

JUST DO IT: SCHOPENHAUER AND PEIRCE ON THE IMMEDIACY OF AGENCY

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In response to the claim that our sense of will is illusory, some philosophers have called for a better understanding of the phenomenology of agency. Although I am broadly sympathetic with the tenor of this response, I question whether the positive-theoretic blueprint it promotes truly heralds a tenable undertaking. Marshaling a Schopenhauerian insight, I examine the possibility that agency might not be amenable to phenomenological description. Framing this thesis in terms of Charles S. Peirce's semiotic framework, I suggest a way to integrate the idea of streaming experiences with that of bodily strivings, which, owing to their primitive structure, can never be represented.

Force indeed is not a datum, but an "actum"
humanly present in effort.

— Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*

The ineffable is not something mystical or mysterious; it is
merely that which evades description. It evades description,
but it pervades experience.

— Thomas L. Short, "Response to Carl Hausman"

Introduction

The topic of agency has recently come into focus as "intrepid forays into this long-shunned territory are at last under way."¹ Although the tools of these investigations have largely been those of third-person

¹ Wolfgang Prinz, Daniel C. Dennett, and Natalie Sebanz, "Toward a Science of Volition," in *Disorders of Volition*, (ed.) N. Sebanz and W. Prinz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 2. See also Chandra S. Sripada, "Philosophical Questions about the Nature of Willpower," *Philosophy Compass*, vol. 5, no. 9 (2010): 793-805.

science, some philosophers of mind like Tim Bayne and Shaun Gallagher argue that first-person reports should have an important role to play as well. The value and reliability of introspective appeals in cognitive science is by no means uncontroversial.² My misgivings, however, are not prompted by naturalist incredulity, but rather by a Romanticist insight originating in the work of Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer is perhaps best known for his iconoclastic defense of pessimism. Yet, that outlook rests on a comprehensive theory of mind, knowledge, and reality that casts serious doubt on the idea that our experience of willing could ever be vindicated by a more complete phenomenological understanding. At the risk of oversimplifying, what prompts this assessment is Schopenhauer's contention that the will falls outside the domain of the phenomenal. It is not simply that the first-person experience of agency cannot be put into language; rather, according to Schopenhauer, true agency as such cannot even be represented—linguistically or otherwise.

In order to understand this remarkable claim, I turn to Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics. Schopenhauer and Peirce are united in their rejection of (what they take to be) Hegelian idealism.³ Building on this kinship, I turn to Peirce's categories in order to motivate the idea that not every aspect of our lives can be put into signs.⁴ Specifically, I believe that the account of two-term relations we find in Peircean semiotics vindicates Schopenhauer's contention that brute exercises of the will pertain to the un-represented.

² Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, "Introspection and the Phenomenology of Free Will: Problems and Prospects," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2011): 180–205.

³ Roughly, Peirce charged Hegel with having neglected the brute fact of "struggle." Robert Stern has recently tried to diffuse this accusation by showing that "it is possible to read Hegel in a way that shows him to have accorded just the same status to these categories as Peirce himself demanded." See Robert Stern, "Peirce, Hegel, and the Category of Secondness," *Inquiry*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2007): 123–55, here 147. This attempt to show that Hegel did countenance something analogous to secondness is perhaps the highest compliment one can pay to Peirce, since it implies that a tenable philosophic system should make room for such a thing. I agree with this position. (I also think it is less of a stretch to claim that Schopenhauer countenanced dyadic relations than to claim that Hegel did so).

⁴ I should stress that, in this paper, I am interested solely with what agency "is" (*i.e.*, what it means for one to actually "have" or implement it), not with how it is ascribed to others. For a semiotic account of the latter that has much in common with Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), see Kristian Tylén, "When Agents Become Expressive: A Theory of Semiotic Agency," *Cognitive Semiotics*, vol. 0 (2007): 68–83.

My argument is divided into four parts, with the first half devoted mainly to Schopenhauer, and the second half mainly to Peirce. In the first section (“Phenomenology and its Scope”), I relate the thought of Schopenhauer to the notions of phenomena and noumena. In the second section (“An Explicit Double Standard”), I examine the twin theses at the core of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, namely that a) the principle of sufficient reason exhausts thought, but b) thought does not exhaust being. In the third section (“Semiotic Subsumption”), I recast these twin theses in terms of Peirce’s triadic categorial scheme, such that acts of agency pertain to two-term relations, and representations of such acts pertain to three-term relations. Finally, in the fourth section (“Prescission and Indexicality”), I explore the technical resources provided by Peircean semiotics in order to discuss (obliquely) the topic of the un-represented.

Phenomenology and its Scope

The typical account of agency seems straightforward enough. A thought is antecedent to a bodily event. Provided the succession of the two meets a handful of sensible constraints—for instance, the relevance of the posited cause and the absence of plausible competitors that could more parsimoniously lead to the same outcome—this shall usually be deemed sufficient to underwrite a subject’s sense of having been the motive force of the behavior. However, sundry experimental studies have shown that the retrospective inference that grounds this alleged mental causation is liable to all the vicissitudes that accompany any theoretically-mediated reasoning, chief among which is the possibility of being mistaken. Spurred by these results, the psychologist Daniel Wegner has famously concluded that our first-person experience of will is, in fact, baseless. On this view, the human brain produces an expedient narrative that secures a false sense of authorship *ex post facto*.⁵

However, as Bruce Bridgeman points out in an otherwise laudatory review of Wegner’s book, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*⁶, when all the dust has cleared, the repudiation of will as illusory, even if true, is largely vacuous because it simply cannot be put into prac-

⁵ See Daniel M. Wegner, “The Mind’s Best Trick: How we Experience Conscious Will,” *Trends in Cognitive Science*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2003): 65–69; see also “Who Is the Controller of Controlled Processes?,” in *The New Unconscious*, (ed.) R. Hassin, J. S. Uleman, and J. A. Bargh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19–36.

⁶ Daniel M. Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

tice.⁷ We may not be in charge, but we clearly go on feeling and believing that we are. This has prompted some philosophers of mind to challenge the illusion claim on phenomenological grounds. Tim Bayne, for example, has maintained that the synoptic interpretation of experimental data has proceeded somewhat hastily and has not paid sufficient attention to the actual details of first-person experience.⁸ Concomitant with a battery of criticisms on the methodological front⁹, he has thus pushed for a more thorough understanding of the phenomenology of agency:

One response to will skeptics—as we shall call them—is to challenge their interpretations of the data derived from the cognitive sciences.... We suspect that much of the motivation for the current wave of will skepticism derives from rather naive models of the phenomenology of agency. A more nuanced account of the phenomenology of agency might fit rather better with what the cognitive sciences are telling us about ourselves.¹⁰

Bayne is by no means alone in this regard. Responding to experiments that purportedly show the conscious mind lagging behind the body when performing an action¹¹, Shaun Gallagher¹² has argued that too much weight has been placed on the idea that one must have some kind of preview of an action for it to be willed.¹³ In contrast to

⁷ Bruce Bridgeman, "Is Mental Life Possible Without the Will?," *Psyche*, vol. 9, no. 13 (2003), unpaginated.

