

Firstness and Thirdness Displacement : Epistemology of Peirce's Trichotomies

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This article aims to present an epistemological approach to perception, especially in terms of the relationship between nature, humanity and culture.¹ When dealing with these matters, I have become increasingly aware that C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory clarifies certain questions about perception and the way we organize these perceptions into knowledge. One of the particularly interesting questions is how Peirce's nine sign types correspond to nature, man and culture. In this study, I will therefore discuss the sign types, dividing the three trichotomies such that Qualisign, Sinsign and Legisign correspond to nature; Icon, Index and Symbol correspond to humankind; and Rheme, Dicent sign and Argument correspond to culture. In my opinion, these nine sign types are ideal signs. This means that the signs, as perceived, do not exist in the world as pure signs; they will contain elements and features from all sign types. In that way, we will not be able to interpret a Qualisign as a pure Qualisign being a monad. Instead, we will interpret it as a Rheme containing a Qualisign and an Icon.

As a consequence, Peirce combines the nine sign types into ten signs. They do not exist prior to perception but rather as a post perceptive experience. So, in order to understand the sign relationship between nature, man and culture we must first focus on the nine sign types. It is important to stress that, in my view, the sign of nature is monadic and corresponds to

1. This article was part of the author's Ph.D. thesis, in which the implications of sign division are investigated in depth, with particular emphasis on the Peircian view of their evolution.

Firstness, man is dyadic, i.e. man interacts with nature in dyadic ways, and culture is triadic. It is culture that determines how we interpret nature. One could say that culture is what Peirce calls the final interpretant but, naturally the culture is not as strong a habit as gravity. Nevertheless, it is a stabilizing factor. Without culture we would not be, what we are.

In most books about Peircian semiotics I have noticed that researchers mainly concentrate their research on the Firstness and Secondness trichotomies leaving the third trichotomy out. In my opinion, this is wrong. How can we understand the relation between nature and man, while disregarding our culture. It is impossible. Furthermore, the sign exists only as a dyad when leaving the third trichotomy out, and a dyad is not a genuine sign. According to Peirce, a sign is a triad relation that is non-reducible.

Let us focus on the sign trichotomies and see what knowledge they bring us. Peirce writes:

Signs are divisible by three trichotomies; first, according as the sign in itself is a mere quality, is an actual existent, or is a general law; secondly, according as the relation of the sign to its object consists in the sign's having some character in itself, or in some existential relation to that object, or in its relation to an interpretant; thirdly, according as its Interpretant represents it as a sign of possibility or as a sign of fact or a sign of reason. (CP 2.243)

The first division of the three trichotomies is identical with Firstness and the representamen, and it consists of Qualisign, Sinsign and Legisign. It is worth noticing that the first trichotomy consists of (non)sign, i.e. signs which do not relate to anything; they are monadic and exist sui generis. But still, they form the basis for the creation of meaning.

The Qualisign is defined as being a quality of a sign. Before the manifestation of the sign, another sign must carry it. Since a quality is — what it is — positive and within itself, a quality can only describe an object due to some kind of resemblance or a shared element. In other words a Qualisign necessarily has to be an Icon, and when a quality is a logical possibility, the Qualisign can only be interpreted as a sign of being, i.e. as a Rheme. An example is the experience of the color red. The color red will, of course, be carried by some thing or event.

The Sinsign is an actual thing or event as a sign. The Sinsign exists only through its qualities; therefore it contains or carries several Qualisigns. A red

cloth is an example of a Sinsign, the cloth carries the quality of red and can be interpreted.

Peirce defines the Legisign as a law, which is a sign. The lawfulness is defined and determined by the users. That is why the Legisign is a conventionalized sign. Each conventionalized sign is a Legisign but not necessarily the other way round. Peirce states that the Legisign is a general type and not a single particular object which one has to agree on as being a carrier of meaning. We are still within Firstness, or the Representamen part of the triadic sign. It is important to stress that the Legisign can also be a natural sign. The development of the natural sign is determined by law and exists only by virtue of the lawfulness. I will return to the Legisign as a natural sign later in the article. The concept of fugue can be imagined as a Legisign but the moment the Legisign is imagined or written (as I did when I mentioned fugue above) the word exists only as a replica of the Legisign.

