.

To emphasize this face of *dialogue* as mission, let us drop the silent *ue* and spell it **dialog**. That might help to remind us of its Greek roots, *δια* and *λογος*. *Logos* refers originally to 'speech' and translates to 'word' or 'thought' – that is, either *the expression of a thought* or *the thought expressed*, which we have called the 'concept.' Beyond that basic ambiguity, it indicates both our means of making sense of the world and the sense it makes – even unto the very meaning of the cosmos and 'logic of the universe' (Peirce, CP 6.189). The *logos* is given absolute priority in the opening words of the Gospel of John: 'In the beginning was the Word,' *ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος*. Centuries before John, Heraclitus and others were already using *logos* in such a cosmic sense, and the term often has that extended sense when imported into English (i.e. transliterated but not translated). All of these 'meanings' developed from the seed-concept of 'speech.'

The prefix *dia-*, though often confused with *di-*, does not mean 'two'; it sometimes signifies 'between,' but its primary ('radical') sense corresponds to English *across* or *through* (or *thorough*, i.e. 'all the way through'). *Dia* (contracted to *δι*') is the preposition in St. Paul's *di' esoptrou* ('through a mirror') above. A *diaphanous* (or in Latin English, *transparent*) material is something you can see *through*. The *diameter* of a circle or sphere is the length of a line drawn all the way across it and *through* its centre. *Dialog*, then, is

primarily *talking through*. This includes the root idea of *conversation* ('turning together'), but adds to it a feeling of direction and purpose. A dialog is a *path* that leads somewhere, a singular mission carried out by a plural crew. That mission may have some practical goal, but more generally its aim is to reveal some truth – and the more universal the better, at least for those who are philosophically inclined.

Now *truth*, if it means anything, is not a private matter. What's really true is so whether you think so or not, and whether anyone knows it or not. You can't recognize reality as such unless you can also see an illusion as such – *especially* one you've been partial to. Your quest for truth begins when you learn, to your surprise, that some of your own beliefs have been false. At that point, and not before, you begin to wonder how many of your *current* beliefs are true. Maybe they only reflect your own idiosyncrasies, or those of your culture. So you begin to look beyond your opinions, seeking some way of sorting the true from the false; and you look at your world with an eye for the difference between appearance and reality. But in order to engage in this kind of quest, there's one belief you can't dispense with: that reality and truth are *out there*, beyond beliefs and appearances. This entails that they must be *out there* for other people too. Maybe we can co-discover it, if we can work together to weed out private illusions from the consensual garden of public opinion. So we start comparing notes on what we see, and thus the mission of *dialog* is born. You wouldn't sign on to the crew of such a singular mission if you didn't believe that the truth is *out there*, and eventually discoverable, even though you can never estimate (let alone measure) how much of the *whole* truth you have discovered.

The social principle

The collective sense of mission that defines *dialog* is already implicit in the looser sense of *dialogue*. Among humans, it goes without saying (almost!) that *language* is the main medium of dialogue. According to Herbert Clark (1996), 'language use is a species of joint action' – not only in face-to-face conversation, which is 'the basic setting for language use,' but also in reading and

writing. There is a kind of partnership or collaboration at the heart of language itself, and in this sense monologue is derived from dialogue. Even the ‘internal monologue’ of thinking develops through social interaction, as Vygotsky (1934) showed. We don’t learn to talk in order to express our thoughts, we learn to think by talking. Before that, we learn to talk by first engaging with another person in ‘joint attention’ to some object, some feature of the world common to both (Tomasello 1999, 2003). Later, thinking as ‘inner speech’ develops when the child learns to internalize her language use and adapt this social medium to private purposes (generally for making sense of her world). If there is no ‘private language’ (as Wittgenstein said), it’s because all language use is rooted in social interaction. Peirce denied that thinking is really a monologue, even when it is ‘internal’: ‘All thinking is necessarily a sort of dialogue, an appeal from the momentary self to the better considered self of the immediate and of the general future’ (SS, 195) – which he also called the ‘deeper self’ (CP 6.338, c.1909).

Also derived from *logos* is the word *logic* for “the art of reasoning.” Reasoning or inference is usually done with words, but even more essentially involves the implicit or explicit use of *diagrams* (from Greek διάγραμμα). Explicit diagrams make the structure of thought visible by representing the relationships among ideas *through* (διά) figures made of lines (γραμμά). Since verbal statements and diagrams alike are all *signs*, logic in a broader sense is the study of how signs work, or *semiotics* (from the Greek σημεῖον, ‘sign’ or ‘signal’; sometimes spelt *semeiotics*).

John Locke introduced the word *semiotic* into English at the end of his *Essay concerning Humane Understanding* (1700), where he divided all of ‘science’ into three kinds. The first was ‘natural philosophy,’ the second ‘ethics,’ and the third

Σημιωτική, or the *Doctrine of Signs*, the most usual whereof being Words, it is aptly enough termed also λογική, Logick; the business whereof, is to consider the Nature of Signs, the Mind makes use of for the understanding of Things, or conveying its Knowledge to others.