⁸ Tim J. Bayne, "Review of Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 9, no. 7 (2002): 94–96. See also E. Nahmias, S. Morris, T. Nadelhoffer, and J. Turner, "The Phenomenology of Free Will," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 11, nos. 7–8 (2004): 162–79.

⁹ Tim J. Bayne, "Phenomenology and the Feeling of Doing: Wegner on the Conscious Will," in *Does Consciousness Cause Behavior?* (ed.) S. Pockett, W. P. Banks, and S. Gallagher (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 169–86.

¹⁰ Tim J. Bayne and Neil Levy, "The Feeling of Doing: Deconstructing the Phenomenology of Agency," in *Disorders of Volition*, (ed.) N. Sebanz and W. Prinz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 49.

¹¹ See the studies (and rarely duplicated results) conducted by Benjamin Libet, "Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 4 (1985): 529–66; and Libet, "The Neural Time-Factor in Perception, Volition, and Free Will," *Revue de Métaphysique et Morale*, vol. 97, no. 2 (1992): 255–72.

¹² Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 237–48.

¹³ For example, see Paula Droege, "The Role of Unconsciousness in Free Will," *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 17, nos. 5–6 (2010): 56–61. See also Patrick Haggard and Helen Johnson, "Experiences of Voluntary Action," *Journal of*

Bayne, Gallagher has explicitly allied himself with the work of traditional phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his bid to reconcile the lived body with scientific models.¹⁴ As Gallagher explains: “Phenomenological psychiatrists and philosophers take the patient’s first-person narratives seriously. That is, they regard them as reflective of the patient’s actual experiences.”¹⁵

Reconnecting with lived experience in an unprejudiced way is indeed the mission of phenomenological inquiry. While the etymology of this endeavor is Kantian in lineage¹⁶, it was Husserl who went on to give phenomenology the status it currently enjoys, so the method has come to be associated with his call for a return “*zu den Sachen selbst*.” In Husserl’s usage, the “things themselves” are those appearances continuously displayed before the apprehending subject. Technically speaking, though, the antonym of “phenomenon” remains the “noumenon,” a notion that also makes a claim to being the

Consciousness Studies, vol. 10, nos. 9–10 (2003): 72–84.

¹⁴ Shaun Gallagher, “Mutual Enlightenment: Recent Phenomenology in Cognitive Science,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1997): 195–214. This recourse can be described as part of a self-conscious “Continental philosophy of mind”—a research program that has been described as “burgeoning by the minute” by David Morris, “Philosophy of Mind,” in *Columbia Companion to Twentieth-Century Philosophies*, (ed.) C. V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 531. As Jean-Michel Roy points out, despite frequent allusions to “Brentano’s thesis,” few philosophers working in the Analytic tradition have actually familiarized themselves with the phenomenological movement that sprung from this. See Jean-Michel Roy, “Heterophenomenology and Phenomenological Skepticism,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 6, nos. 1–2 (2007): 1–20. Continental philosophy of mind, by contrast, can be seen as attempting in earnest to integrate scientific results with phenomenological accounts. This program arguably originated in Francisco J. Valera, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), and has since matured to the point where it now permits a “textbook” statement like the one found in Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹⁵ Shaun Gallagher, “Sense of Agency and Higher-Order Cognition: Levels of Explanation for Schizophrenia,” *Cognitive Semiotics*, vol. 0 (2007): 32–33. To see this broad policy in action, one might look at the research methods described by Claire Petitmengin, “Describing One’s Subjective Experience in the Second Person: An Interview Method for the Science of Consciousness,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 5, nos. 3–4 (2006): 229–69.

¹⁶ The term “phenomenology” first arose from an engagement with Kant’s philosophy in Johann H. Lambert’s 1764 *Neues Organon*—a work which also contained one of the first uses of the term “semiotic” proposed by John Locke at the close of his 1690 *Essay*. See John N. Deely, “The Word ‘Semiotics’: Formation and Origins,” *Semiotica*, vol. 146, nos. 1–4 (2003): 1–49.

thing “in itself.” There is of course a difference between “things themselves” and “things in themselves” and this is the object of my present concern. When philosophers of mind like Bayne and Gallagher call for a more in-depth investigation of the phenomenology of agency, the very terms in which they frame their inquiry seem to prejudge the outcome, surreptitiously barring other (non-phenomenal) possibilities. To be clear, the concern here is not exegetical. It is not that contemporary thinkers have endorsed a phenomenological inquiry into agency without considering that it could also be read in a Kantian key. Rather, the repercussions I want to call attention to are more consequential. Current advocates of a phenomenology of agency often assume that the will is something one can internally gaze upon or contemplate in some fashion—that it is something amenable to a descriptive scrutiny liable of being discursively reported. Bayne and Levy, for example, state that experiences of mental causation, authorship, and effort all “have representational content. That is, they present the world—in this case, the agent and his or her actions—as being a certain way.”¹⁷ This is certainly plausible, but it is far from obvious. At the very least, Schopenhauer’s philosophy gives good reasons to think that the will cannot so easily be grasped.

Like Kant, Schopenhauer held that we represent objects as existing in space and time, and that we represent events as having an antecedent cause. These, he argued, are not really properties that obtain in the world. Instead, the mind adds them to the mix in its attempt to cognitively process its experiential inputs. Schopenhauer’s contribution to this Kantian thesis—which, *modulo* some reservations¹⁸, he regarded as correct—was his insistence that exercises of agency do not involve this sort of processing. In addition to knowing ourselves as we know other things—through representations—we also experience ourselves as willing certain ends. Yet, this experience (if it can indeed be so called) is a privileged one that stands out

¹⁷ Bayne and Levy, “The Feeling of Doing,” 50. To what extent this idea of having representational content concords with the noetic-noematic framework employed to further refine Brentano’s notion of intentionality is open to debate. See Hubert L. Dreyfus and Harrison Hall, eds., *Husserl, Intentionality, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982). Still, the central claim being advanced in recent debates does seem to be that we have a pre-reflective sense of agency, and that this provides enough cognitive traction for us to take our willing as an (introspective) object of apprehension.

