

## **APPLYING PEIRCE**

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### **Neglected aspects of Peirce's writings: Contributions to ethics and humanism**

The task of this paper is to reflect on some aspects of Peirce's philosophical and semiotic conception that have been generally neglected or misunderstood. In particular: the question of the relation between semiosis, interpretation and quasi-interpreter; inseparability of knowledge and responsible awareness; knowledge and responsibility; interconnection between body and sign; dialogic self and otherness; foundation of anthropology and cosmology on agapastic relations; critique of a monadic and egotistic conception of the social with reference to capitalist society and liberal ideology of the time; Peircean metaphysics as an instance of the transcendence of the actual being of human beings, that is, what they know and what they do, in other words, not only in gnoseological, but also in ethical terms; the idea of procedure by approximation, not only when a question of the cognitive object but also for what concerns a more congruous social system, that is, a society that is more responsive to human capacities and aspirations; opposition of "reasonableness", which does not separate logic from morality, on one hand, to absolute and dogmatic reason, on the other; Peirce's unconditional refusal of pragmatism founded on the notion and practice of utility, which eventually led him to invent the term "pragmaticism" in order to distinguish his own position from W. James's. All these aspects are worth considering for a rereading of Peirce which aims to free him from an oversimplified interpretation when his thought system is reductively limited to the gnoseological dimension. With the present paper we propose to consider some of these aspects.

*Otherness in the Self. The responsive interpretant, signification and value*

Peirce's semiotics describes semiosis in terms of its potential for deferral and *renvoi* among interpretants, whether endosemiosically across interpretants forming the same sign system or intersemiosically across different sign systems. In Peirce's approach, the sign is never something static or circumscribed to the limits of a single signifying system. On the contrary, the sign is characterized by its capacity for displacement, by what we might call the 'flight of interpretants', even across different sign systems.

This results in an increase in significance, as semiotic spheres in expansion pulsate ever more intensely with sense and meaning. Continuous displacement indicates to us how structural opening to otherness is a condition of sign identity, as paradoxical as this may seem. The question of otherness also leads back to the problem of the 'limits of interpretation'. Regarding this point, a crucial observation is that the semiotic materiality or otherness of the interpreted sign with respect to the interpretant sign is an obstacle to arbitrariness. The threat of relativism or of dogmatism in interpretive practice is avoided thanks to the strategies of dialogic confrontation among signs on the basis of reciprocal otherness.

Otherness and dialogue in the sign, precisely between the interpreted sign and the interpretant sign, constitute the structure of sign, including the sign that is the I: alterity and dialogue are constitutive characteristics of the I in the semiotic process of actualization as I. This is a continuous responsive process that implies the relation of otherness both internally and externally with respect to the process itself of actualization as I. In other words, the relation of otherness or alterity is a dialogic relation that already implies in itself a responsive and responsible interpretation with regard to the interior other (or others) of self, as much as the exterior other (or others). And it is important to underline that there is no interruption or natural barrier between the responsive and responsible behaviour of self, on one hand, and the other selves beyond one's own self, on the other.

Following Peirce, from the perspective of human social semiotics (or anthroposociosemiotics), our gaze on sign behaviour must embrace the fields of ethics, aesthetics and ideology. Thus equipped the logico-cognitive boundaries of semiotic processes must be extended to contemplate problems of an axiological order. This approach implies focusing on the human capacity and disposition for evaluation, criticism and the assumption of responsibility moving in the direction of what we propose to call 'semioethics' (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2002 and 2005), or what Victoria Welby designated with the term 'significs'. Welby and Peirce were in direct contact with each conducting an intense epistolary correspondence during the last decade of their lives during which they discussed and modelled their ideas together, in constant dialogue with each other.

Welby privileged the term 'significs' for her theory of sign and meaning to underline the scope of her approach and its special focus on the problem of 'significance', that is, meaning in an axiological sense, therefore its focus on the relation between signs and values. In his own studies on signs Charles Morris (1964) too focused on problems of *significance*,

therefore on problems of an axiological order, as well as on problems of *signification*. Welby's term 'significs' indicates her insistent concern for such aspects as the value, pertinence, signifying scope and value of signs, that is, their significance. This presupposes special attention for the human being's involvement in the life of signs considered not only in abstractly theoretical terms but also in emotional and pragmatic terms.