The replica written in bold letters is a Sinsign. The Sinsign is a sign of an actual thing or event. In this case, it expresses the Legisign through the replica. In this way, the Legisign can be understood as an underlying lawfulness, which governs a perceptual habit, and, when the Legisign is made explicit as in the above example it changes its sign character. So, the relationship between the Qualisign, the Sinsign and the Legisign is that these signs exist within themselves, monadically and as non-signs. Naturally, it can be rather confusing that I refer to non-sign as signs, but Peirce is aware of the problem of explaining something which by nature is unexplainable.

The other well-known and most applied trichotomy consists of the Representamen-Object relations, or how Secondness is expressed in the sign: Icon, Index and Symbol. It is important to notice that this trichotomy describes the dyadic relation between representamen and object. When someone analyses the image of a person and says: this is an Icon, or smoke is an Index of fire, or the man on the toilet door is a Symbol, it is only partly correct in a peircian sense. The dyad is a relation between representamen and object without any interpretation. If we interpret the person in the picture as an Iconic relation, a dyadic relation no longer exists, it becomes a triadic relation. This means that the relation between the figure in the picture and the figure in reality is dyadic. However, this is not how we interpret it. In these dyadic cases, it would be more correct to say that the picture, the smoke or the man on the toilet door contains iconical, indexical and symbolic features. In my opinion, this is the reason why Peirce later combines the three trichotomies in 10 sign classes. I will return to this.

The Icon is a sign, which shares a resemblance with the Object it represents. Common examples of Iconic signs are photographs since they resemble the Object (i.e. the model) they depict. Peirce states that the Icon does not have a dynamical relation to the object it represents. The qualities of the Icon resemble the qualities of the object and through that resemblance a similar sense of feelings is evoked in the mind who sees the relation as a resemblance.

Index means reference (to something). This class is constituted of signs which have a causal relation to the objects they describe. The Index refers to the Object, which it describes by virtue of a relationship, in cases where the sign is caused by the Object, like smoke is an Index of fire. An Index sign is thus a sign which represents its Object by virtue of a direct reference to the Object, i.e. footsteps pointing to the person who walked by. The result of a thermometer measuring the temperature is an index of the air temperature. It is important to stress that the Index is physically connected to the object. In a way, the pair of them make up an organic pair, but the interpreter has no influence on the relation between the Index and its object more than merely noticing the relation after it has been established.

Peirce writes that a Symbol is a sign that refers to its Object, which it denotes by virtue of a law. Peirce clarifies this by stating that the law is an association of common ideas. It means that the Symbol will be interpreted as pointing to the Object. Thus, the Symbol is a sign which bears meaning solely by virtue of rules and conventions. A sign being conventionalized means that there is an agreement among users on the meaning of the sign. Letters, words and numbers are such examples of symbolic signs. Peirce writes about the Symbol:

Any ordinary word, as “give,” “bird,” “marriage,” is an example of a symbol. It is applicable to whatever may be found to realize the idea connected with the word; it does not, in itself, identify those things. It does not show us a bird, nor enact before our eyes a giving or a marriage, but supposes that we are able to imagine those things, and have associated the word with them. (CP 2.298)

If we take a closer look at the Symbol, we find out that it contains iconic and indexical features. Peirce uses the concept “to love” as an example:

A Symbol is a sign naturally fit to declare that the set of objects which is denoted by whatever set of indices may be in certain ways attached to it is represented by an icon associated with it. To show what this complicated definition means, let us take as an example of a symbol the word “loveth.”

Associated with this word is an idea, which is the mental icon of one person loving another. Now we are to understand that "loveth" occurs in a sentence; for what it may mean by itself, if it means anything, is not the question. Let the sentence, then, be "Ezekiel loveth Huldah." Ezekiel and Huldah must, then, be or contain indices; for without indices it is impossible to designate what one is talking about. Any mere description would leave it uncertain whether they were not mere characters in a ballad; but whether they be so or not, indices can designate them. Now the effect of the word "loveth" is that the pair of objects denoted by the pair of indices Ezekiel and Huldah is represented by the icon, or the image we have in our minds of a lover and his beloved. (CP 2.295)

The Symbol emanated from the Icon and the Index. And the interaction between the Symbol, Index and Icon root the idea in the Symbol.

