



Affective semiosis and affective logic



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ABSTRACT

Psychology values consistency, reduction of uncertainty, causality and continuity as normative aspects of mental life. Even though theories of dynamic equilibrium include phenomena of ruptures, homeostasis and tension as part of the psychological functioning, these are understood as momentary alterations of a condition that must be restored in order to maintain the integrity of the system. Yet in everyday life one can observe phenomena in which human beings constantly move ahead the conditions of living and the limits of what is somehow acceptable. Tension, ambivalence and uncertainty are part of existence and the most part of us can perfectly live with it, if not actively looking for it.

Traditional logic underneath psychology cannot account for this meaning-making process. We then need to think about a specific form of affective logic that can enable us to understand extreme phenomena not as pathologies but as special forms of meaning-making. I will outline an affective semiosis process based on an affective logic, drawing from the ideas of Peirce's semiotics, Meinong's theory of objectives, Wittgenstein's concept of "seeing-as", Herbst's co-genetic logic and Simmel's complementarity between binding and unbinding.

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The human being is the "bordering creature that has no border" (Simmel, 1994, p. 10, p. 10)

1. Introduction

Psychology values consistency, reduction of uncertainty, causality and continuity as normative aspects of mental life. Even though theories of dynamic equilibrium include phenomena of ruptures, homeostasis and tension as part of the psychological functioning, these are understood as momentary alterations of a condition that must be restored in order to maintain the integrity of the system. On the other hand, in everyday life we can observe phenomena in which human beings constantly move ahead the conditions of living and the limits of what is somehow acceptable. Tension, ambivalence and uncertainty are part of existence and the most part of us can perfectly live with it (within certain parameters), if not eventually looking for it. We love what can kill us, we hate the people we love, we call home even a shack and we can act extremely in the pursuit of things that we cannot touch or see, such

as market, freedom, justice, fitness or love. This ambivalent aspect of affective experience was somehow confined in the realm of irrationality and emotionality, a lower dimension of human nature in opposition to thinking, until the right to emotion as legitimate part of human experience has not been acknowledged (Solomon, 2004; Williams, 2001), including "the study of emotions, moods, preferences, attitudes, value, and stress" (Gross, 1998, p. 997). Yet "the 'turn to affect' across the humanities and social sciences" (Blackman & Venn, 2010, p. 8) is still understood as the domain of low level, unconscious and non-rational processes that must be studied within the perspective of neurological or psychodynamic processes (Blackman & Venn, 2010; Gross, 1998). Yet affective dimension of experience is definitely more complex:

"It consists of bodily capacities to affect and to be affected that emerge and develop in concert. For example, exhaustion both follows from a worker's position in a process of production and limits what a body can do. This initial definition has one important consequence. Straight away a body is always imbricated in a set of relations that extend beyond it and constitute it. Capacities are always collectively formed (...) Second, affect

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pertains to capacities rather than existing properties of the body. Affects are about what a body may be able to do in any given situation, in addition to what it currently is doing and has done. Because capacities are dependent on other bodies, they can never be exhaustively specified in advance. (Anderson, 2014, pp. 9–10).

The perspective of the cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics can provide some advancements based on the idea that psyche is a semiotic process, and the idea that human experience is mediated by signs (Valsiner, 2014a). The signs emerge from the affective-embodied relationship with the world of meaningful “objectives” (i.e. every content of psychological experience) (Meinong, 1960). We experience by proactively, rather than reactively, establishing affective relationships with the world: “We feel that we feel” is the stem of thinking. Affective distinction triggers conceptual distinction and evaluation of affect. Thus, semiosis emerges from the affective distinction, creating a partition of the flow of experience and a relationship between different parts at the same time.

Phil Taylor (1972) interviewed Charles Bukowski for the magazine “Stonecloud”. He asked a question about Bukowski’s technique at playing horses:

“Bukowski: I come up with a different system every week. The one I’m on now is called basically “consistency plus form” or just common sense. Then in the first race, here’s a horse that hasn’t won a race in two years, hasn’t finished closer than seventh or eighth, been running like a dead lung. It’s ten-to-one on the line, it opens at six, it closes at six. I look at the form, I say “Hell, this horse hasn’t done anything, slow time, what’s all this betting? Sucker bet.” It won, it won nicely. Well maybe a neck by the photo.

