

DOI: 10.14394/eidos.jpc.2021.0040

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## Peirce on the Symbolical Foundation of Personhood

### Abstract

This paper discusses the semiotic and metaphysical framework within which Peirce elaborated a symbolical and dynamical conception of personhood. It exhibits the centrality of Peirce's early conception of the "unity of consistency" along with its decentering advantages. It describes how this gave rise to a metaphysics of personhood that questions the singularity of individuals. It then conducts a semiotic study of the evolutive process across which something indeterminate evolves into something determinate that increasingly personifies itself following the logic of symbolization, taking into account two major types of indetermination: generality and vagueness. It then considers the kind of teleology at work within personification. It concludes that personhood so conceived is not restricted to only individual human beings, for the process of symbolization at work is not confined to a particular species-specific application.

### Keywords:

Peirce, Wittgenstein, personhood, determination, symbol, vagueness, generality

### 1. Introduction

The subject of personal identity and personhood has long been a cornerstone of analytical metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> This article does not seek to converse with that literature because the latter has long been driven by question-begging

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1) This article is a substantially and pervadingly modified version of a previous article published in French, see De Tienne, "Le signe en personne chez Peirce, avec échos wittgensteiniens," 203–23. A much earlier and shorter version appeared in Italian as De Tienne, "La persona come segno," 91–109.

nominalistic assumptions that ended up giving rise, for instance, to a clever subgenre fixated on brains in a vat, as removed as conceptually possible not only from the reality of experience but even from the fundamental non-reductionistic logic that subtends reality. To capture within a single nuanced and comprehensive definition all the necessary conditions that preside over the construction of the singular experience traditionally called “personal identity” is an architectonic task that, as the last few centuries have taught us, is surprisingly full of difficulties. In many ways, a viable theory of what personhood amounts to is automatically a test of the robustness of any given metaphysics.

One of the lessons we have learned is that a sound metaphysics requires a sound logic, but a sound logic was not available until a logic of logic had been worked out. Charles S. Peirce was the first logician who managed to study and make out the “elements” of logic as no one had ever done before or even after him. Upon such a logic he built a metaphysics, thus a theory of reality, far more robust and encompassing than any modern-times dependent theory. Peirce’s metaphysics had for one thing the advantage of eschewing the traditional difficulties created by artificial dualistic stances.<sup>2</sup> As a result, one finds in Peirce’s writings, almost right from the start, both a conception of personhood and a method of conceiving it that are no echoes of any conception or method before his. Echoing Peirce’s approach in the current twenty-first century is what this paper aims to do, in part because Peirce’s philosophy has finally and fully come of age: it has long been attracting interest from scholars engaged in plenty of other fields of research, including theoretical physics and the latest interpretations of quantum theory, cognitive and behavioral neuroscience, geophysics, biology, genetics, artificial intelligence, cosmology, and so on. Peirce’s relevance has long escaped from its philosophical fences precisely thanks to the unusual reach of both his logic and his metaphysics.

To narrow this paper’s ambition to something manageable, its particular method will be to examine Peirce’s strategy as he worked out his conception of personhood, while also taking here and there the occasion to identify corroborating or consonant echoes in a distinctively different philosopher – Wittgenstein – the idea being that if Peircean insights are indeed formally identifiable in a contemporary author who never referred to Peirce, there must then be, within Peirce’s insights, a logical strength that is independent of his thinking person. What this paper will not do is to verse into the philosophy of mind or address such matters as Peirce’s conception of mind, of consciousness, and self-consciousness, of mental activity, of individuation, self-reference, and proper names.

What this paper will do is to provide the non-psychologistic but plainly logical and semiotic framework within which Peirce approached the matter soon after he bid farewell to Kant’s transcendentalism; it will then explore how his conception of the unity of consistency became central to that strategy with what particular decentering advantages; it will describe how that gave rise to an original metaphysics of personhood that questions the singularity of individuals; it will then launch itself into an in-depth semiotic study of the dynamic incremental process across which something indeterminate evolves into something determinate that increasingly personifies itself exactly in the way symbols tend to do, while considering two major types of indetermination: generality and vagueness; it will also consider the teleological drive that energizes personification; and it will conclude with the natural implication that personhood so conceived is unlikely to be restricted to only individual human beings: personhood as a process of symbolization is not limited in the range of its instantiations.