The third sign trichotomy consists of Rheme, Dicot sign and Argument, and describes the relation between the sign and the Interpretant / Thirdness. This trichotomy is the least used, I find that this is an misunderstanding as in fact it is the third trichotomy which makes it possible for us to understand the relation between Firstness and Secondness. As we shall see, we would not be able to perceive the world and make sense of it without the third trichotomy. And further, we will discover that there is a great amount of knowledge buried in the third trichotomy. But before I start the discussions, let us take a look at the signs in the third trichotomy.

Rhemes refer to possible objects. As examples of Rhemes one can mention nouns as they clearly refer to possible Objects. In Umberto Eco's words, signs are the prerequisite for lying since the Object does not have to be present at the same moment as the Representamen. So, the Objects referred to are only possible. The Rheme represents possible existence.

Dicot Signs are signs of actual existence. For that reason, the Dicot Sign cannot be an Icon. The Icon does not provide an opportunity of interpretation. In order to describe the case, to which it is interpreted as a reference, Dicot Signs must necessarily contain a Rheme. An example of Dicot Signs could be whole sentences. The Dicot sign represents actual existence.

The Argument is a Lawsign. The Argument represents its Object in its capacity as a sign. This means that something is being stated about the sign. An example of an Argument could be whole passages of text, i.e. meaningful links of Dicot Signs. I emphasize this interpretation and state that Arguments could very well be knowledge domains, cultures, societies etc. The Argument is a sum of knowledge structured through Rhemes and Dicot

signs. In the discussion to follow, I interpret the Argument as a sign of culture which mediates between nature and man.

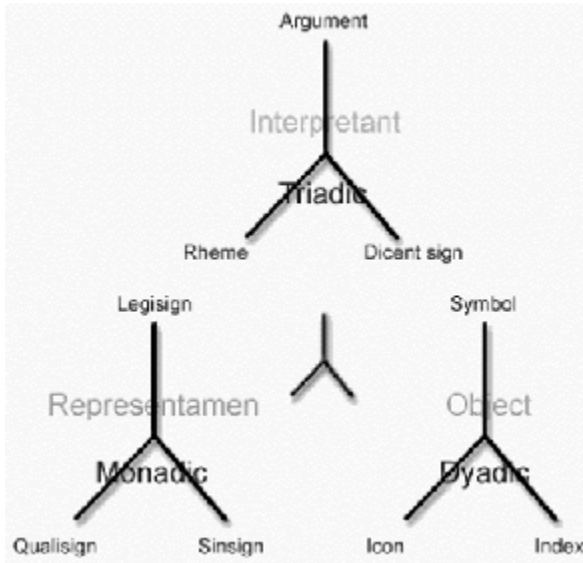


Figure 1

The figure displays a kind of metasign. Every part of the sign is in itself a sign, but is constructed by different kinds of signs with different natures. Let us take a closer look at each trichotomy.

The first part (the representamen) is the Firstness trichotomy. We know that the Qualisign in the trichotomy is the sign which is the most firstnesslike. It is the representamen. The object which is the sign that carries the Qualisign is the Sinsign. We know from the definition of the Sinsign that it is an actual thing or event, and we know that in order to be manifested the Qualisign has to be embodied in the Sinsign. The Legisign is what makes the connection between Qualisign and Sinsign possible. When the Qualisign is manifested in the Sinsign through the Legisign, some kind of lawfulness occur. Peirce calls it “force of habit”. But in this case, the semiosis is monadic; there is no intelligent interpretation behind semiosis. I call it the semiosis of natural signs.

The Second part (the object) is the Secondness trichotomy. A dyadic relationship exists between the Firstness and the Secondness trichotomy.

The Secondness trichotomy is the result of the evolution taking place in Firstness. But the evolution within the Secondness category takes place at a different time and place in evolutions proportional to Firstness, because the evolution in the Firstness category triggers the evolution in the Secondness category. The dyad is created between Firstness and Secondness, and because of this relation Icon, Index and Symbol all contain elements from the Firstness trichotomy. As an example of a dyad relation imagine taking a step, the resistance which occurs when taking the step. It may be caused by air resistance, gravity, inertia, etc. and, as a movement the step is forced forward by a body. The constraints on humans caused by nature are dyadic. In this way, I see the laws of nature as Legisigns.