(as printed in Deely 2004, 60)

But the development of *logic* as *semiotic* did not really begin until Peirce, around the beginning of the 20th century, defined logic as ‘the science of the general necessary laws of Signs and especially of Symbols’ (CP 2.93). Peirce also emphasized that all sciences, including logic and philosophy, are collective social enterprises, *dialogs* to which individuals dedicate themselves in order to carry them forward. Indeed, concern about the best ways of reading signs and searching for truth is a far more spiritual matter than concern about the future state of one’s individual soul. Such a self-centered quest, argued Peirce, is bound to be illogical.

He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is, as it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences, collectively. Logic is rooted in the social principle.

(EP1:149)

This partially echoes the Gospel of *Matthew* 20:25-8, where Jesus says to his disciples, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life [or ‘soul,’ ψυχή] as a ransom for many.’ But rather than a limited community of Christians, Peirce is addressing a community which ‘must not be limited’ but ‘must reach, however vaguely, beyond all bounds.’ The same applies to the Buddhist way of the *bodhisattva*, who dedicates herself to the enlightenment of all sentient beings, dropping any thought of personal salvation. From this dedication arise the ‘enlightening beings,’ as they are called in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, who skillfully use the appropriate means in every situation so that others may awaken to the buddha-nature. Among humans at least, the most common of such means is *dialog*, in its full range from the most intimate interview to ‘the great conversation.’

We can define **dialog**, then, as *the interdependent investigation of reality* in all its forms. This is the mission of the *pure* scientist – who drops all self-interest, and even social utility, in the quest for truth – as well as the *bodhisattva*; but such utterly selfless beings are extremely rare. ‘Teaching of truth is hardly ever heard; Buddhas hardly ever appear’ (*Dhammapada* 14:4), even though the

buddha-nature is inherent everywhere. Hence the need for, and the difficulty of, genuine collaboration. For the goal of our quest (truth, reality, universal enlightenment or whatever we call it) is common to all of us precisely because it is eternally independent of what anyone or any group of us may think we know of it. Yet our quest for *truth* is driven by faith that we can get to know it better by learning from experience. Start with any definite question about the real world, and the *true* answer is the one at which the quest *would* arrive if we could carry it on conscientiously for as long as it takes to get there. At least that's how Peirce defined 'truth'.

Therefore it is necessary to follow the common; but
although the Logos is common the many live as though
they had a private understanding.

— Heraclitus (Kirk and Raven 1957, 188)

A *private understanding* (ἰδίαν φρόνησιν) would be an 'understand-alone' system, a monologue. Whereas Humpty Dumpty, in declaring himself 'master' of words, is contemptuous of those who 'follow the common' conventions of meaning, Heraclitus appears contemptuous of 'the many' for almost the opposite reason: because it is *uncommon* to 'follow the common' *Logos*. Yet this is natural enough: insofar as you are a separate self, you can only look at the world through the keyhole of your experience, and 'all experience is subjective' (Bateson 1979, 33). If that's the common situation, how *logical* can it be to look down on mere mortals with their 'private understanding,' as if you had a privileged *overstanding*? Maybe that aristocratic attitude is just the mirror image of Humpty Dumpty's 'mastery,' his proclamation of a private language.

It's natural enough for a writer like Heraclitus to take such an oracular tone, since the *logos* which he seeks to elucidate 'is at once the discourse of Heraclitus, the nature of language itself, the structure of the psyche and the universal principle in accordance with which all things come to pass' (Kahn 1979, 22). 'Seekers after gold dig up much earth and find little'; 'lovers of wisdom should acquaint themselves with a great many particulars.' Thus spake Heraclitus (Wheelwright 1959, 19). The author aware of how much inquiry he has *behind* him tends to present what he's found as a

finished ‘understanding’ rather than a ‘guess at the riddle,’ so naturally his text begins to sound like the Voice of Authority. But lovers of wisdom (‘philosophers’) read them as testaments, not as oracles.

But that’s where collaboration between writer and reader comes in: any reader worth her salt takes everything she reads with a grain thereof. You know, for instance, that years of investigation, research and revision have gone into the text before you; but you also know that on the scale of the great conversation, it’s barely a beginning. You know that the writer is only a fellow seeker – a mirror image of yourself – and that the writer knows that you know it; why even mention it then? Because, on the other hand – or the other side of the mirror – the image of you that the writer sees is vaguely multiple, a virtual cloud of *possible* readers. For some of those other readers it may be wise to spell out some things that you (in your omniscience) already know. For you this is an opportunity to exercise your infinite patience, by putting up with explications of what ought to be implicit. (Fortunately, the writer-reader dialog has compensating advantages: you can take as much or as little time as you need to play your part in it. You don’t have that privilege in a ‘real-time’ or ‘live’ conversation.)