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2) It is telling that analytical philosophers who developed personhood theories rapidly fell into three camps, the physicalist, the mentalist, and the physical-mentalist camps that have been throwing many a theoretical snowball to one another for a long time. This paper will not join their neo-scholastic battle, preferring to explore more extensively the very notion of personhood, independently of its manifestation within human individuality as such. This is in accord with Peirce’s methodology, which is suspicious of any psychologically driven approach that would reduce the field of research to human experience, thereby disconnecting it from far broader natural dynamics. For an overview and in-depth discussion of the state of research in analytical metaphysics, see for instance Perry, *Identity, Personal Identity, and the Self*; which collects a number of his most significant papers on the subject in convenient format.

## 2. A Non-Psychologicistic but Logical and Semiotic Approach

Peirce gives us many reasons to think that the notion of person is primarily semiotic in its logical and metaphysical nature, a singular (yet not singular) composite made of signs and made by signs. If such is the case, it follows that the initial exploration of the concept rests on the shoulders of the logician of signs, of the semiotician, before it can be taken over by physicalist and/or mentalist researchers, because logic is far more fundamental than physics and psychology. For reasons not developed here because they have been expounded many times, we know that for Peirce logic in its broadest sense is a science which in its investigative processes does not need to take into account the special concerns that motivate anthropocentric metaphysicians, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists, neurologists, and so forth. This in no way means that semiotic logic is an aprioristic and arrogant science. It simply indicates that there is, in the investigation of fundamental phenomena – and “personhood” is one of them – an order to follow that is not arbitrary, in that it proceeds from the more undetermined to the more determined, and from the general to the particular. The term “person” clearly has many acceptations, and there exists a non-negligible tendency to merely reduce it to, or make it synonymous with, human individuality as such, and even exclusively so, that is, to the exclusion of any other living being. There is here a large debate rooted in a quest that seeks to ensure confirmation that human beings stand apart from other living beings in essential respects. The danger of such a biased stance is that it may end up blocking research in the origination of general intelligible patterns.

Eschewing that debate entirely, let us examine what it means to say of some living being that it is, or behaves as, a person, be that living being real or fictitious, social or singular, human or non-human. In such an inquiry, Peirce’s non-psychologicistic and non-physicalist method (and thus non-dualist) is most helpful – and so is the method of Wittgenstein, who in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* announces without any hesitation that in philosophy one studies the ego or the self without any recourse to psychology, and thus without reference to humanity as such.<sup>3</sup>

Several years ago, this author happened to stay in a small town in southern Illinois – Carbondale is its name, and it is the seat of Southern Illinois University. The archives of that university’s library boast a rich collection of texts in Peirce’s hand, specifically many original manuscripts of articles that appeared in the two journals *The Monist* and *The Open Court*. These two journals were published by the Open Court Company, a publishing house that belonged to a wealthy German-born industrialist, Edward Hegeler. The purpose of the visit was to examine 400 pages of documents then recently discovered, an essential part of which was the correspondence between Peirce and Hegeler. One particular letter, which Peirce had sent to Hegeler on July 11, 1894, caught our interest, and especially three sentences, the first remarkable for its philosophical suggestion, the other two for their psychological suggestion. The letter’s main purpose was to try to convince Hegeler of publishing a large book several publishers had already rejected, and Peirce was hoping that Hegeler would consider it favorably. The book was entitled “How to Reason: the Critick of Arguments,” also informally known as “Grand Logic,” an archival title given to it years after Peirce’s death.<sup>4</sup> Quoting Peirce:

I may mention that the book as written states, or partly states (I forget precisely) my view of personal identity, which closely resembles, if it is not the same as, yours. This can easily be struck out. The closer [my] ideas come to yours the less you seemed to like them.<sup>5</sup>

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3) Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.641. All subsequent references to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* are referenced parenthetically as WT followed by his own statement-by-statement numbering scheme.

4) The substance of this book is found in the Harvard Collection manuscripts in the sections numbered 397–424 listed in Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, 397–424.

5) Charles S. Peirce to Edward C. Hegeler, 11 July 1894, in *Open Court*.

That Peirce was not naturally endowed with a diplomatic or even a marketing spirit is clearly manifest and is no longer surprising. But that Hegeler, powerful zinc magnate, had developed a conception of personal identity comparable to that of Peirce, here was something quite intriguing. Searching frantically through the pile of letters, we eventually discovered the fragmentary draft of an undated note from Hegeler to Peirce, in which Hegeler had scribbled the following (including three lines he deleted):

Professor C. S. Peirce, with warm regards, from E. C. Hegeler.  
The soul is not the activity of the nervous system, but the form of its activity.  
~~Soul is Form.~~  
~~The Soul is Form.~~  
~~The soul is form.~~  
We ARE the memories and ideas of which in the language of the day we erroneously say that [we] have them.<sup>6</sup>

