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Renovating Philosophical Practice through Diagrammatic Reasoning

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ABSTRACT The approach to the question of philosophical practice has been dominated by a subordination of practice to theory corresponding in general to a representational conception of philosophy. Methods of diagrammatic reasoning developed within philosophical semiotics provide a more effective approach. In particular, Peirce's system of existential graphs exemplifies how diagrammatic reasoning is able formally to express the processes through which philosophical dialogue and cooperation actually take place and to link such processes to the methods and practices arising in other disciplines and traditions, including those of science, politics, art, religion and technological production.

One important approach to philosophical practice has focused on the problem of theoretical application. Such an application-based approach corresponds in general to a representational model of philosophy, a model privileging the ideals of "objective cognition" and "classification"

that have come under strong critique in recent philosophy.[1] If however in light of the critiques of representational thought, philosophy itself becomes understood as a loose association of complex, coordinated sets of reflective, creative and communicative practices, then the question of philosophical practice undergoes an essential transformation: rather than posing the problem of a relation between theory and its application, philosophical practice becomes understood in terms of the translation and connectivity of distinctively philosophical practices with the practices conditioned by other disciplines and discursive orders. On this revised model, philosophical practice becomes reoriented towards the practices of art, politics, science, religion and so on. The relevant question is then no longer *How do philosophical theories apply in practice?* but rather *Which distinctively philosophical practices communicate and connect most readily with other disciplinary practices and how?*

One disadvantage to the representational conception of philosophy is that it inhibits the transparency of modes of rationality and communication whereby philosophical views are actually forged and elaborated in collective contexts. The implementation of diagrammatic reasoning – using formal diagrams to convey logical and conceptual relationships – as both a method and a record of philosophical production serves to remedy this defect. At the same time the use and development of formal models of dialogical and communicative practice within philosophy facilitates collaboration between philosophy and other disciplines and traditions.

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[1] The critique of the "ideal of objective cognition" comes from Richard Rorty's discussion of John Dewey in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1979), p. 13. Gilles Deleuze critiques the Aristotelian "ideal of classification" in Paul Patton (trans.), *Difference and Repetition* (Columbia University Press, New York 1994), p. 34.

Among others, Hadot has recently called the dominant discursive emphasis in contemporary philosophy into question through intensive study of the practices of philosophy's ancient schools and a call for their return as philosophical "ways of life."[2] As Hadot points out, philosophy for Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans and other schools meant primarily a form of daily lived practice, of which discourse was only one part. More important than discursive, theoretical elaboration of philosophical views were the practices regulating daily life as life lived in the pursuit and light of wisdom. Indeed, philosophical discourse functioned in essential relation to the practical forms of life fostered and constituted communally in the schools themselves.[3] Coming from quite different perspectives than Hadot, thinkers such as Bakhtin and Habermas have challenged the individualism reinforced by text-based, expository argument.[4] Yet despite widespread interest in dialogical practice, the logic of practice developed in specific dialogical events remains for the most part unavailable to philosophical reflection and scholarly scrutiny.

The semiotic approach to philosophy provides a way of formalizing dialogical acts in ways that enable them to communicate across various disciplinary contexts. In the semiotics initiated by Peirce, philosophical

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[2] Pierre Hadot, Michael Chase (trans.), Arnold I. Davidson (ed.), *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge 1995), pp. 49-70.

[3] ibid.

[4] See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Vadim Liapunov (trans.), Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist (eds.), *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (University of Texas Press, Austin 1993) and Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (trans.), Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination* (University of Texas Press, Austin 1981). See also Jürgen Habermas, Thomas McCarthy (trans.), *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols. (Beacon Press, Boston 1984, 1987).

traditions appear in and through the specific practices they constitute.[5] *Semiosis* – from the Greek for becoming-sign – indicates not only the process of signification but more importantly the passage whereby a sign is constituted as such within a set of regular practices or events. Herein lies the importance of Peirce's triadic conception of the sign, his understanding of the activity of a signifying process as the unity of interrelationships of three relational terms: sign, object and interpretant.[6] According to this schema, the interpretant represents the progressively determinate *habit* which makes the triadic relation itself practical as well as essentially iterative and self-correcting. On this basis, philosophical interpretations must be understood as constituted in and through the individual and collective practices in which philosophers concretely participate.