Tensions and persons

Henry David Thoreau was another essayist who recognized the tone of authorial omniscience as a problem. In his classic work *Walden*, he chose to subvert it by explicitly taking himself (his own experience) as his subject:

In most books, the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking.

Indeed it is; but we also commonly forget that it is always the *second* person who is listening, or reading. In most books, the *you*, or second person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to *dialogue*, is the main difference.

As reader, you imagine an author who must have *meant* something by all these words – just as the author imagined that someone would read them. A book is a mirror in which the reader sees another self reflected; author and reader are like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, or Humpty and Dumpty. But this reflection carries on *through time*, as reading and writing are paired *processes*. It's as if we are twin characters in the continuing dream of a sleeping giant who's fallen off the wall, or litterbits of a letter he's forgotten he wrote himself; so now 'the humptyhillhead of humself promptly sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest of his tumptytumtoes' (*Finnegans Wake*, 3). The inquisitive reader – 'that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia' (FW, 120) – sees in the author another inquiring soul; the 'unquiring one,' on the other hand, sees a reflection of his own understanding in the guise of an authority figure. Either way, the reader feels that she is looking *through* the text at something *out there* which the author intended to identify. The writer dreaming up a reader, the reader imagining the author's intent: both are looking through the looking glass. Yet in the moment of meaning, both persons are actualized, caught in the act.

Besides the necessary difference between you and me, there are other differences essential to the creativity of our dialogue. One of them is the tension between language, which is essentially public, and experience, which is necessarily private. For a thinker (or writer, or reader), this tension drives an internal dialogue between thought and word, concept and expression, experience and language. This is a real dialogue and not a one-way transmission or translation from one into the other.

The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. In that process the relation of thought to word undergoes changes which themselves may be regarded as development in the functional sense. Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them.

— Vygotsky (1934, 125)

This psychological view mirrors Peirce's remark about logic, that 'it is quite indifferent whether it be regarded as having to do with thought or with language, since thought, like an onion, is composed of nothing but wrappings' (EP2:460). But language and experience do not come to terms without a struggle. Our external dialogue draws its life from the internal dialogue, because every act of meaning is committed by *somebody* – some living body with an inner life. Without the struggle of original *experience* to compose itself in common words, all you can do is repeat social conventions; and even what 'everybody knows' can only have been learned or discovered by each person from his own experience. Part of Thoreau's point (above) about the 'first person' is that the pretense of impersonal expertise is indeed pretentious, because even the expert can speak only from the experience to which she is subject. A deep dialogue, regardless of medium, plumbs that privacy. You can't speak to the heart of another unless you speak from your own. As Thoreau himself put it in 'Life Without Principle': 'When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip.'

When heart meets word, the act of meaning must always collide and collude with the limits of language. For instance: the rules of grammar specify that in order to address *you*, the reader, an author has to use the *second person*. But you, as author of your acts and expressions and as *subject* of your experience, can only use the *first person* in reference to yourself. These two 'persons,' first and second, are aspects or appearances of the same reality, different masks of the same being. *Person* derives from the Latin *persona*, meaning 'mask'. We don these masks in order to renew our common sense, our sense of the common. In mutual attention we meet one another for the first time again.

But already a *third person* has joined us, or rather a whole host of them: all those who, being neither you nor i, we have to call 'he, she, it' or 'they' – including every rule, act, event, expression, experience, reality and mask, including other people. The joint perspective which you and i take on all these other objects of our attention may be called the 'third-person' point of view, the looking-glass through which we see 'the world.' This is a *whole* world when it is the entire content of a single subject's experience, that single subject being not only the first but the *only* person. But

for the third person, attending to objects which are also objects for others, the world is broken into innumerable pieces – all the king's horsemen couldn't put it together again. We are among the pieces of this world, which is older than we are, as it must have been here (or there) before you and i (the 'first' and 'second') arrived on the scene. In fact it *is* the scene we arrived on, however much it may have been modified by our arrival.

Clearly *first*, *second* and *third*, as applied to 'persons,' do not refer to chronological order of appearance. They appear together, if they appear at all. Each is the ground of the others' being.

In our language, only the 'third person' can refer to the non-personal. It's the only point of view from which we can see the world as a collection of objects rather than a communion of subjects. This turns out to be extremely useful for scientific inquiry, even into the nature of selfhood, for it allows us to see a person as composed of non-personal elements. Idealized as the "impersonal observer," it may also enable you to recognize *some* of the private quirks lurking in your own point of view. Once you have a handle on them, you can "see through" these tricks you play on yourself. But if you lose sight of *dialogue* as the context of *all* utterance, then you are tempted to focus on the mote in your neighbor's eye rather than the I-beam in your own. You might become obsessed with eliminating points of view which are not in accordance with your own. The impersonal eye can lead to hell, or to holocaust, when tightly wrapped in a private understanding and invested with authority. That's a natural consequence of seeing other persons as other than *persons*. Yet in science, as the *public dialog par excellence*, we need the third-person view as the ballast which stabilizes the ship of inquiry with the weight of conventional consensus. Our ultimate home port is *public truth*, though we don't know when (or whether) anyone will arrive.