The argument here presented, or rather the enthymeme since it is fragmentary, has an Aristotelian tinge. Hegeler refuses to reduce the soul, the seat of the person, to brain activity such as a neurologist would describe it. The soul is instead the general form of that activity, that is, the very experience into which such activity translates, such as in memories and the agitation or affirmation or conception of ideas. It is a form at once permanent and evolving through reproduction, just like a text does through subsequent editions. Hegeler insists that this experience is something that we are rather than we have. Merely having that experience would imply that there was something else preceding the memories, ideas, thoughts, something like an independent subject whose business would be to conceive them, or not, according to circumstances. In holding to the contrary that we are our thoughts, Hegeler implies that the experience of personal identity cannot be separated from the agitation of memories and ideas – that it is essentially the same thing.

Peirce would clearly have found this idea quite congenial. One finds an echo of it already thirty years earlier, thirty years before this exchange with Hegeler, thus toward 1865, at a time when Peirce had brought his main struggle with Kant's Critique to an end and when he had begun to identify and articulate the principal processual elements of his semiotic logic. Peirce fully agreed with Kant that it was necessary to find a principle that could guarantee the synthetic power of our representations, a principle that could explain how a proposition relating to an objective experience – such as "Peirce is the American Aristotle" or "this sheet of paper is light" – how such a proposition states an external fact truly and impartially. But Peirce quickly rejected the ad hoc Kantian stratagem of postulating a transcendental unity of apperception for reaching such a goal. There was no need to posit at the source of the unifying power of representation a permanent and changeless transcendental ego. Such a solution resorts to an inexplicable external entity, and therefore shuns the very effort of understanding what is intelligible in principle. On the contrary, if any representational activity manifests an intrinsic logical unity, it is precisely because that unity emerges naturally from that representational activity.<sup>7</sup>

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6) Edward C. Hegeler to Charles S. Peirce, undated draft fragment of a note, early to mid-1893, in *Open Court*. The last sentence is identical to a statement by Hegeler in *Open Court* #259, 11 August 1892, p. 3349, col. 2. See Hegeler's related remark in *Open Court* #402, 9 May 1895, p. 4487. Hegeler wrote, in the "publishers' preface" of Freytag's *Lost Manuscript*, that the soul "is the form that is constantly reproducing... The soul of the future man stands in the same relation to our soul as the future edition of a book, revised and enlarged, stands to its present edition" (a splendid metaphor inspired from Benjamin Franklin's reworked draft of his own proposed but unused epitaph).

7) This is a point our former student David Agler further researched in a 2006 paper: Agler, "The Symbolic Self." Zachary Micah Gartenberg published a definite demonstration in that same regard in his 2012 article "Intelligibility and Subjectivity in Peirce:

### 3. The Unity of Consistency: *Ego non Cogitans sed ex Interpretatione*

One of Peirce's first theses is thus that if there is somewhere something that is an "ego," an "I" subject of thinking, this I or ego is to be found within the thinking process as an effect of its activity, and not as its cause. Here is how Peirce put it in the first Harvard Lecture of 1865:

We find that every judgment is subject to a condition of consistency; its elements must be capable of being brought to a unity. This consistent unity since it belongs to all our judgments may be said to belong to us. Or rather since it belongs to the judgments of all mankind, we may be said to belong to it.<sup>8</sup>

Every act of representation consists in introducing a "unity of consistency." That unity is unrelated to the Kantian unity of apperception. It is rather the result of bringing together different elements within a judgment, such as a subject and a predicate, in ways that are not arbitrary (thus not under the authority of any judging or assessing egoity). For a subject and a predicate to be conjoined, they must be made of conjoinable stuff to start with. That conjoinability, condition of consistency, happens to be given from the beginning within the very processual elements of representation, because what all such elements have in common is that they are each some sort of sign, and the logical fact is that every sign is a logical entity that is essentially relational.

Speaking for instance of some light sheet of paper, the predicate "light" is a symbol that is itself the fruit of a long sequel of interpretation involving processes of contrast, correlation, and comparison (not to mention a long etymological history), and the same is true of the subject "sheet of paper." Their conjunction, for instance on the occasion of an actual experience of picking up a particular sheet that brings some utterer to state that "this sheet is light" (in any language or other system of expression) thanks to the obscure magic of a unifying copula (loud or mute), is the concrete affirmative expression, urged by the very experience being had, of just that "unity of consistency." Now, this conjunction or unification, it is useless to say that it is some "I," some sort of ego, that presides over it, because that explains nothing and would only repeat Descartes's fallacy regarding the cogito: taking the ego for granted.<sup>9</sup> In order to describe the logical operation at work in this representation, we do not need to bring in an extraneous psychological element. Peirce shows, especially in his celebrated 1867 essay "On a New List of Categories," that the principal engine of unification within a representational act is what he calls the interpretant. As a logical entity, the interpretant is a representational agent that does several things, but essentially a work of comparison. Once the sheet of paper has been isolated, abstracted from the mass of things present to perception, and recognized as sheet, and once the effect of picking it up has also been recorded and labeled – that is, set into signs – the work of comparison takes place in recognizing that the recorded effect is similar to other effects experienced previously, all of which had been collected under the symbol of lightness