¹⁸ Robert Wicks, “Schopenhauer’s Naturalization of Kant’s A Priori Forms of Empirical Knowledge,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1993): 181–96.

from the usual fare of processed intake. “Consequently, it may be said that the knowing subject has a twofold knowledge of the body, vaguely put as knowledge of it both as representation (like every outer object) and as will (unlike any outer object).”¹⁹

Since Schopenhauer often sought to reshape commonsensical intuitions, it is important to understand the particular sense in which he used the term “will.” Bayne and Levy, for instance, have distinguished between three components of a phenomenology of agency, depending on whether one focuses on the experience of mental causation, authorship, or effort. Although this tripartition has merit, I am reluctant to employ it. First, I worry that finer distinctions could be made at leisure, since I detect no ready principle that could halt the process.²⁰ Second, breaking down the will into various parts is ill-suited to a discussion of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, in so far as he saw fragmentation into plurality as a sort of accident added to what is otherwise a unitary notion.²¹ Third, some of the terms of the partition, most notably “mental causation,” are moot (as the authors themselves recognize) and, when combined with the natural assumption that if they are applicable then they are necessary features of agency, seem to prejudge the issue at hand (in a direction away from embodiment, moreover). To be sure, some provisional distinctions are in order. Nevertheless, it might be wise not to put too much stock in typologies that stand a good chance of being reified with use.²²

In a more familiar context, “will” means “free will.” Typically, this is taken as the faculty possessed by humans and not by plants. Will, in this sense, is what gives citizens a right to vote, why we enter into

¹⁹ John E. Atwell, *Schopenhauer on the Character of the World: The Metaphysics of Will* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 85. Ironically, it is by turning to what is closest to the self that Schopenhauer found a way out of solipsism. He thus triumphantly spoke of having discovered “a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that could not be taken by attack from without.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, (tr.) E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966[1844]), 195. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as WR2.

²⁰ Bayne and Levy suggest the experience of freedom, trying, deliberation, and decision-making as supplementary subheadings. See “The Feeling of Doing,” 65 n.1.

²¹ See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, (tr.) E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966[1818]), 128. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as WR1.

²² In this respect, I am probably closer to Gallagher’s readiness to “accommodate a certain degree of ambiguity” than Bayne’s more confident analytic approach. See Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, 5.

consensual relationships, etc. However, when Schopenhauer discusses the will, he is usually alluding to a motive force that can be expressed whether or not there are such alternatives. In this sense, “will” is a much more basic notion. A plant striving to reach sunlight manifests this drive. Technical execution notwithstanding, a weightlifter stokes her conative furnace and generates the energy needed to accomplish her Herculean task. Choosing to lift a barbell is not enough—the athlete must actually *do* it. Whether or not the environment complies with what is undertaken is unimportant. As Schopenhauer writes: “The will is in the dark concerning the external world in which its objects lie; and it rages like a prisoner against the walls and bars of his dungeon.” (WR2, 235) In promoting a twofold ontology of will and representation, Schopenhauer is alluding mainly to this conception of “will”—the less glamorous one that, in the Aristotelian definition of the human being as a “rational animal,” would correspond to its animality.²³

As discussed previously, Schopenhauer’s ideas are an explicit response to the Kantian system. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* had attempted to hug the contours of human intelligibility so as to delineate (from the inside, as it were) the frontier of thought. Phenomena are defined as appearances that present themselves to us. If anything can be shown to exist without showing up as an appearance, then, by definition, it shall fall into the complementary class of the noumenal and thus lie outside the ambit of phenomenological description. As it turns out, Schopenhauer claimed to have identified the sole candidate that fits this bill, and insisted that “only the *will* is *thing-in-itself*; as such, it is not representation at all, but *toto genere* different therefrom.” (WR1, 110) He therefore augmented Kant’s topography with primal bodily events capable of transgressing these limits (by simply not being subject to those limits). As Schopenhauer writes: “[O]ur *willing* is the only opportunity we have of understanding simultaneously from within any event that outwardly manifests itself; consequently, it is the one thing known to us *immediately*, and not given to us merely in the representation, as all else is.” (WR2, 196)

Given that the initiative we marshal in behavior lets us commune in an unmediated fashion with the mind-independent world, Schopenhauer would have regarded the current project of a “phenomenology” of agency as effectively vitiating the profundities our willing has to offer. As G. S. Neely notes:

²³ It has been observed that “research on volition has lagged behind research on other aspects of the mind” (Prinz, Dennett, and Sebanz, “Toward a Science of Volition,” 2). This statement betrays the mentalist bias that might just explain it.

Thus, although we do have an avenue of direct and immediate access to the thing-in-itself (which is discovered through the introspective examination of bodily agency), if we are to bring this subtle awareness to the forefront of consciousness in order to “think” about it and talk about it plainly, we will have to locate a word signifying an appropriate concept.... By extending the term “will” to include non-rational, impersonal forces, Schopenhauer effectively re-directs the reach of the term *away* from distinct phenomena and toward that non-cognitive striving which lies at the root of all phenomena.²⁴

In 1820 Schopenhauer shared these results at the University of Berlin, defiantly scheduling his lectures so that they overlapped with those of Hegel. Two very different worldviews were going head-to-head. While Hegel sang the praises of the disembodied “Idea” and strove to eliminate Kant’s noumenal realm in favor of a grand entelechy of “the Absolute,” Schopenhauer made the domain of the unrepresented the site of his most significant insights and stressed the centrality of our guts, genitals, muscles, and tendons in cognition.²⁵ This radically anti-Cartesian emphasis on the body explains why Schopenhauer described the intellect as a “subsidiary organ” of the will (WR2, 258)—a momentous shift that has led Julian Young to declare Schopenhauer “if not the father, certainly the grandfather” of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology.²⁶ The merits of that conception were eventually recognized by some (most notably Nietzsche and Freud), and are increasingly taking center stage as “the second-generation cognitive revolution consists largely of the study on the embodiment of mind; that is, the bodily basis of meaning.”²⁷ At the time, however, Schopenhauer’s challenging theses were ill-received by his colleagues who filled Hegel’s lecture hall to capacity and left his almost vacant. Let us now re-examine those tenets in a

²⁴ G. Steven Neeley, “Schopenhauer and the Limits of Language,” *Idealistic Studies*, vol. 27, nos. 1–2 (1997): 47–67, here 58.

²⁵ Maurice Mandelbaum, “The Physiological Orientation of Schopenhauer’s Epistemology,” in *Schopenhauer: His Philosophical Achievement*, (ed.) M. Fox (Sussex: Harvester, 1980), 50–67.

²⁶ Julian Young, *Schopenhauer* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 244. See also Wayne Sheeks, “Schopenhauer’s Solution to the Intellect-Will Problem,” in *Schopenhauer: His Philosophical Achievement*, (ed.) M. Fox (Sussex: Harvester, 1980), 68–77.