Dialog, then, always implies a creative tension or *dialectic* – this word being another branch from the same root – between public and personal truth. Your very *self*, insofar as you can know it 'objectively,' is a creature of that deep tension.

Looking through

Signs make no sense if nobody reads them. However, as reader (rather than observer of reading), you have to believe it's the sign (or the author) making sense, and not you. Otherwise they would mean whatever you want them to mean, and could show you nothing new; you'd be locked in the prison of self without a key. Your belief (or faith, or trust) that the truth is *out there*, and yet subject to being intimately known, furnishes your quest with an *object*, and thus enables you to see *through* these signs, as if they were windows on the world. To look *through* the signs means to forget them, and forget your looking, to focus on the *objects* outside the window-glass and recognize them for what they are. Signs have to seem *transparent* in order to serve as media, and thus to mean something. (Latin *trans-parent* is equivalent to Greek *dia-phanous*, *trans-* and *dia-* both meaning 'through' or 'across,' as in *transmission* and *dialog*, while the stems *-par-* and *-phan-* signify 'appearing'.)

Here's an experiment you can perform in any room with glass windows, if there's enough light outside:

First, have a look out the window. When you do that, you naturally look *at* some objects out there while the rest of the scene remains in the background, as it were.

Next, look *at* the window glass rather than through it. (You will probably focus on some specific marks on it or flaws in it, but we will call this 'looking at the glass.')

Immediately you lose your view of the objects outside, or at least they are all relegated to the background, since the glass itself becomes the object of your attention. The window itself is now 'outside' and is no longer working for you as a transparent medium.

However, a third-person observer of this experiment could say that now your *eyes* are working as transparent media. They were already functioning as media before, when you were reading *through* the glass rather than reading the glass or the marks on it. But unlike the glass, they continue to function as media now because they are still 'transparent.' An observer trained in psychophysics and equipped with some kind of brain scanner might even say that your eyes work as media because patterns of light, by affecting the retina in each of your eyes, function transparently as signs of external objects reflecting the light, and these signs are read by your brain as a scene composed of objects

in your visual field. Likewise, if these words mean anything to you, it's because your brain interprets them as a thought-scene, a statement, composed of objects in your mental field, inhabitants of meaning space.

Let's end the experiment here, before you start wondering whether your brain is a transparent medium too, or pondering where to draw the line between 'inside' and 'out.' There is indeed a problem with this 'transparency' metaphor, but we'll leave that for a later chapter. Summing up so far: in any given sense-making or semiotic process, the sign is transparent while its object is opaque. Thus the object is visible because the sign is not. If you shift your attention from object to sign – for instance, look at the word 'sign' *as a word* – it immediately becomes an object, and your view of it is mediated by *other* signs, which are out of sight, or rather inside your seeing. You can never look at your seeing itself, though you can read its recent history as “the remembered present” (Edelman), and thus catch a glimpse of how seeing and meaning work.

In seeing forms with the whole body-mind, hearing sound with the whole body-mind, though one intimately understands, it isn't like reflecting images in a mirror, it's not like water and the moon – when you witness one side, one side is obscure.

— Dogen, *GenjoKoan* (tr. Cleary)

In this dialog about dialogue, using these words about language and signs about semiosis, you are asked in a sense to give up your innocence (your 'naïve realism,' as philosophers call it). Realizing that neither your understanding nor your perception purely mirrors the reality 'out there,' you see immediately that your 'innocent eye' was always an illusion. And if we can see that there is no reading without interpretation, we can also say that every expression is *idiomatic* (peculiar, uncommon) to some degree. The Greek word ἴδιος means basically 'private' (as in the quotation from Heraclitus above). McArthur (1992) defines *idiom* as

- (1) The speech proper to, or typical of, a people or place; a dialect or local language; ...
- (2) An expression

unique to a language, especially one whose sense is not predictable from the meanings and arrangement of its elements, such as *kick the bucket* meaning “to die” ...

But even if everyone on Earth spoke the same language, it would still be local and unique to this planet, and thus idiomatic relative to the cosmos. Likewise your own language is an idiom, since it is you alone who have learned to use it, albeit through social experience.

Moreover, perception is entangled with expression. ‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world,’ wrote Wittgenstein (*Tractatus* 5.6). What you see *out there* can only represent nature’s answers to the questions you know how to ask. That’s why science has been called a conversation or ‘dialogue with nature’ by philosophers going back at least to Kant (1787, Bxiii). Likewise, you can’t very well read a dialogical text if you aren’t implicitly asking the questions it proposes to answer. Maybe you’ve never occurred to those questions, or maybe you already have your habitual answers; either way, if they aren’t *actual* questions at reading time, they can’t have *current* answers.