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A Reading of his 'New List of Categories,' stating that the New List "shows that the intelligibility of experience is not grounded in subjectivity, but in the mediating function of representations, where 'representations' are considered as systems of relations rather than mental entities or as entailing the conformity of a subjective thought to an extramental object." See Gartenberg, "Intelligibility and Subjectivity in Peirce," 583.

8) See Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 1, 167.

9) The hidden premise to Descartes's non-inferential "Cogito ergo sum" was the antecedent reality of the ego: I am, therefore I think that when I think, I am. A very thorough critique of the Cartesian *ego cogito* and of several other philosophical attempts to discern the ego, the self, and personhood (especially in the Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenological tradition that critique's author descends from) is found in Michel Henry's formidable work *The Essence of Manifestation* whose main theme is "the meaning of the Being of the ego," and whose main goal is "to submit to philosophical scrutiny what we mean by 'I' or 'me' whenever it is a question of ourselves." See Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*.

(a symbol born of a hypostatic abstraction provoked by inquisitive attention recurrently focused upon a selected qualitative element of experience). Such comparison and recognition make it then possible to attribute the same symbol of lightness, recognized for its relevance, to this sheet of paper, in the very moment of its experience *hic et nunc*. The judgment thus gets formulated (even if silently), “this sheet of paper is light,” and the copula’s (possibly tacit) utterance signals that the act of representation has been accomplished, and that a unification of the manifold has just taken place.

Peirce in the “New List” says something that is exceedingly revealing. He suggests that it is the very experience of the unifying work of the interpretant, as attested in the formulation of the judgment, that brings about the vivid conception that the judgment is ours.<sup>10</sup> This is a crucial realization, for what appears here is the logical effect that produces an egoic phenomenon. This logical effect is in part the result of the actuality of the localized experience (a contingent indexicalization triggered not by such quasi-ego but by the sheet being “this” one, a demonstrative tantamount to an indexical copula), but especially the result of the consistency obtained by the interpretant in unifying a segment of experience – a consistency that is then sealed in the very utterance of the copula proper, which is not demonstrative. The verb “to be” within such a judgment expresses no more than the completion of a representation, and in this regard its role is to execute a “second intention.” The copula “is” adds nothing to the judgment’s content, since the content exclusively depends on the indexicalized subject and iconicized predicate viewed as “first intentions,” that is, viewed in their reference to the objects or qualities of experience that they stand for respectively. But subject and predicate may fulfill their first-intentional role only if both are conjoined in a representation that actualizes them, and such an actualization demands that the act of representation take notice of itself at a second-intentional level. Uttering or somehow expressing the copula fulfills this indispensable back-seat function within the judgment, a back seat from which the judgment is represented in its very accomplishment, as distinguished from the particular content that the judgment happens to express through the subject and predicate. Performing or uttering a judgment so that a segment of experience gets unified constitutes a historical event, because it always takes place somewhere at some time, in response to some other experience whose elements have already been set into signs. For Peirce, every judgment is the result of an inference, logically as well as historically. Now, a judgment’s historical inscription is nothing but its incarnate utterance or its being set into signs, and its embodiment into signs is per force localized, in situ, by virtue of its very expression. When that expression occurs, it is experienced, or felt, or apprehended as a particular focal point, the very nexus that accompanies the establishment of representational consistency. Such a focal nexus is what we call an “ego,” some sort of self, the continuous locus that witnesses and registers those sign processes that keep getting completed or conjoined not through its authorship but through its mediation – a symbolical agency that keeps growing while instituting itself, little by little, as an “autonomous” logical agent, an autonomy anchored not in itself (for that would be question-begging) but in the consistency that keeps shaping and reshaping it.

Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* provides an interestingly analogous reasoning, *mutatis mutandis*. Wittgenstein states that the “I,” the self, is that which emerges as the limit of a world of which it is not a part (WT, 5.632) and yet by which it is determined in such a way that it can perceive that world and express it as being its “own,” properly speaking (WT, 5.63) – like a submerged iceberg’s emerging peak equipped with a periscopic sensory organ that is feeling and viewing that very iceberg while being also aware of that experiencing. Wittgenstein defines the world in general as the totality of all existing relations between objects (WT, 1.1, 2, 2.01), and he defines an object as any stable and simple element capable of becoming related to something else so as to form a state of things that is representable precisely by virtue of that relation. Every set of relations possesses a deter-

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10) Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 2, 54. Also in Peirce, “On a Method of Searching for the Categories,” 524.

minate structure (WT, 2.031), and it is that structure (itself a general form) that confers to the state of things its own identity (which may be similar to others but not exactly identical). To define the subject as the “limit” of a world of particular relations is to present that subject not merely as a first-intentional epiphenomenon, but especially as a metaphenomenon – a continuously emerged second-intentional awareness so to speak, an awareness that realizes that it depends on the world while not quite being in the world. As a limit, that subject is that “just beyond” all-embracing ends through which what gets revealed, maintained, and developed is the identity of a localized world that cannot be identically replicated. The world is thus the occasion of the subject while the subject is the condition of the world – condition both in the sense of a state and in the sense of an end or telos – a telos that has of course something to do with the notion of limit as is abundantly manifest in Peirce, as we shall see further down.<sup>11</sup>

Wittgenstein also defines the self or subject as an entity that forms images: “we form images of facts” (WT, 2.1); that “we,” however, refers not so much to a metaphysical subject as to a generalized ordinary ego for the sake of stating a common inductive observation. These images depict existing states of things or facts and represent in hypothetical form the relations between things in the logical space (WT, 2.1.1). Wittgenstein suggests that it is in so far as these images are capable of “reproducing the world” (WT, 2.9) that they represent their own meaning (WT, 2.221). Now facts alone can express a meaning (WT, 3.142), and propositions alone, which allow thoughts as images to get embodied and become perceptible, have meaning (WT, 3, 3.1, 3.3). Given this terminology, and even though the *Tractatus* does not have the advantage of resorting to Peirce’s eminently precise logical distinctions between types of signs, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that that treatise offers a distinctly semiotic conception of the self. If the world is the totality of facts (WT, 1.1), if these facts all express a meaning (that is, a logically possible situation), and if meaning gets perceptibly expressed in propositions – thus formally, but as a matter of real experience – then it follows that the world cannot but end up getting expressed, which implies that it is structured like a language, and vice versa. The world calls for its own representation by virtue of the very fact that it effectively actualizes states of things. It is that actualization that determines meanings, and for that determination to take place it is imperative that objects that compose facts be put into signs (WT, 3.23): the iceberg’s emerged periscopic organ is endowed with an investigative and communicational apparatus (the organic version of a rover on Mars). The world depends on that conversion into signs or into language, a conversion that is itself part of the world since it is an ingredient of its factualization. The coming of the world into language and the coming of language into the world are thus coordinated (viz. WT, 5.64), and from the limit of their continuous experience the self emerges. That self is therefore defined, “limited,” as much by this world as by this language (WT, 5.6), both having become “its own,” not in the sense of mere belonging, but in the sense of a singular, historical, and local realization that constitutes it and only it as self.

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11) When discussing the logic of prescission, Peirce implies that if A “occasions” B, then A cannot be “prescinded” from B because occasioning B is what A is all about. But the moment B is occasioned by A, the moment B somehow sheds light on A, or contributes to making it intelligible, or becomes an explanation of it. As such B acquires a *conditioning identity* of its own that can be prescinded from A in order to become itself the object of an inquiry that will seek to determine what B itself, on its own, can occasion. If B occasions C, then B cannot be prescinded from C, but C in turn can be prescinded from B. One remarkable feature of this chain of prescissions is that it entails no repetition nor redundancy: each prescinded element (B, C, and so on) is formally utterly distinct from and irreducible to any other. Following such a gradual scheme step by step in reverse, it appears that the ego that emerges when the judgment is conceived as being “ours” is ultimately occasioned by what Peirce called Substance in 1867, the “present in general,” which is comparable to Wittgenstein’s “world.” That ego emerges in the very moment of the experience of intelligibility and feels like an “I get it!” moment of learning. The world cannot be prescinded from it, but such an ego can be prescinded from the world. It is that possibility of prescinding the ego that, if misinterpreted, leads into dualism, when one forgets that it is and remains fully occasioned and informed by the world as present in general. The reason the latter point is made here is that prescission is the most expedient way of conducting a phylogenetic analysis of the genealogy of any symbol.