The third part (the interpretant) of figure 1 is the Thirdness trichotomy. These signs are pure triads, i.e. genuine signs. These signs all express lawfulness. Peirce has primarily worked with this trichotomy when developing his logic. That is why the relation between the Rheme, the Dicent sign and the Argument is the same in an inference. Here, the Rheme is the predicate, the Dicent sign the premise and the Argument the conclusion. In this way, the conclusion mediates between the predicate and the premise and during this process a sign occurs. This is interesting because the interpretant forms the equivalent or a more developed sign in semiosis. Peirce stresses that we, as a consequence of the logic within the interpretant, must necessarily reason on the background of the same logic, i.e., our ability to make judgements (logically) and to draw conclusions based on an innate logic. But what kind of logic is it? Is it a logic based on the same logic within the natural sciences, or classical empiricism or is it a symbolic logic, a logic which occurs out of evolution? In my interpretation, it is definitely the latter. The logic which connects Firstness with Secondness expresses lawfulness, not only conventions created by man but habit formation and lawfulness created by the way we reason, and the world we reason about.

There is, however, another way of looking at the sign trichotomies in figure 1. So far, I have been interested in the signs as signs trichotomies existing in themselves but now, I will take a closer look at the trichotomies developing within Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness across the trichotomies.

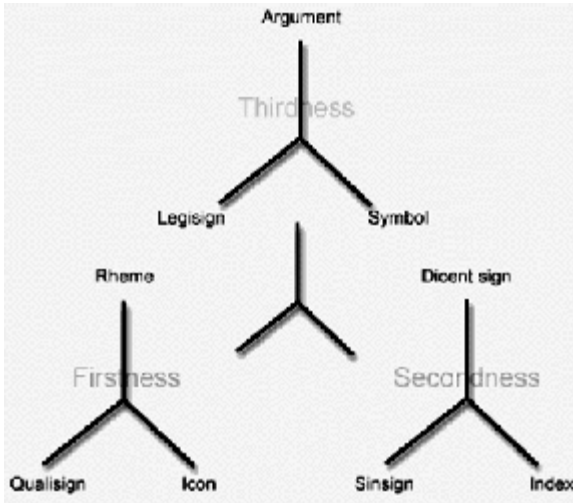


Figure 2

If we take a closer look at the first trichotomy, all the signs refer to Firstness. The basic sign is the Qualisign and both the Icon and the Rheme are constructed on the basis of the Qualisign. Peirce writes that: “Since a quality is whatever it is positively in itself, a quality can only denote an object by virtue of some common ingredient or similarity.” (CP 2.254)

The similarity means that a Qualisign when manifested must be an Icon, and when a quality only exists as a pure logical possibility, the Qualisign can only be interpreted as a sign of being i.e. as a Rheme. The Rheme mediates between the Qualisign and the Icon. It has to be the logical possibility that determines whether we can identify the resemblance in a picture. The movement from the Qualisign to the Icon through the Rheme constitutes the lawfulness within Firstness.

The second trichotomy consists of Secondness signs which all denote signs of actual existence. They all act as objects and therefore they all carry qualities from Firstness. Within the Dicent sign is the Rheme, and in the Sinsign there is one or many Qualisigns, and in the Index is the Icon. As we saw, the Sinsign and the Dicent sign are signs of actual existence. The index also has to denote actual existence since it expresses a causal relation between Firstness and Secondness which determines the actual existence.

The third trichotomy consists of Thirdness signs denoting lawfulness and conventionality. The Legisign expresses a conventionalized sign but most important, it is also a sign which denotes lawfulness in nature. The Symbol is also a conventionalized sign and denotes lawfulness as a dyadic relation between nature and man. This relation is not yet interpreted as, in that case, it would have been triadic. The connection between the Legisign and the Symbol is created by the Argument. The Argument is the most Thirdnesslike sign. So, within the Argument, we have the Legisign consisting of Qualisign and Sinsign and we have the Symbol consisting of Qualisign, Sinsign, Legisign, Icon and Index. Within the Argument we also have the Rheme and the Dicent sign. So the Argument is the most degenerate sign in the sense that it is the sign farthest away from Firstness, and yet it is always in danger of becoming Firstness again. I will return to this later.