²⁷ Merlin Donald and Lars Andreassen, “Consciousness and Governance: From Embodiment to Enculturation,” *Cognitive Semiotics*, vol. 0 (2007): 68. For more on embodied cognition, see Andy Clark, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together Again* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); and Lawrence Shapiro, *Embodied Cognition* (London: Routledge, 2011).

fairer light. For if Schopenhauer is right, a phenomenological study of the will introduces a mediated distance where there is none to begin with.²⁸

An Explicit Double Standard

Schopenhauer maintained that the will is noumenal.²⁹ The rationale behind this claim can be broken down into two sub-theses, which are expressed in Schopenhauer's two-volume *World as Will and Representation*. Succinctly, the first is that the principle of sufficient reason—the idea (generally associated with Leibniz's 1714 *Monadology*, §32), that every event has at least one prior cause or “reason why it should be thus and not otherwise”—provides an exhaustive explanation of phenomena. The second is that phenomena—understood as first-person appearances amenable to linguistic description—do not exhaust reality. Jointly considered, these tenets suggest that the confabulation account of agency (like the one championed by Wegner) could very well hold true for all that is represented—but that not everything is representable.

It is a coarse corporeal impetus that, in Schopenhauer's view, gives us a privileged ingress into the true, mind-independent nature of things. Such a forceful contact, Schopenhauer³⁰ argued, can be traced back to the fact that our bodies are irrevocably enmeshed with the natural world—our minds are an outgrowth of our bodies.³¹ He nonetheless considered the idea of free will to be a chimera. In a manner analogous to recent scientific incredulity, Schopenhauer held that “only subsequently, and thus wholly *a posteriori*, does [the intellect] learn how these [decisions of the will] have acted, just as a man making a chemical experiment applies the reagents, and then waits for the result.” (WR2, 209) His attitude in this regard was far ahead of its time, laying the groundwork for the now commonplace idea that our psychological motives are not necessarily known to us

²⁸ Robert J. Henle, “Schopenhauer and Direct Realism,” *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1992): 125–40.

²⁹ For etymological reasons, Schopenhauer tended to distance himself from this term.

³⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Will in Nature*, (tr.) E. F. J. Payne (New York: Berg, 1992[1836]).

³¹ For a similar view, see Vittorio Gallese, “The Inner Sense of Action: Agency and Motor Representations,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, vol. 7, no. 10 (2000): 23–40, here 32–33.

and may, in fact, obey a rationale wholly foreign to the one we credit ourselves with.³²

The upshot of Schopenhauer's stance is that while it affirms the undeniable existence of the will, the primitive nature that it ascribes to agentive acts leads to a cynical view akin to the contemporary confabulation account. At first glance, this would seem to bar any insight into one's bodily happenings. Yet, far from considering it to be an "illusion," Schopenhauer saw self-generated action as the supreme truth upon which all subsequent knowledge claims (scientific or otherwise) are founded, the incontrovertible datum of our own willing occupying pride of place in his architectonic.³³

The resultant conception carves out a neglected notional space that allows Schopenhauer to agree with Wegner that conscious will is essentially the product of a confabulated narrative *ex post facto*, whilst holding fast to the idea that the will *per se* is there all along, toiling underneath the discursive reports we weave. Straddling the frontiers of philosophy of mind, epistemology, and metaphysics, this mixed position beckons us to countenance the *causa sui*—yet reminds us that this motive force shall always appear as determined by an antecedent factor.³⁴ On this view, strict determinism reigns in the phenomenal realm, but the noumenal realm is governed by the non-determined force of will. (WR1, 106) Schopenhauer's philosophy of mind and action therefore divides the caused and the *causa sui* into two separate domains: the caused belongs to the phenomenal, which is represented, and the *causa sui* belongs to the noumenal, which cannot be represented.

Of course, this way of accommodating apparently incompatible notions turns on an appeal to a thing-in-itself (here glossed as will). Kantianism has by now lost much of its purchase, so there is an understandable tendency among contemporary theorists to disavow

³² See for example Richard E. Nisbett and Timothy DeCamp Wilson, "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes," *Psychological Review*, vol. 84, no. 3 (1977): 231–59; see also Droege, "The Role of Unconsciousness." It is also worth recalling that Freud was exposed to the ideas of Schopenhauer as a young man. For more on this point, see Frank J. Sulloway, *Freud: Biologist of the Mind* (New York: Basic, 1979), 467–68.

³³ To assess the extent of the ontological disparity, one should compare the remark about Spinoza by Schopenhauer (WR1, 126) with the remark by Albert Einstein quoted at the close of Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, 342.

³⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, second edition (revised and augmented by the author), (tr.) E. F. J. Payne (La Salle: Open Court, 1974[1847]).

the very idea of the noumenal.³⁵ While I share these reservations, I would not be so quick to dismiss the possibility, urged by Schopenhauer, that the primitive impetus animating bodily agency is the exception to an otherwise sober rule (likewise, I do not see why the idea that phenomenological inquiry might be limited in its descriptive reach should seem implausible, even at first sight). Commenting on Schopenhauer's theory of knowledge, David Hamlyn writes:

It is not simply that knowledge of agency is not like other kinds of knowledge; it is different in being *immediate*. Unfortunately, the notion of immediate knowledge...is not clear, despite the numerous occasions on which it has been invoked in philosophy. Presumably, to say that knowledge is immediate is to say that it is not mediated by anything.³⁶

I believe it is here that Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic framework has much to offer.

Peirce argued that any representation involves an irreducible combination of three parties: first, a vehicle, second, that for which this vehicle stands, and third, a mediating term of some sort for which there is such a "standing for." In many ways, this is a very liberal definition, as it does not prejudge what might fill its various place-holders. Still, it is a robust formula, as the three components supply individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for anything to represent. Delete any relatum, and the bond that sustained the representation collapses. An immediate relation, then, would be just that: a mere relation between two things that has no representational value (although it *can* have one, if taken as such by something external to it). Far from concluding from this that only what is represented exists, Peirce insisted that the triadic character of representation entails a way *out* of Idealism, compelling us to countenance realities that are patently non-representational (or

³⁵ Carl Hausman, for example, is led to the same (Peircean) view as the one developed in this paper, yet writes "I trust that this conclusion about the role of pre-cognitive experience will not be criticized for implying a commitment to the legitimacy of the concept of a thing-in-itself." See Carl Hausman, "T. L. Short's *Theory of Signs*," *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry*, vol. 26, nos. 2-3 (2006): 147. However, Hausman does not explain this statement—the reasons why such a commitment should be deemed shameful are apparently too obvious to be rehearsed.

³⁶ David Hamlyn, "Schopenhauer and Knowledge," *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, (ed.) C. Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 52.

more appropriately *sub-representational*).³⁷ As I proceed to show, this Peircean semiotic viewpoint allows us to better comprehend Schopenhauer's contention that the will is not an appearance.