There is a well-known passage in the second of Peirce's 1868 anti-Cartesian essays, where he explains that the unity of thought that is the hallmark of consciousness is nothing but the recognition of consistency: "consistency belongs to every sign, so far as it is a sign; and therefore every sign, since it signifies primarily that it is a sign, signifies its own consistency."<sup>12</sup> That recurrent word, "own," matters much: the actual experience of signifying, that is to say of uttering a proposition that involves (as Peirce will show later on), iconic, indexical, and symbolical elements, is invariably accompanied by the actual feeling of the unity itself – or of the unification achieved – a feeling which translates, in its continuous repetition, into a symbolical phenomenon called the self, the self that "owns" its utterances, because as Hegeler would say, it "is" them. The word "own"<sup>13</sup> is a quintessential agent of self-reference or reflexivity, and as such it embodies the reflexivity proper to second-intentionality. Every sign is capable of taking stock of the fact that not only does it stand for an object, but it can also stand for that very standing. Put differently, a sign takes stock of the fact that, while not being the object it stands for, it can and does stand for that object, and such standing is not inconsequential for it triggers further standing and further competence for standing: the representational, correlational, and interpretational power of signs grows with experience, without getting dispersed, for the umbilical cord that attaches them to their owning origin cannot be severed. That is what "consistency" implies minimally: some sort of continuity, at once stable and yet evolving.

Peirce adds, two paragraphs later: "the identity of a man consists in the consistency of what he does and thinks, and consistency is the intellectual character of a thing; that is, is its expressing something."<sup>14</sup> Joining this quotation to the one quoted earlier from the first Harvard Lecture allows us to say that for Peirce the very experience of being a self, of being some sort of ego, is the effect that results from the act of representation, the act of "expressing" something. The latter verb is not innocent. Young Peirce held the word "expression" to mean essentially the formulation of the conclusion of a hypothetical inference.<sup>15</sup> It is a central tenet of Peirce's theory of perception that every perceptual judgment, like that of the lightness ascribed to a particular sheet of paper, is the result of a hypothetical inference, and not from a deductive or inductive inference. Ascribing lightness to the sheet of paper is irreducibly hypothetical (and one's certainty about it is no objection: what matters is the form of the inference that retains a risky leap of heuristic faith, not the psychological feeling it adduces). Thus it appears that already in the young Peirce one finds a theory of personhood that considers it as a semiotic effect of the hypothetical work of representation accomplished by the interpretant within the ordinary course of experience.

A familiar example is the experience that we have of our own unity, an experience that urges us to say not only "I" but more completely "I say" or "I think," even though such an "I" is not the cause but the result of the actual flow of representations (at stake here is the logical "I" and not the psychological "I"). It is in the consistency, and therefore – making here a slight leap and using once more a later and loaded term – in the very continuity of the process of representation and interpretation that the odd phenomenon of personal identity manifests itself. This is what authorizes Peirce to claim that the entire phenomenal manifestation of mind

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12) Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," 241.

13) Readers are encouraged to look up the four classes of etymologies attached to the word "own" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is a most instructive exercise.

14) Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," 241.

15) See Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol.1, 86; and Robin, *Annotated Catalog*, 1105: ISP 7–8 for instance. (ISP numbering corresponds to page numbers stamped on each sheet of an electroprint copy of the manuscripts by the Institute for Studies in Pragmaticism, Texas Tech University, Lubbock).

is a sign resulting from inference,<sup>16</sup> and to write a famous footnote stating that “accordingly, just as we say that a body is in motion, and not that motion is in a body we ought to say that we are in thought, and not that thoughts are in us.”<sup>17</sup>

To refuse to say that motion is in a body is to refuse to separate a given property from the substance in which it is manifested. It is to throw suspicion over the ontological validity of the distinction, otherwise quite convenient grammatically, between subject and predicate. This distinction indeed institutes a hierarchy between concepts (motion and body, ego and thought) that tends to obliterate the fact that corporeality and motion, egoity and thought, are practically and organically inseparable. All bodies are always already in motion, even if imperceptibly so, and this motion is integral to corporeality. In the same fashion, the very activity of thinking in the broadest sense is integral to the logical ego; the representational process is what constitutes it. To put it perhaps abruptly, it is not thought that is an attribute of the ego, but the ego that is an attribute of thought: thinking tends to be “egogenic.” Wherever thinking is at work, a concrete sign will emerge; a kind of “I” which, as an overarching form or limit, will signal that a given process of thinking – that is, to a continuous train of actual symbolic expression – is achieving a singular consistency, a concrete regularity that gets noticeably manifested in specific attributes without which thought could not communicate and thus could not evoke new interpretants: so-called “personal” attributes such as a voice, a rhythm, a style, a set of habits organically grown to manifest both the witnessing and the self-witnessing of the witnessing. Those experiential attributes are themselves essential, for their congregation in any particularized individual is truly unique and confers to such a person a distinct “firstness” that is not replicable.<sup>18</sup>