If we look at figures 1 and 2 and combine them, we get the following figure:

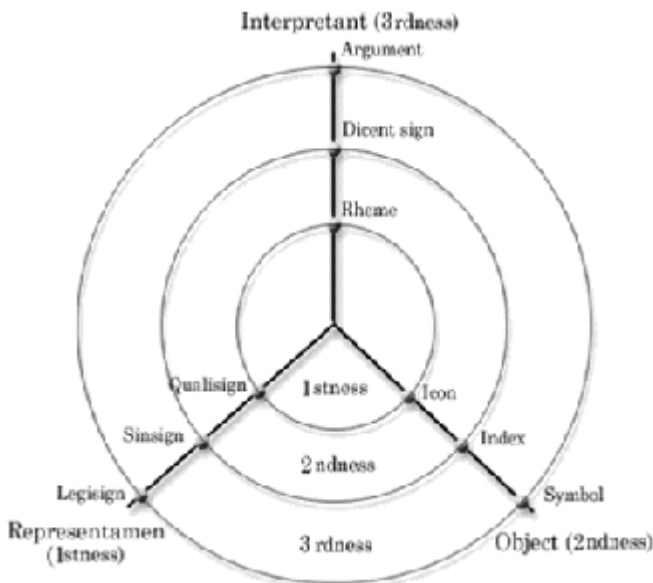


Figure 3

The figure shows how the signs relate to Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. Each leg in the triangle corresponds to the parts in the sign relation: Representamen, Object and Interpretant. The graph is thus made with

Firstness closest to the center, Secondness in the middle and Thirdness farthest away from the center. (the figure is adopted from Theleffsen, Brier, Theleffsen 2000). It is important to understand that these types are ideal, basic analytical classifications that we seldom see purely represented in reality. Let us take a closer look at the ten sign types Peirce creates on the basis of the nine types of signs.

Peirce creates ten classes of signs from the above trichotomies. The ten classes are a consequence of classes logically excluding each other. A Qualisign will always be a Rhematic Iconic Sign, and a Symbol will always be a Legisign, and an Argument will always be a Symbolic Legisign etc. The way Peirce's ten basic classes of sign types are organized in figure 4 illustrates that two classes, which border on each other with a thin line, share similarities in two ways. For example, Indexical Sinsign (3, 4) or (1, 5) are both Iconic and Rhematic. But, where the thick black line divides the classes between 2 and 6, 6 and 9, 3 and 7, this is not the case. Neither can classes share similarities if they do not share borders. The classes have been given the shortest possible names that distinguish them from each other. The names of the classes are in bold letters.

In this way, Peirce manages to conceptualize ten basic different categories of sign types.

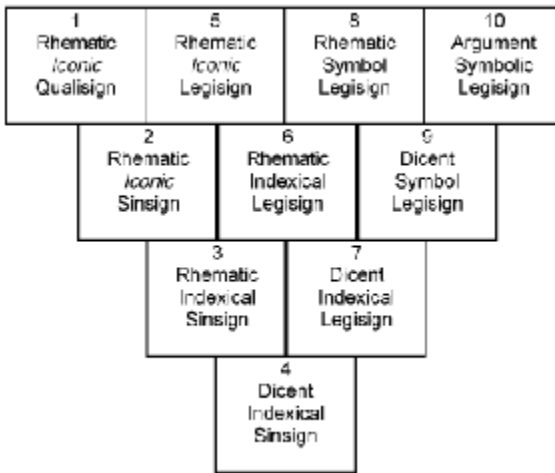
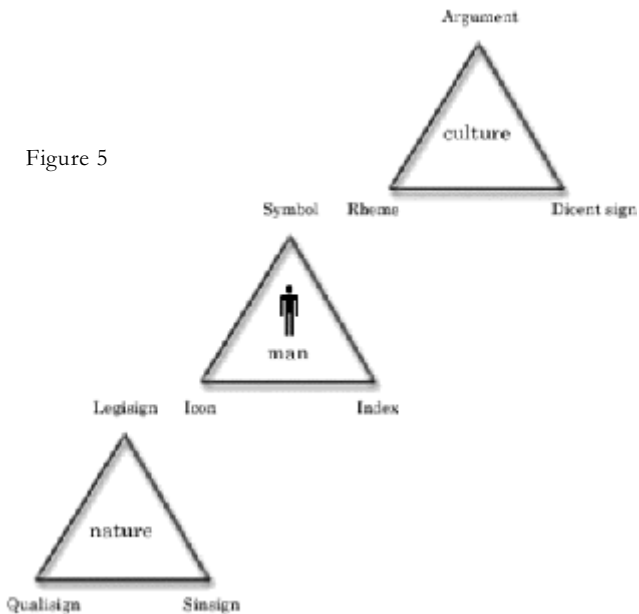


Figure 4: Peirce's ten basic classes of sign types (CP: 2.264)

In the following discussion, I will take a closer look at the three sign trichotomies and then discuss the ten sign types.