### *From Reason to Reasonableness*

Coherently with his pragmatism or 'pragmaticism' as he preferred in a subsequent phase of his research, Peirce developed his cognitive semiotics in close relation to the study of human social behaviour and human interests globally. From this perspective the problem of knowledge necessarily presupposed problems of an axiological order. Peirce introduced the concept of reasonableness which he understood as an open-ended dialectic-dialogic signifying process, the development of thought unbiased by prejudice, oriented by the logic of otherness: an unfinalizable sign process regulated by the principle of continuity or synechism.

As can be inferred from Peirce's semiotic perspective, the dialogic conception of signs and otherness together form a necessary condition for his doctrine of continuity, or synechism, the principle that 'all that exists is continuous' in the development of the universe in its globality and of the human subject that inhabits it (cf. *CP* 1.172).

The dia-logic relation between self and other – both the other from self and the other of self – emerges as an essential condition for the growth of reasonableness and continuity in the creative process. Peirce transcended the limits of theoreticism in semiotics working in a direction that could be described as pragmatic-ethic or operative-evaluative, *semioethical* in our terminology, *significal* in Welby's. In the final phase of his research Peirce specifically turned his attention to the normative sciences: beyond logic, he contemplated aesthetics and ethics and therefore such issues as the ultimate good or the *summum bonum*, which he neither identified in individual pleasure (hedonism) nor in the good of society (English utilitarianism), but in the 'evolutionary process' itself, and more precisely in the 'growth of reasonableness':

Almost everybody will now agree that the ultimate good lies in the evolutionary process in some way. If so, it is not in individual reactions in their segregation, but in something general or continuous. Synechism is founded on the notion that the coalescence, the becoming continuous, the becoming governed by laws, the becoming instinct with general ideas, are but phases of one and the same process of the growth of reasonableness. This is first shown to be true with mathematical exactitude in the field of logic, and is thence inferred to hold good metaphysically. It is not opposed to pragmatism in the manner in which C. S. Peirce applied it, but includes that procedure as a step. (*CP* 5.4)

The most advanced developments in reason and knowledge are achieved through the creative power of reasonableness and are fired by the power of love, agapasm: ‘the impulse projecting creations into independency and drawing them into harmony’ (CP 6.288). In Peirce’s conception of evolution developed with reference to the Gospel of St. John and to the theosophy of Emanuel Swedenborg, human semiosis is enhanced by the power of love understood as orientation toward the other, as care for the other.

Reasonableness is endowed with the power of transforming one’s horror of the stranger, the alien, one’s fear of the other (the fear one experiences of the other foreign to oneself) into sympathy for the other. And, in fact, recalling his own essay of 1892, ‘The Law of Mind’ (1892a), Peirce asserted that the type of evolution foreseen by synechism is evolution by love, where reason warmed by love becomes reasonableness and the hateful becomes lovely:

Everybody can see that the statement of St. John is the formula of an evolutionary philosophy, which teaches that growth comes only from love, from I will not say self-*sacrifice*, but from the ardent impulse to fulfill another’s highest impulse. [ ] It is not dealing out cold justice to the circle of my ideas that I can make them grow, but by cherishing and tending them as I would the flowers in my garden. The philosophy we draw from John’s gospel is that this is the way mind develops; and as for the cosmos, only so far as it yet is mind, and so has life, is it capable of further evolution. Love, recognizing germs of loveliness in the hateful, gradually warms it into life, and makes it lovely. That is the sort of evolution which every careful student of my essay ‘The Law of Mind’ must see that *synechism* calls for. (CP 6.289)

*Self between love and logic, reading together Peirce, Welby, Levinas*

Love is directed to the concrete and not to abstractions, it is directed to persons, one’s neighbour not necessarily in a spatial sense, locally, but in the sense of affinity, a person ‘we live near [...] in life and feeling’: love is a driving force where iconicity, abduction and creativity are clearly operative at high degrees. Citing the Gospel of St. John whose evolutionary philosophy teaches us that growth comes from love, Peirce clarifies that love is not understood as *sacrificing self* or gratifying the egoistic impulses of others but as sacrificing one’s own perfection to the perfecting of one’s neighbour: ‘the ardent impulse to fulfill another’s highest impulse’. Applying the lesson learnt from St. John, we may infer with Peirce that the mind and the cosmos it inhabits develop through the power of love understood as orientation toward the other, as care for the other. And recalling his essay of 1892, ‘The Law of Mind’ (Peirce 1892a), he reminds his readers that the type of evolution foreseen by synechism is evolution through the agency of love whose prime characteristic, as mentioned above, is the ability to recognize the germs of loveliness in the hateful and make it lovely (cf. CP 6.287-289).