Wittgenstein appears to hold a similar position when he writes that “there is no thinking, representing, subject” (WT, 5.631). To maintain the contrary would suppose it possible to isolate the subject as though it could be reduced to an object in the world, which can be done but only at the cost of losing its metaphysical dimension. But we saw earlier than Wittgenstein said that the self or subject is an entity that forms images. Is it not the case that forming images is representing? Wittgenstein’s point is that, in the same way as nothing in the experience of a visual field allows us to infer that it is being seen by an eye (since the eye cannot see itself as seeing), in the same way it is not possible to infer from the experience of thinking back to what it is that thinks. Unlike the psychological self, the metaphysical subject, in its metaphenomenality, does not think because it is the limit of “its” thought, just as much as it does not talk because it is the limit of “its” language; it is on the

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16) Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 2, 240.

17) *Ibid.*, 227 n. 4.

18) In 1897–98 Peirce argued that the ultimate foundation of any unity, including that of one’s ego, had to be and could only be, a firstness. This stems in part from the utter monadicity of firsts. Peirce said that the only general attribute that applied to all qualia was their respective inmost unity. Unity belongs to all of them, see Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 6, 225. Not only that, but he went further: all possible unities – including the unity of logical consistency that results from a continuous historical reduction of manifolds to representative copulative propositions that ensue upon comparison – all unities, as unities “originate NOT in the operations of the intellect, but in the quale-consciousness upon which the intellect operates,” *ibid.* This is one of Peirce’s most striking phenomenological conclusions. What this truth entails is that the sense of oneness, including that of our own “own,” the one we attach to our own permanently evolving consistency that despite all distinctions and discontinuities manages to remain one, that sense is a direct echo of the quale-consciousness that permeates the unique continuum of our respective individual experiences. It is not a by-product of intellectual analysis or synthesis. Our fundamental unity does not come from an indexical anchor such as a self-demonstrative pronoun “I” but originates in a manifestation that escapes comparison because it is not even a representation (and only representations can be compared). It follows that the unity of a symbol derives from the unicity of its train of unifications, a unity that can only be captured within the permanence of its very own presentness or firstness. One finds an independent echo of this fundamental idea; Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 577 (in the French original); where the author makes “affectivity” the essence of ipseity, affectivity meaning the capacity for something to feel itself *without* the mediation of any sense, thus an autonomous absolute feeling that is the essence or condition of any sensibility.

contrary thought that thinks that subject out (without thinking “of” it, but as a result of continuous thinking), language that talks it out (without talking “about” it, but as a result of continuous talking). The subject does not represent, because the very process of representation has no use of the subject. Representation occurs on its own, without external initiative, without being set in motion by a mind acting like an efficient cause, a mind that would be the master of speech or silence. Meaning occurs without being imposed any direction. Human beings qua organic subjects admittedly form images and “possess the capacity to construct languages through which every meaning can be expressed” (WT, 4.002), but remarkably that capacity does not come with any control over meaning. Meaning is independent from its linguistic clothing, but this is not to say that it is insensitive to the effects of its disguise.

Wittgenstein goes further on this point when he writes that “in logic it is not we who express what we want through signs, but ... it is rather the nature of naturally necessary signs that states itself” (WT, 6.124). There are things that “we” as non-metaphysical subjects (subjects who delude themselves on their copyrights and intellectual “property”) cannot claim to be able to express by our linguistic artifices. There are things that get expressed without awaiting our telling by virtue of their logical irrepressibility or lack of arbitrariness. And among such things is the logical form of reality. That form is not represented by any representation but only exhibited throughout the “representing” of itself while the latter is occurring. That form presences itself or reflects itself but does not represent itself (WT, 4.121). It is through such self-reflection that the propositions of language show or present the logical form without being governed by any representational agency. The logical form of reality therefore presents itself on its own. Now the metaphysical subject, as limit of its world and of its language, is form of forms (Peirce would likely say more precisely “a first of third shared by thirds”). Language shows that form but does not talk about it. Such monstration of the logical and metaphysical self is an effect of language at work, so that there is some legitimacy in saying that the *Tractatus*, too, sees the ego as a logical effect.<sup>19</sup>