Sign, object, interpretant

Your world appears to you only through the signs you are here to read, and all reading is interpretation of signs. The ‘interpretation’ process begins pre-consciously with the *percept*, and continues with each interpretant being ‘translated’ into another *sign* of the same *object* with another *interpretant*, as long as the process continues. This semiotic triad is like the triad of ‘persons’ in that each of the three is ground of the others’ being: they can only occur together. *Interpretation*, in the sense that reaches down to the raw percept, is not necessarily an elaborate or deliberate process; in fact most of it goes on underneath your conscious control. Take the reading of this sentence: before you begin to think about ‘what it means,’ your visual system has already interpreted (read, translated) a series of shapes on the page or screen as a sequence of words. Then your linguistic system – a multilayered complex of habits – identifies the words and

phrases as parts of an utterance. And then, drawing on conceptual habits associated with those words, it tries to combine them into a whole that makes sense in the context of the conversation. It's only when a word fails to find its immediate place in this effortless construction process that it becomes puzzling, stops the semiotic flow, and comes to your attention. In the Humpty Dumpty dialogue, this happens with the word 'glory' – while every *other* word works in the background according to the usual conventions familiar to both parties. If those words didn't work thus, it would be impossible to ask or to explain what 'glory' means.

Likewise you might question my usage of the word *interpretation* in reference to subconscious linguistic and perceptual processes. But Peirce, who was finicky to a fault in his choice of words, had no such qualms: 'it is not necessary to go beyond ordinary observations of common life to find a variety of widely different ways in which perception is interpretative' (EP2:229). Likewise Ernst Gombrich challenges us to find any better word for the perceptual process:

I would be ready to substitute another for the offensive term 'interpretation,' provided it described the same process of trial and error by which alone we weed out illusions and test and revise our beliefs about the world, in perception no less than in science.

– Gombrich (2002, xii)

Later on we will look into this 'process of trial and error' in more detail; here we are only trying out the idea that *interpretation* is always going on beneath your notice, whether you are deliberately *interpreting* or not. If this is true, it raises Humpty Dumpty's question in another form: Which is to be master, *you* or *interpretation*? Are you thinking your thoughts, or is Thought (semiosis) thinking you? Are you a co-author of this play of signs, or are you a character in it?

This is another question defying a simple answer, but Peirce often emphasized the latter view, pointing out that all persons (including you) are really signs. This is a logical conclusion if you focus on the semiotic process as a whole object – for then the 'interpreter' becomes obscure, drops out of sight. Thus

interpretation – or *semiosis*, or *dialog* – appears as a creative process which generates meaning through its own activity rather than being passively manipulated by an agency external to it. As we've already said of *dialog*, it moves in its own direction, which is not imparted to it by the participants alone. From this perspective, it's not you who uses language, but the *logos* using you.

We have already begun to see how *sign* and *object* are involved in this process. But the key semiotic insight is to recognize the *third* element of semiosis, which is the effect of the sign on its reader – or rather the influence which the object has *through* the sign on the interpreter. Peirce calls this the *interpretant*. For instance, the interpretant of any sentence in this book is the thought it brings to mind when you understand it as referring to whatever is the object of that sign. More generally, the Interpretant is 'that which the Sign produces in the Quasi-mind that is the Interpreter by determining the latter to a feeling, to an exertion, or to a Sign, which determination is the Interpretant' (CP 4.536, 1906).

The Sign creates something in the Mind of the Interpreter, which something, in that it has been so created by the sign, has been, in a mediate and *relative* way, also created by the Object of the Sign, although the Object is essentially other than the Sign. And this creature of the Sign is called the Interpretant.

EP2:493

The above explanation (from a 1909 letter to William James) is only one of dozens to be found among Peirce's writings, each presenting the idea from a slightly different angle. But from any angle, the *interpretant* is part of a *triad* which cannot be reduced to a mere pairing of things with labels, or concepts with words. It's true that a sign must point to (refer to, denote) something other than itself in order to *mean* anything, but it must also take another step *forward* on the semiotic path. Each sentence you read *for meaning* must evoke some element of your experience – that is, of the life-path now *behind* you – but only in order to *carry it forward*, to make a difference *now* in your current experience, which will in turn determine your course into the future. As Peirce put it (CP 4.539), 'the Immediate Interpretant of all thought proper is

Conduct.' But thinking is itself conducted, and since any thought is itself a sign, it will normally produce another interpretant in its turn, thus taking its place in a train of thought all pertraining (pardon me!) to the same object, in the hope of *realizing* or knowing it better.

Signs grow and develop by making meanings ever more extensive, comprehensive or definite, a process as continuous as time and life itself. When we speak of signs 'standing' *for* or *to* something, as if *object* and *interpretant* occupied fixed places in a static scene, it's like describing walking as partly standing and partly falling forward. Along the way, you are always leaving and always arriving, and *going* is what comes between the two. Signs can 'stand for' things or events because they *re-present* the universal growth process rather than standing as tombstones marking the resting places of past realities. Thus we can call the semiotic process *representation*, provided we read the word as abstracted from a *verb*, and realize that it refers to a continuous revelation of its own relevance.