Peirce goes on to polemically contrast the ‘Gospel of Christ’, where the capacity for progress is described as depending on a relation of sympathy among neighbours, with the ‘Gospel of greed’, the dominant tendency of the times according to which progress depends on the assertion of one’s individuality or egoistic identity over the other (cf. *CP* 6.294).

A parallel may be drawn between Peirce’s critique of the supremacy of the individual and Welby’s critique of subjectivity (see Petrilli 1998; Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: ch. 2). Welby theorized subjectivity in terms of the relation between *I* and *Self* and criticizes the tendency in *self* to transform ‘selfness’ into ‘selfishness’ or ‘selfism’. The principles of natural selection, of the survival of the fittest, of the struggle for existence as developed by Darwin in *The Origin of Species* are all based on the concept of individual as adapted from nineteenth century political economy and applied to the life sciences, translating therefore from the sphere of economic development to evolution of the organic. On the contrary, Peirce privileged the agapastic theory of evolution and even considered his own strong attraction for this doctrine as possible proof of its truth insofar as it responds to the natural judgments of the sensible heart.

Recalling Henry James, Peirce distinguished between self-love, that is, love which is directed to another considered identical to one’s self, and creative love which instead is directed to that which is completely different, even ‘hostile and negative’ with respect to one’s self, love directed to the other as other. On this basis we can propose a typology of love which progresses from a high degree of identity to a high degree of otherness. But truly creative love, as both Welby and Peirce teach us, is love oriented by the logic of otherness, love for the other, directed without second ends to the other as other. We can make the claim that otherness logic is agapastic logic and that love, otherness, dialogism and abduction together constitute the generating nucleus of signs, senses and worlds that are real, possible or only imaginary.

[...] the love that God is, is not a love of which hatred is the contrary; otherwise Satan would be a coördinate power; but it is a love which embraces hatred as an imperfect stage of it, an Anteros – yea, even needs hatred and hatefulness as its object. For self-love is no love; so if God’s self is love, that which he loves must be defect of love; just as a luminary can light up only that which otherwise would be dark. Henry James, the Swedenborgian, says: ‘It is no doubt very tolerable finite or creaturely love to love one’s own in another, to love another for his conformity to one’s self: but nothing can be in more flagrant contrast with the creative Love, all whose tenderness *ex vi termini* must be reserved only for what intrinsically is most bitterly hostile and negative to itself’. (*CP* 6.287)

The Peircean concept of reason fired by love calls to mind Welby’s own association between love and logic. An example from her writings is the following passage from a letter to Peirce of 22 December 1903:

May I say in conclusion that I see strongly how much we have lost and are losing by the barrier which we set up between emotion and intellect, between feeling and reasoning. Distinction must of course remain. I am the last person to wish this blurred. But I should like to put it thus: The difference e.g. between our highest standards of love and the animal's is that they imply knowledge in logical order. We know *that, what, how* and above all, *why* we love. Thus the logic is bound up in that very feeling which we contrast with it. But while in our eyes logic is merely 'formal', merely structural, merely question of argument, 'cold and hard', we need a word which shall express the combination of 'logic and love'. And this I have tried to supply in 'Significs'. (Hardwick 1977: 15)

In an advanced phase of his studies and from the perspective of pragmatism, Peirce described subjectivity, the self, as a set of actions, practices and habits. Furthermore, an essential characteristic of self was identified by Peirce in what he called 'power' as opposed to 'force'. The incarnated self is a centre of power oriented toward an end, a 'purpose'. This may be related to what Welby understood with the terms 'purport' or 'ultimate value' in her description of the meaning value of the third element of her triad, that is, 'significance' (the other two terms being 'meaning' and 'sense'). Power is not 'brute force' but the 'creative power of reasonableness', accompanied by doubt though not amiable, which thanks to its agapastic orientation rules over all other powers (cf. *CP* 5.520). We could say that power, that is, the ideal of reasonableness, is the capacity for opening to the attraction exerted by the logic of otherness on self. It converges with the disposition to respond to the other and the modality of such a disposition is dialogue.