The construal of representation at work in semiotics is arguably far more sophisticated than anything found in Schopenhauer's corpus. After all, for Schopenhauer, theoretical philosophy was but a means to a more spiritual and aesthetic end³⁸; whereas, for Peirce, it was the focal point of an almost obsessive lifelong pursuit.³⁹ Yet, in spite of their different emphases, I believe the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Peirce are, in crucial respects, mutually supportive. I do not mean to suggest that Schopenhauer's work somehow anticipated that of Peirce (or that Peirce's work recapitulated that of Schopenhauer). Rather, my contention is simply that the construal of the will as noumenal can be carefully extracted from its original context and made more rigorous by disrobing it of the Kantian idiom in which it was originally formulated.⁴⁰

Semiotic Subsumption

Viewed from the standpoint of Peircean semiotics, what Schopenhauer states, in effect, is that although the declarative intelligibility expected of free agents is possible solely by recourse to triadic representation, this appeal does not preclude, but in fact *presupposes*, a dyadic relation that is patently *not* beholden to any form of mediation by the mind.⁴¹ This technical gloss augments Schopenhauer's unique construal of agency with Peirce's seminal recognition that three-term relations subsume two-term relations. Hence, even though the will is exercised in events which require the addition of a third term in order to be interpreted, we can logically discern its

³⁷ Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 179–95. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as EP2.

³⁸ David E. Cartwright, *Schopenhauer: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁹ Joseph Brent, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ This is of course achieved at the price of infringing upon the sanctity of the author's intent; however, my goal in this paper is substantive, not exegetic.

⁴¹ For a statement of the semiotic theory of mind informing my discussion, see Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 257–62. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as EP1.

ordinal priority in such events (I will say more about this cognitive operation in the following section).

Peirce observed that “[w]here there is no effort, there is no resistance; where there is no resistance, there is no effort.” (EP2, 369) Similarly, it is part of Schopenhauer’s account that the very presence of effort on the part of an agent requires a conflict of sorts. Willing is not something that one peacefully contemplates. In fact, “[i]t is a cardinal point of Schopenhauer’s doctrine that as far as human-beings are concerned the will manifests itself only in doing.”⁴² The insight provided by the will thus comes by way of a visceral contact—a situated collision of subject and object that has nothing to do with deliberation and conceptual knowledge. It is not so much that a lack of confrontation would let our striving spread off evenly into a void, like a soundless scream in outer space (which would correspond to Peirce’s “Firstness”). Rather, the very absence of constraint, one could say, makes will constitutively impossible.⁴³

In contrast with internalist accounts of the mind, this view countenances relations that have one foot in the external world.⁴⁴ In a passage reminiscent of Schopenhauer, Peirce writes: “A door is slightly ajar. You try to open it. Something prevents. You put your shoulder against it, and experience a sense of effort and a sense of resistance. These are not two forms of consciousness; they are two aspects of one two-sided consciousness.” (EP2, 268) Causality in the ordinary (efficient) sense does not really enter the picture, because the presence of two and only two things prohibits the emergence of a causal chain or direction of priority. It is more like a duel—and at this categorial level of “Secondness,” the duelists have no inkling as to who is winning or whether they are in fact part of a greater melee. Peirce goes on to write: “For will, then, as one of the great types of consciousness, we ought to substitute the polar sense,” where “polar sense” is to be taken in the strict scientific sense of a pair of equal and opposite charges. (EP1, 260)

That said, just as Schopenhauer incorporated both will *and* representation into the mix, so Peirce recognized that an interpretation is needed in order make this two-sided conflict intelligible. Consequently, Peirce held that “he who wills is conscious of doing so, in the

⁴² David Hamlyn, “Schopenhauer on Action and the Will,” in *Idealism Past and Present*, (ed.) G. Vesey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 133.

⁴³ See the cosmogonic account in WR1, 149.

⁴⁴ An internalist account is defended by Terry Horgan, “Agentive Phenomenal Intentionality and the Limits of Introspection,” *Psyche*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2007), unpaginated.

sense of *representing* to himself that he does so.”⁴⁵ Most contemporary advocates of a phenomenology of agency would probably concur with such a statement. However, in keeping with their methodological compact to take first-person reports at face value, they would regard such mediation as unproblematic. By contrast, Schopenhauer and Peirce argue that the mere fact of representing an episode of willing introduces an additional feature not possessed by the will.

What mediation by the mind adds is conformity to the principle of sufficient reason. Schopenhauer remarked that we are hardwired by a constitutive need to make anything and everything intelligible in terms of antecedent causes (which extend serially in both directions). Likewise, Peirce held that “[n]o cognition not determined by a previous cognition...can be known.” (EP1, 26) Current theories of agency support this view. Bayne and Levy, for instance, remark that “even if it is possible to experience oneself as a mover, it does not follow that it is possible to experience oneself as an *unmoved* mover. It is hard to see how one could experience an agent causal relation as undetermined by prior states.”⁴⁶ This is a philosophical realization, and it applies to experimental subjects and clinical observers alike. We might say it is a normal, and even desirable, by-product of being caught up in the uninterrupted flow of thought. However, Schopenhauer did not think this epistemological condition of possibility—which he fully acknowledged and even helped to clarify in his FR—entails the metaphysical nonexistence of the will.⁴⁷ This is because the serialization imposed by sufficient reason does not warrant our extending it beyond its proper scope to things that are in no way acting as signs:

The principle of sufficient reason in general is the expression of the fundamental form at the very core of our cognitive faculty, namely the basic form of necessary connexion between all our objects, i.e., our representations.... But for this very reason we are not justified in setting forth, as the absolute eternal order of the world and of all that exists, such a principle, outside and independently of the mechanism of our cognitive faculty from which it has sprung.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, (ed.) C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. W. Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), vol. 1, § 532.

⁴⁶ Bayne and Levy, “The Feeling of Doing,” 54.

⁴⁷ Atwell, *Schopenhauer on the Character of the World*, 110.

⁴⁸ Schopenhauer, *On the Fourfold Root*, 130, 134.

Daniel Wegner writes that “[t]he idea of conscious will and the idea of psychological mechanisms have an oil and water relationship, having never been properly reconciled.”⁴⁹ His proposed solution is to further entrench this dualism by investigating one side with mechanistic natural science and appealing to epiphenomenalism to explain (away?) all the leftovers.⁵⁰ In contrast, the model I am proposing strives to exhibit the unique relation of *subsumption* that binds representation and action. Peircean semiotics insists that representation presupposes a mediating interpretation that brings into relation two things—but not the other way round. Armed with this categorial scheme, we can recast Schopenhauer’s thesis by saying that represented acts of will are a three-place relationship between a mind, a body, and a world (each broadly construed). Yet, if we strip away what is responsible for the interpretation, we get an unrepresented event that is a two-sided altercation between a body and a world. While this altercation entails that the structures of agency and thought are very different, such a difference does not thereby translate into incompatibility. On the contrary, we are in a position to see how those two realms interlock, insofar as every triadic relation logically presupposes a dyadic one.