A sign stands *for* something *to* the idea which it produces, or modifies. Or, it is a vehicle conveying into the mind something from without. That for which it stands is called its *object*; that which it conveys, its *meaning*; and the idea to which it gives rise, its *interpretant*. The object of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first representation is the interpretant. But an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, may be conceived to have an absolute object at its limit. The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact, it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.

This is only an introduction to Peircean semiotics; if the concepts are now confusing, perhaps they will be clarified by the applications to come. This is a reasonable expectation, as it reflects the developmental nature of the sign systems essential to human dialogue. And dialogue, in turn, is essential to your quest for self-knowledge.

Into the glass

Some time ago you were looking through a glass window, and then looking at it. Now turn your attention to a glass that is reflective rather than transparent – a looking-glass, a mirror. Look at your eyes. – Are you looking *at* them or *through* them? Are the eyes you see the same as the eyes you see *with*? And what about *you* – are you seeing *yourself*, or is it your *self* that's doing the seeing? Or is it both? Let's say that seeing yourself in the mirror is an experience in which you are both the *subject* and the *object*. That makes sense in a way, doesn't it? But in another way, another sense, what you see is not you at all but an *image*. If you read (interpret) this image as a sign (a representation) of yourself, then clearly you are looking *through the looking glass*.

Looking into a mirror can be an unsettling experience if you try to *see how you look* – that is, to see what's really going on in your looking, as if you could look into it from the outside. Just how do you follow the ancient advice to 'Know thyself'? Can you really *appear* in the roles of knower and known, or subject and object, at the same time? You are, no doubt, adept at switching roles, but can you step back from *both* roles and take a director's-eye view of the whole play of semiosis? If not, you're bound to get confused by the fact that these different roles can have the same name at different times, and the same role can have different names as well. The semiotic view of perception or 'knowing' as reading is a way of sorting all this out. (In more philosophical language, it's a way of looking at *intersubjectivity* objectively.) But this path of inquiry will have to continue for a few more chapters before the 'view' reveals itself in all its – glory. For now, let's continue looking into the

quirks of language.

Flukes

Languages evolve because every genuine use of language *changes* the language. Concepts ebb and flow, and so do words, and so do the relationships between words and concepts. That's why every word that has a history has taken on a variety of meanings, and though some lose their currency, others persist through repeated use and continue – without obstructing each other, despite their differences. Here's an example, chosen almost at random:

An unlikely bit of good luck is sometimes called a *fluke*. The same word is used to denote a flatfish, or one of the end-parts of an anchor, or part of a whale's tail, or a parasitic flatworm (all of which have vaguely similar shapes). By the way, some of the parasitic flukes have a very complicated life cycle requiring up to four different hosts – so complicated that few flukes actually reach the adult stage. The species survives because those few survivors lay *thousands* of eggs. Thus if one particular egg produces a creature who lives long enough to reproduce, you could call that a *fluke*. However, the connection here is accidental (as usual with symbols: Peirce, EP2:317). Dictionaries tell us that the habit of referring to improbable good luck as a *fluke* is of unknown origin. In other words, it's just a fluke that we can describe the survival of a fluke as a fluke. Such 'frozen accidents' pervade the conventional relations between word and meaning, but as they settle into habits, their accidental origins are forgotten.

But that's not all; the word *word* itself can refer to different kinds of objects, for semiotic as well as historical reasons. What counts as a "word" in linguistics and semiotics varies with the purpose of the counting.

A common mode of estimating the amount of matter in a MS. or printed book is to count the number of words. There will ordinarily be about twenty *the's* on a page, and of course they count as twenty words. In another sense of the word "word," however, there is but one

word “the” in the English language; and it is impossible that this word should lie visibly on a page or be heard in any voice, for the reason that it is not a Single thing or Single event. It does not exist; it only determines things that do exist. Such a definitely significant Form, I propose to term a *Type*. A Single event which happens once and whose identity is limited to that one happening or a Single object or thing which is in some single place at any one instant of time, such event or thing being significant only as occurring just when and where it does, such as this or that word on a single line of a single page of a single copy of a book, I will venture to call a *Token*.

— Peirce, CP 4.537 (1906)

Peirce’s terms for this distinction have been widely adopted; but even when it is clear that the word *word* refers to a *type* as opposed to a token, what it denotes can vary with the user’s purpose (Hilpinen 2012). For instance, the word *fluke* is a single ‘orthographic word’ in its written or printed form, or a single ‘phonological word’ in its spoken form, with several different meanings. But in another sense these ‘different meanings’ are really different *words*, no matter how much their tokens may look and sound alike, because they are different signs.

