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# Commentary on Philip Rose's "The Universe as an Argument: Argumentative function—a Peircean orientation"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Professor Rose has provided us with a truly rich and provocative paper. Within the framework of this commentary it is not possible either to provide an adequate exposition of the paper's suggestive ideas or to examine all of the problematic relationships proposed by Peirce regarding the world-mind argument connections. Perhaps a good way of probing some of the aspects of these relationships is to hold in mind the juxtaposition of two phrases which occur in one of sentences in the paper (p. 8): "Mind is merely the structures or patterns found in nature raised to the level of conscious thought"; "logic is merely those same argumentative structures brought under deliberate, self-controlled thought." The structures that are in question in each of the phrases form the bases for the defence of the idea of "the universe as argument"—as the title of the paper claims.

## 2. DIAGRAMMATIC SUMMARY

Due to the complexity of the paper I would like to summarize rapidly some of the conceptual relationships presented as basic for the thesis. Professor Rose's logical layout of these makes a diagrammatic survey not only the quickest way to get an overview of his detailed exposition but also the easiest way to reference particular points. From Diagram I it becomes clear that Philosophy is a science that discovers what is true in reality, differing from the general truths of Mathematics that need not bear on the real and the specialized truths of other sciences. From Diagram II one can see that Logic is a Normative science but not in the sense of Ethics or Esthetics being normative. Logic furnishes norms for correct thinking ("self-controlled or deliberate thought") taken as "thought in general" as opposed, say, to specific psychological aspects of our mental operations. Since Logic falls under Philosophy which is a *positive* science of discovery, it deals with the real; indeed, the "axiom that *real things exist*" is "the fundamental axiom of logic." (p. 3) Since Logic deals with thoughts and thoughts are neither particulars (as facts are) nor independent of time and realization (as qualities are). Rather thoughts bring together and provide the *reason* for a fact (*subject*) and a quality (*predicate*) to be brought

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together, i.e. “thought is a reasonable relation between a fact and a quality,” i.e. it is a mediation.

For Peirce a Sign is a form of mediation. Diagram III shows how the sign mediates the object and the interpretant. One can also see that signs are of different sorts, but it is the sign as symbol that becomes important for our topic since arguments, which are ruled governed, fall under the symbolical. One can also see in this diagram that argumentation is a more specific type of argument. Arguments need not be instantiated “in any thinker here and now.” (p. 8) As Rose writes,

[...] it is the normative character of Arguments that frees them from having to be instantiated in any thinker here and now, for this allows them to refer to some possible thinker not yet present in any actual or fully determinate sense.” (p. 8)

Argumentation, on the other hand, seems to presuppose something “deliberate and self-controlled” and, if I am not mistaking Professor Rose, *realized* by a given mind. Finally, it is important to note that Logic is seen as especially relating to the real insofar as it taken to be Methodetic (or Speculative Rhetoric)—“Logic is a positive normative science whose ultimate aim is to advance thought towards truth.” (p. 6)

### 3. UNIVERSE AS REAL OR AS ACCOUNT

All of this helps to provide foundations for dealing with the bewilderment that many will have when they read Peirce's remark:

the Universe as an argument is necessarily a great work of art, a great poem,—for every fine argument is a poem and a symphony,—just as every true poem is a sound argument. (cited, p. 8).

Rose expands on the sense of this and the circumambient text of Peirce by saying:

Arguments in this general, logical sense are not peculiar to minds. Instead the mental embodiment or expression of an Argument or Argumentation is itself merely the broader argumentative structures and processes found throughout nature manifest or expressed in the mode of conscious thought or mind. (p. 8)

I expect that Professor Rose intended to insert parentheses around the phrase “or Argumentation” so that in effect, “the mental embodiment or expression of an Argument” = “Argumentation.” Thus, although we could make the proposal that the universe is an Argument we could not hold that the universe is an Argumentation.

However, it seems to me that many will find Peirce's remark about the Universe as an argument as really strange. Now, one can argue for some kind of isomorphism between thought and reality—indeed, this is something that Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition already possessed. The first three books of the *Organon* were thought to indicate the strong relationships between the elements of the world, mind, and language. The *Categories* analysis rested on the existence of basic essences knowable by intuitions, the *On Interpretation* dealt with complexes knowable in judgments, and the *Analytics* considered the linkage of those complexes in inferences. Consider the following table (Diagram IV):

COMMENTARY ON PHILIP ROSE

|                          | Mental Operation | Linguistic Items      | Reality             |
|--------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Categories</i>        | Intuition        | Term                  | essence             |
| <i>On Interpretation</i> | Judgment         | Statement (subj/pred) | Substance-attribute |
| <i>Analytics</i>         | Inference        | Syllogism             | Complexes           |

That there is some kind of correspondence between the world and the mind, that aspects of logic mirror the structure of things in the world is not something that is completely novel or that should surprise philosophers. However, most of them would be surprised if Aristotle were to say: “The world is a syllogism.”