Bayne and Pacherie are thus correct to hold that “[a]gentive self-awareness undoubtedly contains narrative elements, but it is not narrative all the way down.”⁵¹ After all, interpretations of doing—accurate or otherwise—are different in kind than the act of doing. What is now required is a tangible reason *why* representations could never be all there is to agency. The ongoing flow of conscious mental life has long been remarked for its stream-like structure, where one thought quite literally leads to another.⁵² Such a stream is clearly amenable to phenomenological scrutiny. A bodily act, however, is a

⁴⁹ Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, 2.

⁵⁰ Irrespective of any outside criticisms, this stance faces a host of internal difficulties. Wegner, for example, writes that “[t]he experience of will is merely a feeling that occurs to a person.” (*Ibid.*, 14) Yet, he later adds that “this body-based signature is a highly useful tool” in that it “helps us to tell the difference between things we’re doing and all the other things that are happening in and around us.” (*Ibid.*, 327) A mistake is surely being made here: something “useful” is, to that extent, causally efficacious, and thus can no longer be characterized as merely epiphenomenal.

⁵¹ Tim J. Bayne and Elisabeth Pacherie, “Narrators and Comparators: The Architecture of Agentive Self-Awareness,” *Synthese*, vol. 159, no. 3 (2007): 475–91, here 489.

⁵² William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York: Cosimo, 2007[1890]), 224–90.

discrete occurrence, if anything is.⁵³ Moreover, any such act is causally efficacious in a way not mirrored by thoughts (the will actually moves things about). So, the succession of thoughts needs to be unpacked in a way that allows for finite engagements with the world, otherwise we will be faced with a regress of representations. In short, we need a theory that carves out a place for *bona fide* action. Schopenhauer provides such a theory.

The Schopenhauerian stance is that our bodily participation in worldly affairs is definitely real, even if it falls below the threshold of discursive articulation. By contrast, the illusion claim propounded by Wegner effectively throws a cloak of mystery over human agency. On his view, it is not merely that subjects apprehend their willing through a mnemonic lens; rather, such a lens is held to be opaque. The irony is that Schopenhauer was in many respects the forebear of this view. Yet, instead of hastily endorsing what can best be described as a “disenchanted” view of the human predicament, he provided complex philosophical, psychological, and biological arguments that in the end vindicate—inadvertently, as it happens—our intuitive sense that we have an active part to play in constituting our lives.⁵⁴ Thus, let us not forget that the thinker who pioneered the confabulation account also made it a point to underscore that causal forces always leave the will itself singularly untouched.

Precision and Indexicality

In the course of his phenomenological investigations, Merleau-Ponty was compelled to acknowledge that “the perception of our own body” in action betokens “a *logic lived through*” that attains clarity

⁵³ In “Can ‘I’ Prevent You from Entering my Mind?” (in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2013): 145–62) I allude to experiments that show how discrepancies in proprioceptive feedback that last beyond 150 ms begin to dissipate the phenomenological feel of being in control of a movement, and I note that, “if the sense of agency is inversely proportionate to the delay, then the lower limit of such a temporal gradation (which marks no discrepancy) would have to entail an absolute agentive involvement in an *hic et nunc* event...insofar as an ‘instantaneous feedback’ bereft of *any* sequentiality is no feedback at all” (149 n. 4).

⁵⁴ Compare the two-tiered psychological model proposed by Janet Metcalfe and Walter Mischel, “A Hot/Cool-System Analysis of Delay Gratification: Dynamics of Willpower,” *Psychological Review*, vol. 106, no. 1 (1999): 3–19; with the philosophical account given by Julian Young in *Willing and Unwilling: A Study in the Philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987).

“only through experiencing certain natural signs.”⁵⁵ The subsumption I have just canvassed, where triadic relations asymmetrically envelop dyadic ones, supports this idea that “[m]y corporeal intending of the objects of my surroundings is *implicit and presupposes no thematization or ‘representation’ of my body or milieu.*”⁵⁶ One might wonder, then, why phenomenological investigation cannot handle the topic agency, while semiotics can.

This question can be answered by reviewing how many things are needed for there to be a sign. We may begin with two untendentious premises. First, we collect assent to the logical dictum that whatever is complex is composed of simples. This realization (which so captivated Leibniz and later Russell) is as secure as it is trivial. However, the realization becomes crucially important once we grant a second premise, namely that the experiential world, as one finds it, is always already complex—very complex in fact. Of course, phenomenologists of all stripes have long noted this.⁵⁷ Semiotics, though, is not phenomenology, so no methodological constraint forbids the semiotician to adulterate this baseline of lived experience. Therefore, we may take this complexity and begin to remove some items. This move—termed “prescission”—is permissible because, as stated, anything complex subsumes something simpler. In prescinding, then, we attend to some elements and deliberately neglect others.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (tr.) C. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), 49.

⁵⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, (tr.) R. C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 89. Emphasis added.

⁵⁷ For a particularly strong (if at times cryptic) statement of this, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (tr.) A. Lingis, (ed.) C. Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–55.

⁵⁸ In this sense, the method of prescission can be likened to the “simplification” inference rule applied to (in our case, three-term) conjunctions in logical derivation. Despite its utility, this parallel has limitations since the items that simplification applies to can exist on their own as robustly as the conjunction can. This, however, is not the case with all three elements of the sign relation, so there is a genuine need for a different label. For more on prescission, see Marc Champagne, “Explaining the Qualitative Dimension of Consciousness: Prescission Instead of Reification,” *Dialogue*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2009): 145–83; Gérard Deledalle, *Charles S. Peirce’s Philosophy of Signs: Essays in Comparative Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 5–6; Nathan Houser, “Peirce, Phenomenology and Semiotics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*, (ed.) P. Cobley (London: Routledge, 2010), 95–96; Frederik Stjernfelt, *Diagrammatology: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Phenomenology, Ontology, and Semiotics* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 246–55.

Now, suppose that, armed with this “focusing mechanism,”⁵⁹ we have done quite a bit of pruning and are left with, say, only four things (here using the term “thing” loosely). Can there still be a sign? Certainly, since one of these things could conceivably stand for another to yet another.⁶⁰ So we continue supposing simpler scenarios. Three items still allows for sign-action or semiosis. A major shift occurs, however, when we get down to two. Suddenly, the situation becomes too sparse for us to assemble anything plausibly resembling a sign. We, as thinkers gleaning this fact, do not suddenly vanish from existence; we have been (and remain) there all along. However, in supposing increasingly simpler states of affairs, we eventually learn something informative about the constitutive conditions of semiosis. The passage from, say, 500 items to 4 can be implemented rather smoothly, and although the resulting setting becomes more and more impoverished and artificial, nothing beyond frustrated folk intuitions prevents semiosis from unfolding. When we dip below three elements, however, we hit a real barrier that involves impersonal considerations, which are not at all the product of whim or social convention.