Following a late development in Peirce's thought, the semiotic approach allows us to reframe the thematic of dialogue in contemporary philosophy by reorienting dialogical practices towards diagrammatic expression. The method formalized by Peirce in the three-tier system of existential graphs (or EG) provides a way of mediating the separation of dialogical practice from formal result.[7] As Shin's study of Peirce's beta graphs has shown, the diagrammatic form of EG enables it to serve purposes that would otherwise require expression in separate and

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[5] See the analysis in Richard A. Smyth, *Reading Peirce Reading* (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham 1997).

[6] See Peirce's article "Pragmatism" in Charles S. Peirce, Peirce Edition Project (eds.), *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Vol. 2 1893-1913* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1998), pp. 398-433.

[7] The most comprehensive study of Peirce's existential graphs is Don Roberts, *The Existential Graphs of Charles S. Peirce* (Mouton, the Hague 1973).

distinct "logical systems" and "deductive calculi."[8] At the gamma level, modal distinctions (possibility, impossibility, necessity and contingency) become representable in EG and, more importantly, new graphical conventions – agreed upon by a community of users – may be incorporated into the graphs. At the gamma level, modes of reasoning may be elaborated diagrammatically at the same time they are enacted dialogically. The graphs themselves then remain as a record of the steps and detours of this process.

What are the advantages of diagrammatic reasoning? (1) It is iconic: the relationships represented in formal diagrams appear in the diagrams themselves as relationships among the diagram's component parts. Iconicity aids in establishing analogical relationships across disparate domains and facilitates connections between philosophical reasoning and other disciplines. (2) It is efficient: diagrams are able to condense multiple relations and multiple levels or orders of relationality in a compact representation. As philosophy continues to diversify and to develop complex modes of argumentation, it becomes increasingly important to find efficient forms of argumentative expression. (3) It is multilateral: diagrams invite varied interpretations and may be applied in diverse contexts. Unlike a text, a diagram does not thematize a claim but rather illustrates and formalizes a set of abstract relations. In this respect diagrammaticization represents a kind of abstraction quite different from the logico-conceptual abstraction of language. Above all, diagrammatic reasoning presents a form of rationality that potentially overcomes the distinction between theoretical representation and practice. Because the graphs involve the formation of real triadic relations (to employ Peircean

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[8] Sun-Joo Shin, *The Iconic Logic of Peirce's Graphs* (MIT Press, Cambridge 2002), ch. 6.

terminology), the habits correlated to the use of the graphs become reflected iconically in the figures composing the graphs themselves.[9]

These advantages appear in striking fashion with respect to the promise offered by diagrammatic reasoning and by Peirce's EG in particular in reframing and coordinating the relationships among various formal logical systems, both diagrammatic and algebraic. The cultivation and use of Peirce's diagrammatic system may help to organize forms of collective practice that encourage the confrontation and communication of multiple formal systems, creating a record of the experiments of encounter between formal systems and practicing philosophers. As dialogical practices are transformed into formal diagrams, debates over meaning tend steadily to become subsumed into practices of formal clarification and creative production. Diagrammatic reasoning thereby encourages the transition from representation to operativity, organizing practices of thought and communication rather than merely presenting the static results of such practices. This emphasis puts philosophy in closer connection, potentially, to the discoveries and inventions of other traditional and disciplinary procedures, including those of art, religion, science, politics and technological production.

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[9] This point is argued in greater detail in Rocco Gangle, "Collective Self-Organization in General Biology: Gilles Deleuze, Charles Peirce and Stuart Kauffman," *Zygon*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2007): 223-239.