Now, Professor Rose can certainly find ammunition in Peirce’s arsenal to defend what might seem as a lonely outpost. As must be clear to many readers of Peirce, the very triadic structure that is so influential in his writing seems to be of Hegelian inspiration, as is the notion of mediation which is playing such a significant role at the very root of the notion of sign. Similarly, the teleological—dare I say—eschatological drive of his philosophy seems to parallel the move of logic toward the (completely?) rational. As Rose writes,

Logic is a positive normative science whose ultimate aim is to advance thought towards the truth. As we shall see, this is equivalent to the aim at making the world more reasonable. (p. 6)

But what is the sense of “world” here? An extra-mental reality? If so, the mind would be rendering something outside itself ordered. Such is a very powerful mind indeed. But perhaps, on the other hand, “world” is just the representation of mind of what is taken to be known. If so, then the world as argument would simply be what is known, a theory that has established itself.

The problem that Peirce faces is the same problem that Hegel should have confronted—but dodged. This problem, in my opinion, is two sided. On the one side it is the problem that I have already noted, the problem of the extra-mental reality of the universe. Hegel may seem to have made the problem disappear but ultimately seems to have hidden it under the warp and woof of his dialectic tapestry. On the other side it is the problem of the reality of mind. Outside of the phenomenological elaboration of the contents, activities and products of mind, the question arises whether there is any ontological foundation or reality of mind itself. If not, then one is left again with mere representation. Indeed, the all-enveloping *commens* that Professor Rose highlights simply seems to be more support for a reading of Peirce as one who simply neglects the ontological status of mind. The *commens* is a holistic framework which has a “dynamical object” that “does not mean something out of the mind.” (p. 10) The role of consensus in belief, the joint individual and communal agreement which produces a true integrity of belief (p. 13) is again indicative of the essential role played by this shared mind.

What Professor Rose says about Peirce’s use of the distinction concerning Breadth, Depth, and Information is of importance precisely with respect to both the teleological and the representational side of knowledge. Growth in knowledge, which takes place not deductively but abductively and inductively, depends on gaining both breadth and depth together. If one were to use the Aristotelian syllogism as a model, one might say that growth depends on adding middle terms or minor terms to a given major. This openness in knowledge must be paralleled in reality: “Peirce comes to realize that

what is true epistemically is also true of reality in general, that reality is an open rather than a closed system.” (p. 16) However, note that even here we are making a distinction between the known and the real. Thus, the criticism raised a little while ago can be raised again. Is the Universe an argument or does it just resemble an argument, i.e., does it just possess a possibility for development in a way that resembles the ever-developing accumulation of knowledge? While one does not want to overlook some fascinating points that Professor Rose makes with respect to argument, types of reasoning, growth of reasoning, and goal of reasoning, one still needs to confront the basic issue how what is known is related to the knower and the knowing process. The naturalist flavor of Peirce’s understanding of the growth of both logic and knowledge might seem to bridge this difference, but the question remains whether it is sufficient to do so.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Professor Rose has presented a penetrating and insightful examination of some pivotal ideas in Peirce. My criticism is not so much of his paper as it is of a problem that seems to be lurking within Peirce’s philosophy itself, the problem of relating the knowing process to reality itself. Of course, Peirce appears to seamlessly weave together such seemingly opposed approaches as those of idealism and naturalism that the resulting fabric has the appearance of a durable canvas upon which he can paint his theory. Naturalist tendencies are quite widespread in current English speaking and analytic philosophical circles; talk of the world as narrative is popular in European and post-modern circle. More specifically, Peircean talk of truth as consensus and the agreement of scientific inquirers has found sympathy even in highly technical American philosophers, e.g., Wilfrid Sellars and his view of the coherence view of truth as found in the agreement of the scientific community. However, the fact that there is also a resurgent interest in the role of the a priori indicates that consensus on these philosophical issues is not yet in sight.

[Link to paper](#)