The self is not understood as an individual in an absolute sense. In other words, it is not an undivided, closed totality or a coherent and non-contradictory identity (Petrilli and Ponzio 2005: ch. 1). Insofar as it is a sign self is at least doubled into interpreted and interpretant. As evidenced by the activities of speaking, deciding, discussing, coming to consciousness, reasoning, self is structurally, constitutively other. Self is not monologic but, on the contrary, is modelled by a plurality of voices, logics, parts in dialogue. Therefore self's identity is dialogic, plurivocal, detotalized.

Echoing Peirce self may be envisaged as a community endowed with a capacity for criticism and projectuality, a community that interacts with the social community conceived as a sort of more fluid and less compact person (*CP* 5.421). The other is structural to identity while at once representing the external force of attraction that shapes identity in an evolutionary process of development oriented by the principle of love, by attraction for the other – the affective other, the cognitive other, the ethic other and the aesthetic other.

It is surprising how Peirce and Welby anticipated considerations that were to reappear in the writings of a contemporary philosopher like Emmanuel Levinas who thematizes the otherness relationship. As he claims throughout his writings (see in particular his books of 1961, *Totalité et infini*, and of 1972, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*), we experience the desire

for others even in the most insignificant social experience, such desire being the essential movement, pure transportation, absolute orientation, sense.

Developing Peirce's discourse in the direction of Levinas's philosophy of subjectivity, love transforms fear *of* the other, fear that the other provokes in self, into fear for the other, for his/her safety, to the point of becoming wholly responsible for the other, of taking the blame for all the wrongs s/he is subjected to. Love, reasonableness, creativity are grounded in the logic of otherness and dialogism, and move the evolutionary dynamics of human consciousness, if not of the universe in its wholeness, as we learn from the authors thus far cited.

Levinas is critical of the approach adopted by contemporary philosophy to the analysis of language insofar as it insists on hermeneutic structure and on the cultural effort of the incarnated being who expresses itself, forgetting a third dimension.

This third dimension is orientation toward the other who is not only a collaborator and neighbour in the cultural work of expression, or a client for our artistic work, but an 'interlocutor'. Levinas defines the interlocutor as the person to whom the expression expresses, for whom the celebration celebrates, at once the term of orientation and primary signification. In other words, before being the celebration of being expression is a relation with the person to whom I express the expression and whose presence is a necessary condition for the very production of my cultural gesture of expression. The other in front of me, *autrui* as says Levinas, is not included in the totality of the expressed being, but escapes being, as its shadow, face, excess with respect to being. The other is neither a cultural signification, nor a simple given. Far more radically the other is primordial sense, the possibility of sense for the expression itself. Indeed, it is thanks to the other alone that such a phenomenon as signification itself can enter being (cf. Levinas 1972: 49-50).

### *Cosmology, semiotics and logic*

If we shift our attention from the modalities of evolutionary development in the universe – the effects of chance, love and necessity; and from an approach to semiotic activity, with special reference to self and thought, which places dialogism and otherness at the heart of the sign; and enter the sphere of logic to consider inferential procedure, we find that in Peirce's universe of discourse the categories of cosmology, semiotics and logic are interconnected by a relation of reciprocal implication. As Peirce above all teaches us, the self too is a sign and develops according to the laws of inference (*CP* 5.313). Correspondences also continue to emerge between Peirce's thought system and Welby's.

Each of the three evolutionary modes mentioned, tychasm, anancasm and agapasm, contains traces of the other two. Thus, they are not pure; rather they affect one another reciprocally and share the same general elements (cf. *CP* 6.303).

In tychastic development – which in semiotic terms corresponds to symbolicity and in argumentative terms to induction – chance determines new interpretive trajectories with unpredictable outcomes that in some cases are fixed in ‘habits’. Paradoxically, chance generates order, in other words, the fortuitous result generates the law while the law itself finds (an apparently contradictory) explanation in terms of the action of chance. This is the principle that informs Charles Darwin’s book of 1859 *The Origin of Species* (cf. 1998). However in Peirce’s view, Darwin’s success was largely determined by the values which informed his research and which could be represented by the principle of the survival of the fittest. These values responded to the dominant values of the times that were grounded in the logic of identity and that, in the last analysis, could be summed up with the word ‘greed’.