With only two things there can be no sign action, and this for principled (*i.e.*, demonstrable) reasons. And since two, and only two, things are involved in acts of agency⁶¹, we can better understand Schopenhauer’s claim that, in order for one to seize upon the true nature of the will, one has to “think away” the contribution of the mind (WR2, 269).⁶²

Peirce recognized that the conclusions arrived at by way of precission manifest a persuasive force different from the sort pro-

⁵⁹ The expression comes from Stjernfelt, *Diagrammatology*, 172.

⁶⁰ See Barend van Heusden, “Dealing with Difference: From Cognition to Semiotic Cognition,” *Cognitive Semiotics*, vol. 4 (2009): 116–32, here 118; see also Terrence W. Deacon, “Shannon–Boltzmann–Darwin: Redefining Information (Part II),” *Cognitive Semiotics*, vol. 2 (2008): 169–196, here 173.

⁶¹ Semiotic inquiry is not preoccupied solely with such rudimentary structures. If no methodological restriction is placed on how many things one can countenance, one is free to run an account that helps itself to far richer descriptions of conscious life (and life *simpliciter*) as a semiotic flow. In fact, there are good reasons to think that, once interpretation enters the picture, things *have to* get complex. See Marc Champagne, “Some Semiotic Constraints on Metarepresentational Accounts of Consciousness,” in *Semiotics 2008: Specialization, Semiosis, Semiotics*, (ed.) J. N. Deely and L. G. Sbrocchi (Toronto: Legas, 2009), 557–64.

⁶² Perhaps this explains why Peirce’s rejection of things in themselves was strategically qualified so that “there can be no conception of the *absolutely* incognizable.” (EP1, 24; emphasis added)

vided by traditional logical argumentation.⁶³ The kinship between this Peircean appeal to the self-evident and phenomenology is by now widely recognized⁶⁴, and the complexity premise can justly be classified as phenomenological (just look around and see). Yet, since quite a bit of epistemological doctoring needs to be done for that setting to yield the insights that are of interest to a study of signs, in prescind-ing we are performing something very different from phenomenological description, which is defined by its programmatic desire to capture human experience as it actually presents itself.⁶⁵ Hence, while such scholars as Spiegelberg⁶⁶ are correct to draw a parallel between the semiotic tool of prescindion and the Husserlian method of “eidetic variation,”⁶⁷ I disagree with those⁶⁸ who think prescindion can artificially tease apart and omit the bound features of experience whilst still falling under the rubric of the phenomenological.⁶⁹

Most semioticians working in the Peircean tradition have come to reject the idea that interpretation is completely open-ended and thus accept that there is a constraint on what one can say truthfully.⁷⁰

⁶³ André De Tienne, “Quand l’apparence (se) fait signe : la genèse de la représentation chez Peirce,” *Recherches sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry*, vol. 20, nos. 1–3 (2000): 95–144.

⁶⁴ For comparative analyses, see Charles J. Dougherty, “The Common Root of Husserl’s and Peirce’s Phenomenologies,” *The New Scholasticism*, vol. 54, no. 3 (1980): 305–25; Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Context of the Phenomenological Movement* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 27–50; Stjernfelt, *Diagrammatology*, 141–59.

⁶⁵ As Spiegelberg notes: “[I]t was chiefly Hegel who was on [Peirce’s] mind, both when he adopted and when he dropped the phenomenological label.” (*The Context*, 45) For more on Peirce and Hegel, see Max H. Fisch, *Peirce, Semeiotic, and Pragmatism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 261–82.

⁶⁶ Spiegelberg, *The Context*, 33.

⁶⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, (tr.) D. Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999), 70. See also Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 27–28.

⁶⁸ Leila T. Haaparanta, “On the Possibility of Naturalistic and of Pure Epistemology,” *Synthese*, vol. 118, no. 1 (1999): 39–41.

⁶⁹ A similar view has recently been expressed by Vincent Colapietro, “On Behalf of the World,” *The American Journal of Semiotics*, vol. 28, nos. 1–2 (2012): 129–47, here 137–38. Care must therefore be taken to disambiguate the kinship at hand. Going back to the parallel I introduced earlier (note 58), if prescindion consists in using the simplification rule to infer “P and Q, therefore P,” then eidetic variation is akin to appealing to the commutative law to license “P and Q, therefore Q and P.”

⁷⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

Precision calls attention to the fact that there is another limit to semiosis at its simpler bookend⁷¹—a constraint on what one can say *tout court*.⁷² It would, of course, be contradictory to claim that one can “think the unthinkable.” Philosophers eager to spot this contradiction often leap to an indiscriminate dismissal of the noumenal. Yet, there is no contradiction whatsoever in the claim that one can “touch the unthinkable.” That is what Schopenhauer and Peirce are saying. If one has a problem with such a suggestion, it certainly cannot be on account of any formal shortcoming. Interestingly, Peirce—who was no slouch in logic—diffused the objection that the ineffability of the will somehow renders it “not scientifically true” by noting that “if intelligibility be a category, it is not surprising but rather inevitable that other categories should be in different relations to this one.” (EP2, 151, 153)⁷³

As Wittgenstein famously urged in the seventh clause of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the bounds of discourse must be respected, and whatever ineffable surplus lies beyond should be met with silence.⁷⁴ In his survey of semiotic theories, Winfried Nöth aptly taxonomizes this response as “transsemiotic agnosticism.”⁷⁵ To a

⁷¹ Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2000), 107.

⁷² Paul Livingston has argued that Anglo-American (“Analytic”) philosophy has been held particularly captive by the “assumption that structuralist forms of explanation can adequately account for *everything* that we ordinarily say about ourselves.” Paul Livingston, *Philosophical History and the Problem of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 196. Continental philosophy of mind, by contrast, does not seem to be as severely handicapped by this assumption, and so is more receptive to the thesis—defended from different angles by Schopenhauer and Peirce alike—that, as a matter of logic, the action of signs must comprise its share of ineffability.

⁷³ Peirce did not always see things that way. In one of his earliest papers (from 1868), he asserted that “*cognizability* (in its widest sense) and *being* are...synonymous terms” (EP1, 25; emphasis in original). Borrowing the term “phenomenology” from Hegel (EP2, 267), Peirce later departed from this view by insisting that “the category of thought...is an essential ingredient of reality, yet does not by itself constitute reality, since this category...can have no concrete being without action, as a separate object on which to work its government...” (EP2, 345; see also EP2, 149). Since Peirce retained the principle of sufficient reason expressed in his early claim that “[n]o cognition not determined by a previous cognition...can be known” (EP1, 26) and eventually dropped the contention that cognizability and being are coextensive, his mature view is very close to Schopenhauer’s.