As mentioned, I am dividing signs into natural signs (Firstness), human signs (Secondness) and culture signs (Thirdness). However, it is important to stress that the division does not mean that the Firstness trichotomy does not exist in the intellectual signs, i.e., the culture signs. Firstness does indeed exist in intellectual signs but as a displacement. As we have seen, we get ten types of signs from the nine ideal signs. The first of the ten signs is the Qualisign. But in order to exist in relation to something, the Qualisign must be embodied in an Icon and it can only be understood as a Rheme. This means that the Qualisign, which I regard as a natural sign when it only exists in itself as a monad, has been displaced. How else could it become a Rheme?. The same applies for the Sinsign and the Legisign. The Firstness trichotomy exists on both sides of human perception. The Qualisign as we saw exists as a pre-perceptive, positive possibility but post-perceptively it exists as a Rheme. The pre- perceptive Sinsign exists only as a possibility that in fact exists but is non-comprehensive but post- perceptive the Sinsign becomes a Dicent sign. The pre-perceptive Legisign exists as a natural sign on which the natural laws build, but post-perceptively it exists as a lawfulness which determines our perception. It becomes an Argument.

In figure 5, we see each trichotomy and we see how they correspond to nature, man and culture.



The figure shows that the Firstness trichotomy, i.e the trichotomy of nature, in human perception is being displaced. When we act in the world, what we perceive is in fact not the actual world but the world as a sign displacement. The world exists in our head as a symbolic representation determined by our culture.

Humans have evolved through the natural signs and therefore the nature is a First. Man is part of nature thus the human is also a First or what? In my interpretation, humans cannot be a First, humans are Second. The intellect with which man is equipped has symbolically displaced us from the world. Man is a symbolic species.² This is important because when intellect appeared in the minds of man during the course of evolution, we lost the ability to exist within Firstness. So what we understand as the world can only be a representation of the world. These representations have formed our culture. So the culture can only be a Third. But it is through the culture that we understand the world. But how does that harmonize with Peirce's ten sign types? See figure 4.

The signs are 1) Rhematic Iconic Qualisign 2) Rhematic Iconic Sinsign 3) Rhematic Indexical Sinsign and 4) Dicent Indexical Sinsign 5) Rhematic Iconic Legisigns 6) Rhematic Indexical Legisigns 7) Dicent Indexical Legisigns 8) Rhematic Symbolic Legisigns 9) Argument Symbolic Legisign and finally 10) Dicent Symbolic Legisign. It is interesting that all these signs refer to the Thirdness trichotomy. They are all rooted in our culture. It provides my interpretation with a solid basis because all these signs are signs that are displaced from Firstness. And furthermore it gives the third trichotomy an important role in understanding Peirce's semiotics. Let me stress the importance of the Argument as a sign of culture by stating that the movement from the Legisign to the Argument is a displacement of Thirdness and that displacement is the representamen's (nature's) way to the object (man) mediated through the interpretant (the culture). Peirce stresses that Thirdness is a category of habits and habits tend to become subconscious. So, the evolutionary way of Thirdness is that semiosis through Thirdness forms a habit. This habit gradually becomes more and more subconscious, and Thirdness begins its regress to Firstness. Not the monadic Firstness in nature but the Firstness of Thirdness — the Rheme.

So the way we understand the world goes through the category of Thirdness and forms our culture. But the culture forms the way we act in

2. See Terrence Deacon 1997.

the world, so we shape our culture through our interactions in the world, and the culture shapes our way of interacting in the world. This interaction of Firstness and Thirdness creates and shapes our ability to cognize, and the process of cognition creates the mental space, which I call the perceptionsphere which arise as a result of the sign displacements. The perceptionsphere designates the room for human cognition (Thellefsen 2000). So the basic epistemological thoughts of perception are in fact the displacements of Firstness and Thirdness. And in these displacements lies the evolutionary processes which force the representamens towards the objects through the interpretant. The “force of nature” of the sign is what determines the evolution of both the natural signs, the human signs and the cultural signs. This has come clear to me after researching into the Peircian sign world.

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