The word Sign will be used to denote an Object perceptible, or only imaginable, or even unimaginable in one sense—for the word “*fast*,” which is a Sign, is not imaginable, since it is not *this word itself* that can be set down on paper or pronounced, but only *an instance* of it, and since it is the very same word when it is written as it is when it is pronounced, but is one word when it means “rapidly” and quite another when it means “immovable,” and a third when it refers to abstinence.

— Peirce, CP 2.230 (1910)

Natural languages are not designed for perfectly unambiguous communication. The more widely a word is used, the vaguer its reference must be; otherwise how could it carry relevance in so

many different situations? Yet in any given situation, we have ways to reduce vagueness and increase precision. The trouble is that those ways have to function implicitly: you can't make them explicit and actually use them at the same time. In a dialog, you depend on your partner to be making meaning with the same tools you are using yourself; but stopping to check on this, to *observe* the dialog, means taking a detour from it.

The expert's language is more precise than ordinary language, and he often objects to vague uses of terms that he prefers to use precisely. But if the same words are widely used, their precision belongs to the expert's idiom, not to the language at large. Using vague words precisely is no more intelligent than using precise words vaguely. Either kind of use can fail to fit the situation.

Charity and polyversity

In a typical dialogue, the partners expect one another to say something *relevant*, i.e. something more or less informative about the subject of the conversation. In the more pointed and purposeful situation of *dialog*, we also expect the subject to be more clearly defined as the dialog proceeds. In other words, a genuine dialog typically progresses from the vague to the definite. But along the way, what seems vague to one partner may seem definite to the other. If you are habitually attached to precise meanings of certain terms used in the dialog, you may have to cut your partner some slack, as they say, in order to collude effectively with him or her. Indeed, *premature precision* is one of the great barriers to communication. Terms generally in vague use had better be understood vaguely until the dialog itself defines them, or 'until we see our way to rational precision' (Peirce, EP2:117).

More broadly, it's a reader's job to trust that the writer is telling the truth, and to adjust her usage habits accordingly. Until it becomes too much of a strain, that is. Engaging in dialog requires the *default* assumption – the one you begin with, although may have to give up on it later – that your dialog partner is at least trying to tell the common truth, however odd her idiom may appear. This has been called the 'principle of charity' by some philosophers. You might even identify it with the 'love' (ἀγάπη) of

which the Christian Bible speaks (*1 Corinthians* 13, for example). In any case, it is clearly 'rooted in the social principle,' just like logic, science and religion.

This is worth mentioning because it may conflict with another typical assumption: that when i use a word, it 'means the same thing' (signifies the same idea) that it does when you use it. In a conversation with you, i tend to assume by default that the connection between your words and your experience matches the connection between your words and *my* experience. However, when it comes to abstract words in common use (such as 'truth' or 'love'), that assumption is not likely to survive a serious attempt to pin down precisely what they mean. For any participant in a genuine dialogue, the assumption of common usage is far more readily abandoned than the principle of charity. That's because it is tacitly recognized by all parties that all words have to be interpreted, and the *interpretant* is not the *object* but another sign of the object. When the assumption of common usage trumps the principle of charity, the usual result is a 'dialogue of the deaf.'

As Ray Jackendoff (2002, 91) says, 'not everyone's language is entirely identical – just good enough for both parties in a conversation to be convinced that communication is taking place.' This conviction is expressed in practice by carrying forward the conversation. We learn what we're talking about by carrying on as if we knew. (If we *really* knew what we were talking about, would there be any point in talking about it?)

Alice was quite right to ask 'whether you can make words mean so many different things'; yet as everyone knows, it's perfectly normal in natural languages for the same 'word' (defined as its written or spoken form) to mean several different things. (That is, we all know this *implicitly*; we don't notice it in the flow of conversation because the context usually constrains what the word can mean in the current situation.) Look up any common word in the dictionary, and you'll probably find that several definitions are given for it. The more common the word, the more 'meanings' it has, counting entries in the glossary as 'meanings'. Sometimes it is easy to see a family relationship among the various meanings, and sometimes it isn't.

In linguistics, the tendency of a single word to have many different meanings is called *polysemy*. (This word and its cousin

semantic represent another branch of English terminology derived, like *semiotic*, from the Greek root -σημ-) But we don't seem to have an established word for the tendency of a single meaning to have many different expressions. This obviously happens all the time; how else could you explain what a word means by using *other words*? If we need a term for it, as a counterpart to *polysemy* ('many meanings'), an obvious choice would be *polylogy* ('many words'). According to the OED, 'polylogy' has a history of meaning something else (namely loquaciousness), but it's been used so rarely that we can safely ignore that history. Thus in naming the concept 'polylogy' we are not acting as arbitrarily as Humpty Dumpty, and we don't have to worry that the word means too much, as commoner words often do.