Taylor: And you bet on it?

Bukowski: No, I didn’t, because it wasn’t sensible. But, you see, racing works both ways. Sometimes the same kind of horse will get action before the race, and nothing happens. So it’s a very mysterious game” (Taylor, 1972, p. 34).

Bukowski’s answers are a very nice example of how we do not experience anything *per se*, but we always see the world “as something” under “some conditions”. The value of an experience X is at the same time distinguished and related to the value of non-X. The fact itself that the two sides of the coin co-define each other implies the possibility of a figure/ground shift, so that what once was loved can become non-loved and vice versa. The context in which we live is filled with signs produced by others and by ourselves that somehow suggest specific affective guidance and we negotiate under specific conditions the meaning of these signs: sucker bet.

Traditional logic underneath psychology cannot account for this meaning-making process. It is then needed to think about a specific form of *affective logic* that can enable us to understand extreme phenomena not as pathologies but as special forms of meaning-making. There is some consent around the idea that psyche is working at different levels of systemic organization with different logics (Kahneman, 2011; Matte Blanco, 1998). I will try to go further and try to outline a unitary process of affective semiosis based on an affective logic, drawing from the ideas of C.S. Peirce’s semiotics, David Herbst’s co-genetic logic, Alexis Meinong’s theory of objectives, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s concept of “seeing-as”, Georg Simmel’s and Jaan Valsiner’s complementarity between binding and unbinding. In the first part of this contribution, I will try to approach step-by-step the fundamentals concepts of a theoretical

perspective on affective meaning-making processes. Then I will try to outline the system of affective logic. According to Peirce, in his famous distinction between “seminars” and “laboratories” philosophers, the “true scientific Eros” (Peirce, CP 1.620)¹ is not pursued by those who “love only the truth already in their possession and, thus, conceive their task as steadfast and uncompromising defense of their property” (Colapietro, 1988, p. xvii), rather by the “pains-taking and cooperative inquirer” (Colapietro, 1988, p. xvii), who thinks that discover is a never ending quest. This is why I will share the development of some temporary, precarious ideas on the move, asking for your help to enlarge and enhance our collective understanding.

1.1. Step 1: Peirce’s semiosis

According to Peirce, the emergence of mind is based on the process of semiosis, or, in other words, the mind is a specific form of semiosis (Colapietro, 1988). When applied to psychology, this usually has directed attention toward the use of symbols, that are just one of the instantiations of signs in Peirce’s theory: the dimension based on the arbitrariness of the representation as characteristic feature of human culture. Yet, if we look at the definition of sign:

“A sign, or Representamen, is a First that stands in a such genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant, to assume the same triadic relation to its object in which it stands itself to the same object. The triadic relationship is genuine, that is its three members *are bound together by it in a way that does not consist in any complex of dyadic relation*”. (Peirce, CP 2.274, emphasis added) ...

... we can see that the relevant issue is that a sign is everything that stands for something else in function of a third or, to be more precise, as something that relates to something else for someone in some respect or capacity. The first question is that what can we develop thanks to Peirce’s theory?

The first element is that semiosis is based on triads (Fig. 1): dual systems do not allow development (Tateo, 2016).

The sign is indeed made of a triplet in which two different elements are mediated by a third. This mediation provides both the “meaning” of the sign and the necessary degree of uncertainty to

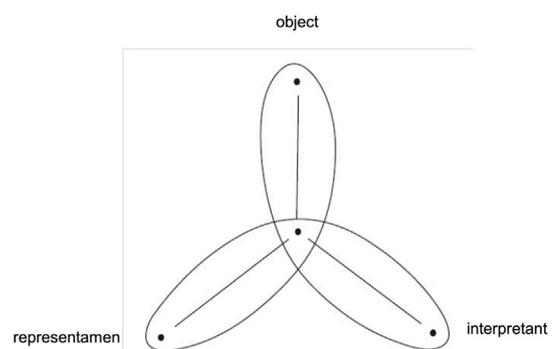


Fig. 1. Peirce’s concept of sign.

¹ “CP” refers to the standard edition of Peirce’s works “Collected Papers”.

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