Anancastic development is connected with indexicality and deduction. New interpretive routes are determined by necessity – internal necessity (the logical development of ideas, of interpretants that have already been accepted) and external necessity with respect to consciousness (circumstance) – without the possibility of hazarding farsighted predictions concerning eventual results. So logic understood in a strict sense as necessary cause is connected with anancastic development. The limit of this kind of development rests in the assertion that only one kind of logical procedure is possible, in the supposition therefore that the conclusion deriving from the premises is obliged and could not be different, which excludes all other argumentative modes and consequently the possibility of free choice (cf. *CP* 6.313). Constriction, contingency and mechanical necessity all effectively dominate the relation between the interpreted sign and the interpretant sign in anancastic development. However, this does not preclude the possibility of other interpretive modalities which, in fact, are always active even when anancastic procedure prevails. In semiotic terms the relation between the interpreted sign and the interpretant sign is of the indexical type, in argumentative terms it is deductive. The relationship between the conclusion and its premises is regulated by reciprocal constriction and as such is invested with low degrees of otherness and dialogism.

On the contrary, as Peirce states in his paper of 1893 included in the *Collected Papers* under the title ‘Evolutionary Love’ (*CP* 6.287-6.317), in agapastic development the deferral among interpretants is characterized by iconicity and abduction. The evolution of anthroposemiosis, progress in linguistic and nonlinguistic learning, the generation of sense, value, significance at the highest degrees of dialogic otherness, creativity, innovation, playfulness and desire are articulated in semiotic processes of the abductive, iconic and agapastic type. Agapasm, that is, the evolution of thought, or, better, semiosis, according to the law of creative love, is regulated neither by chance nor by blind necessity, but rather, as Peirce says, ‘by an immediate attraction for the idea itself, whose nature is divined before the mind possesses it, by the power of sympathy, that is, by virtue of the continuity of mind’ (*CP* 6.307). As an example Peirce cites the *divination* of genius, the mind affected by the idea

before that idea is comprehended or possessed by virtue of the attraction it exercises upon him in the context of relational continuity among signs in the great semiotic network of the universe, or semiosphere.

There is manifestly a close connection between the concepts of agapasm, abduction and desire. Peirce in fact established an explicit relation between desire and meaning: these concepts both share in the semiotic and the axiological spheres, they are both connected with signs and values and therefore with meaning as value and desirability. In their correspondence, Welby and Mary Everest Boole – wife of the famous logician and mathematician George Boole (discussed by Peirce) – in fact dedicated a significant part of their letter texts to considerations on the laws of mind and, therefore, to the interconnection between logic, love, passion and power (cf. Welby 1929: 86-92; Boole 1905, 1909, 1910; Petrilli 1998a).

The end of agapastic development is the evolutionary process itself (of the cosmos, of thought, of language, of the subject), continuity in signifying processes, of semiosis in general. Creative evolution is beaten out at the rhythm of hypotheses, discoveries and qualitative leaps through the combined effect of agapasticism, attraction among interpretants, and synechism, so that no single existent, idea or individual is conceivable in isolation from anything else. From the viewpoint of subjectivity, self far from being solitary is a communicating entity moved by desire and grounded in Agape. Therefore, by virtue of the continuity of thought and creative love, *agapic or sympathetic comprehension and recognition* is the dominant force in the deferral among signs from an evolutionary perspective; and the simultaneous occurrence of a genial idea to a number of individuals not endowed with any particular powers and independently of each other (a consequence of belonging to the same great semiosphere) may well be considered as a demonstration of this (cf. CP 6.315-316).

Both Peirce and Welby attempt to develop a global science of signs and meaning that can account for semiotic processes, human and nonhuman, verbal and nonverbal in all their diversity, complexity and articulation, in relation to the specifically human world for meaning not only in terms of signification but also of significance or sense. We cannot with any claim to neutrality study the life of signs in merely descriptive terms. Such an approach can only be partial and inadequate for a full understanding of the human subject moved by forces animating the universe it inhabits. An adequate understanding of human consciousness and human behaviour calls instead for a conception of signs the boundaries of which extend not only in the direction of 'zoosemiotics' and 'biosemiotics', as proposed by Sebeok, but also in the direction of what, developing both Peirce and Welby, we might call 'cosmosemiotics', which encompasses 'geosemiotics' and 'heliosemiotics', and in the direction of 'semioethics' with its focus on the relation of signs to values (cf. Petrilli 1998; Petrilli and Ponzio 2002, 2005).