So a word can have many meanings (polysemy); a meaning can have many words (polylogy). There are many ways to express a single idea, though some are better than others in any given situation. There are also many right ways to read a single expression (along with an infinite number of wrong ways). We have to know these multiplexities intimately in order to fully engage *both* principles, of charity and of relevance. Perhaps it would help to have one word for polysemy *and* polylogy. How about *polyversity*? Since this word has very little history of usage, we can in good conscience do a Humpty Dumpty on it, and dictate what it means without fear of interference from established meanings. Besides, it combines a Greek prefix with a Latin root, something no expert coiner of words would ever do. Let's face it, if you want to be sure that a word means exactly one thing and nothing else, you have to use one that's never been used before – and the uglier the better, as Peirce remarked about one of his many coinages (EP2:335).

However, just because we have a new word with a single meaning doesn't mean that we have a new concept. Other versions of the same idea may have appeared elsewhere. Maybe what I call polyversity is the same as what's called *conceptual alternativity* in cognitive semantics (Talmy 2000, I.258). An equivalent principle is also recognized in biology, as we will see later on. But that's the whole point of polyversity: what appears at first to be a new concept, or a false one, can always turn out to be an old truth in a new (dis)guise, while the most familiar phrase can sometimes turn

into a revelation. That's because language does have a life of its own, as do you, and thus it can cross your path at many different angles. And that's why it helps to approach dialog with 'beginner's mind,' as Dogen called it (S. Suzuki 1970).

Communicants

If we are to engage in a genuine dialogue, then, you and i have to trust each other in two ways.

First, i trust you to *speak from experience*, to tell me honestly how the world looks to you, rather than repeating some conventional formula or habitual opinion, or saying what you want me to think you think. In other words, i assume by default that your expression is authentically motivated. This way, if my description of the world differs from yours, i can chalk it up to polyversity and not to your personal perversity. Rather than summarily dismissing what you say as simply wrong (which would abort the dialogue), i can consider working with you to resolve (or at least elucidate) this difference together. Of course neither of us knows, until we try, whether it will be worth the effort.

Second, i trust you to speak in a medium or language that we have in common. We may find that my idiom differs from yours, but such a difference can be resolved if the two idioms are versions of a single dialect. Or we may find that our dialects differ, but can still communicate because the two dialects are versions of a single language. Even if our languages differ, we may be able to bridge the gap if the languages belong to the same family (as for instance Italian and Spanish are both Romance languages). And even if they differ in family, we may still have a meeting of minds at some level if we are both *human*. All humans, regardless of culture, and barring special disabilities, are equipped to learn some form of symbolic language – in all its glorious polyversity.

(Whatever the prospects of communication with other species, it's much easier to maintain the double trust required of dialog partners if each can assume that the other is human. This has been a pretty safe assumption throughout the history of human dialogue. But from this end of time in the early 21st century CE, i can no longer be so sure that you, dear reader, are human –

especially if this text is as old to you as the *Gospel of Thomas* is to me. Maybe in your time my species has been joined (or survived) by others who are its genetic or technological descendants, and somehow this text has survived to be dug up again like the Nag Hammadi library. In that case, i wonder, how would you read it? And *why*? Maybe you're curious about how your ancestors in the dark ages made sense of their world, or why they were so busy burning down their real house (the biosphere) while rigging up a fake substitute for it. But then, from your perspective, that was just another episode along the way to your present, and you're wondering why we felt in our time that the world was coming down around our ears. – I wonder, do you have ears?)

Summing up: dialog partners have to trust each other to try, at least, for *both* original truth and consensual expression. We have *confidence* in the conversation insofar as we *confide* in each other. The dialog in which you are now engaged as a reader will have a chance to mean something if you trust me to have spoken from experience in the first place, and i trust you to bring a *current* experience to this text (rather than, say, admiring the style or the typeface, or 'going through the motions' of reading). Then we both contribute to the flow of semiosis that carries us through it. We both sense the common circumstances implied in it, though we would no doubt explain them differently.

Dialogue revolution

The Great Conversation has always been a dialogue, but we haven't always read it that way (especially when it comes to sacred scriptures). Many have preferred to broadcast a private understanding, hoping only to overcome all the others. In religion, this leads to reading sacred scripture as supreme monologue; in the sciences, to a rigid adherence to dogma, for instance the doctrine that cultural and biological evolution is strictly a matter of competition. But all that may be changing; many voices have been lifted up of late to declare our time a turning point in this respect. For instance Leonard Swidler, Co-Founder-Director of the Global Dialogue Institute, has written that

humankind is emerging from the relative darkness of the 'Age of Monologue' into the dawning 'Age of Dialogue' – dialogue understood as a conversation with someone who differs from us *primarily* so we can learn, because of course since we now growingly realize that our understanding of the meaning of reality is necessarily limited, we might learn more about reality's meaning through someone else's perception of it.

— Swidler (1999, 15)

From Swidler's perspective, this shift from monologue to dialogue 'constitutes such a radical reversal in human consciousness ... that it must be designated as literally "revolutionary," that is, it turns everything absolutely around. In brief: Dialogue is *a whole new way of thinking* in human history' (Swidler 1999, 16).

Sounds almost like an apocalypse. A beginning. A new global guidance system.