⁷⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Tr.) D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 1974[1921]), 89.

⁷⁵ Winfried Nöth, *Handbook of Semiotics* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press,

certain extent, Schopenhauer shares this stance—not surprisingly, since he was one of the few thinkers read by Wittgenstein.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Schopenhauer’s support of the thesis that whatever the mind handles must be represented as having causes was strategically qualified by his insistence that this “surest and simplest truth” applies only to the representational domain, thereby leaving open the possibility of a more intimate mode of access that can bypass this constraint. (WR2, 5) Hence, much like Wittgenstein emphatically stressed that logic exhausts all that can be put in language but intimated that one could nevertheless try to “show” (“*zeigen*”) that which language and logic cannot capture⁷⁷, Schopenhauer held that causality exhausts what can be represented but maintained that what can be represented does not exhaust all that is. And it is there, in that non-cognitive blind spot that narration cannot reach⁷⁸, that the will dwells.

Aside from prescissive analysis, is there any other way to bypass this limitation? Interestingly, semiotics studies the employment, not just of symbols, but of indices and icons as well. Indexicality is particularly germane. It is analogous to the will in that it is a dyadic relation that does not entail (but is entailed by) representation.⁷⁹ Just as one cannot exert effort upon a thing without being in contiguous contact with it, so must one’s body be in the vicinity of an object in order to denote it by ostension. Of course, an interpretation (by oneself or someone else) is needed to seal the semiotic transaction, “otherwise what ‘this’ refers to is indeterminate: is it (for example) the door in front of me that I am pushing, the door in the wall, the wall in the building, the building in the city, and so on—what exactly is the ‘this’ to which my indexical refers, outside some further specification of the *class* of things to which the ‘this’ belongs?”⁸⁰ However, when we clarify the referent by adding a third ingredient, we *ipso facto* ensure that we are no longer dealing with just two things.⁸¹

1995), 81–82.

⁷⁶ S. Morris Engel, “Schopenhauer’s Impact on Wittgenstein,” in *Schopenhauer: His Philosophical Achievement*, (ed.) M. Fox (Sussex: Harvester, 1980), 236–54; Robert Wicks, *Schopenhauer* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 173–83.

⁷⁷ Catherine Legg, “This is Simply What I Do,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 66, no. 1 (2003): 58–80.

⁷⁸ Neeley, “Schopenhauer and the Limits of Language,” 51.

⁷⁹ Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 38; John N. Deely, *Basics of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 23–25.

⁸⁰ Stern, “Peirce, Hegel, and the Category of Secondness,” 146.

⁸¹ To be sure, in the locution “I just can’t describe it,” the index “it” (vaguely) circumscribes the area of reality that escapes description. To that extent, one

To the extent one endorses a sign-theoretic approach to the study of consciousness, it is self-contradictory to countenance triads whilst denying the simpler relations these presuppose. The commitment is optional, but the entailment is not. It is hard to see, though, how phenomenological reports could ever do without the employment of signs. So, if Schopenhauer's central thesis is correct, and acts of the will are by themselves too brute to be genuine phenomena, then traditional phenomenological strategies like "bracketing"⁸² will bring no succor in the laudable quest for a better understanding of agency. Of course, knowing in detail *why* the two-term relations involved in acts of the will fall below the level of representation (and thus intelligibility) does not spontaneously give one the means to escape that descriptive limitation. Precission can only do so much. Thus, while I see nothing in the Schopenhauerian theses previously canvassed that bars an informative semiotic account of agency, it goes without saying that, as embodied human beings, the semiotician and the phenomenologist are both condemned to the same fate.

Conclusion

For an exercise of agency to be free, it would have to "proceed absolutely and quite originally from the will itself, without being brought about necessarily by antecedent conditions, and hence also without being determined by any anything according to a rule."⁸³ This poses a problem, since "the positing of a ground, in all of its meanings, is the essential form of our entire cognitive faculty," whereas in trying to conceive an uncaused act "we are here asked to refrain from positing a ground."⁸⁴ I have proposed a new way to look at this thesis by arguing, with the help of C. S. Peirce, that our ability to layer a triadic interpretation upon our bodily struggles with the world neither usurps nor annuls the brute dyad that it subsumes.

While this revised Peircean take on the Schopenhaurian account of agency lends some support to the criticisms of illusionism independently put forth by Bayne and Gallagher, it does so at the price of

can succeed in reporting where (roughly) the relevant limitations lie. However, one must not lose sight of the fact that the only robust referential work a sentence like "I just can't describe it" succeeds in doing is a (second-order) description of the *inability* at hand—not of the difficult object/event targeted by "it."

⁸² Gallagher and Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 21–26.

⁸³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essay on the Freedom of the Will*, (tr.) K. Kolenda (Mineola: Dover, 2005[1839]), 8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

undermining the phenomenological descriptions they have called for. These philosophers of mind prescribe phenomenology to counter “will skeptics,” who are presumed to be skeptical on naturalist grounds. I have introduced a view that sees agency as escaping not only third-person science, but first-person description as well. Despite its Romanticist origins, this view can be motivated by a semiotic analysis of what it means to represent a bodily act (this is, perhaps, as close as we shall ever come to “naturalizing” voluntarism).

Schopenhauer warned that “that which exists independently of our knowledge and of all knowledge, is to be regarded as something quite different from the *representation* and all its attributes, and hence from objectivity in general.” (WR2, 10) This warning should be taken seriously: given that the will forever lies unrepresented, it is answerable to modalities wholly incommensurate with those governing the phenomenal field. Phenomenologists have long issued statutes of methodological limitation on what certain research programs can, even in principle, hope to achieve.⁸⁵ I have suggested that the phenomenological project might harbor a blind spot of its own. As Bayne and Levy aver, “[t]here is much about the phenomenology of agency that is obscure. Perhaps this reflects the relative neglect of the topic; perhaps it arises from the fact that the phenomenology of agency appears to be less vivid and stable than the phenomenology of perception.”⁸⁶ Although it is entirely correct to speak of a relative neglect (and to suspect this as a probable cause of our poor phenomenological understanding), the account of agency outlined here suggests that the “obscurity” alluded to by the authors might be intrinsic to the topic—albeit not for any lack of vividness.⁸⁷

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⁸⁵ A prominent example would be Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

⁸⁶ Bayne and Levy, “The Feeling of Doing,” 64–65.

⁸⁷ I want to thank Jim Vernon, David Jopling, Sam Mallin (deceased), Abigail Klassen, Geeta Raghunanan, Joshua Mugg, Henry Jackman, Ryan Tonkens, Jes Vang, and Julian Young.