Neither Peirce nor Wittgenstein reduce the ego to being a mere locus where thought or the symbolical continuum gets manifested. A fuller conception of the person cannot be restricted to a locus of semiotic expression. If there is such a locus, it is that of a living organism.<sup>20</sup> The organism itself, Peirce says, is the instrument of thought. Wittgenstein says about the same thing when he suggests that “vernacular language is a part of the human organism and is no less complicated than it” (WT, 4.002). The living organism is indispensable for the world to get factualized, for thought to get expressed and gestured (speaking not only involves gestures but is a kind of gesturing all of its own). It is itself set into signs and is setting everything else into signs; it embodies meaning and so actualizes locally the possible. The organism, in inhabiting the world, confirms and realizes it by vocalizing it and gesturing in myriad ways. It is by doing so that the organism formally becomes a person. From its varied experiences emerges a general consistency of a second-intentional nature, an “identity.” Peirce teaches us that the nature of that consistent identity is fundamentally symbolical, that its conduct exactly reproduces the logical behavior of the sign called symbol. That which in some respect appears to animate the organism (without being its moving spirit, however) is itself fully a symbol included within a network of symbols; it instantiates symbols and turns itself into a symbolizing symbol. In hearing this language, some

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19) Wittgenstein privileges “language” in a time when logocentrism became fashionable in analytical and structuralist circles. Peirce was too much of a logician to commit such a reductionistic mistake. That Wittgenstein was still able to come up with insights that manage to echo Peirce’s logical findings despite such logocentrism is noteworthy.

20) In his 2009 article, Robert (Lane, “Persons, Signs, Animals: A Peircean Account of Personhood,”) proposes and defends the thesis that it is perfectly possible to reconcile Peirce’s semiotic account of personhood with his own naturalistic account on which a person is an animal. Lane’s individualistic account diverges from Peirce in one respect: it rejects the idea that some groups of human beings count as persons. Lane also does not consider the possibility that personhood could extend to other animals than human beings, as a matter of semiotic logic that is unconcerned with species-specific replications.

critical minds could object that what we end up with is nothing but another variation of the classic body-soul dualism. To show that this is not the case, we need to step more deeply into Peirce's semiotic logic. But before we take that step a preamble is necessary.

#### 4. Personhood Metaphysics

We alluded earlier to Peirce's famous 1867 essay "On a New List of Categories." Thirty years later, in the first chapter<sup>21</sup> of the book Peirce had unsuccessfully tried to persuade Hegeler to publish, Peirce attempted to write a new version of that foundational text. Part of his intention was to take into account his recent revision of the theory of categories (begun in the mid 1880s), and also of his recent study of the association of ideas, in which he had identified the principal law of mental operation (notably in his 1892 article "The Law of Mind"<sup>22</sup>). In this first chapter, written in 1894, Peirce describes the association of ideas in terms of a process of unification of the sensory manifold (as in 1867), a process that consists both in the blending of ideas and in their spreading over and into one another. One novelty in his new approach was to distinguish three dimensions within the manifold of sense, each corresponding to one of the three categories called firstness, secondness, and thirdness. First there is the manifold of qualities of feeling, which are mere possibilities of sensation, and Peirce suspects that originally they were vastly more numerous than in present times. In the second place there is the manifold of sensory stimulations, that is, the manifold of actual sensations. And thirdly, and this is the one in which we are interested, the manifold of sense is also that of consciousnesses. Peirce remarks that these consciousnesses have today reached a stage where they appear to be segregated into distinct consciousnesses. Such a claim implies the evolutionary hypothesis that there used to be a time when consciousnesses were a lot less separated – levels of consciousness much more vague and diffuse, much less "egoical" (perhaps a communal kind of consciousness such as displayed in a beehive, an ant colony, a school of fish). But even today, Peirce insists, the separation into discrete consciousnesses is not fully achieved, far from it, so much so that no one has good ground to boast about their individual differentiation: any sort of absolute "self-consciousness" may be a pipe dream. The following passage, though somewhat psychologizing, is remarkably suggestive.

Personality, on both sides, that of the unification of all of a body's experiences, and that of the isolation of different persons, is much exaggerated in our natural ways of thinking, – ways that tend to puff up the person, and make him think himself far more real than he veritably is. A person is, in truth, like a cluster of stars, which appears to be one star when viewed with the naked eye, but which scanned with the telescope of scientific psychology is found on the one hand, to be multiple within itself, and on the other hand to have no absolute demarcation from a neighboring condensation.<sup>23</sup>

As far as the unity of a person is concerned, therefore, Peirce gives us a double warning. The experience of personhood is limited neither to a given body nor to a particular soul but transcends both. Only a superficial and quite ordinary examination could lead one to conceive the person as a clearly denumerable singular entity. Centuries of habits essentially linguistic have reinforced that naturally convenient conviction. There is no need

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21) Peirce, "Division I. Formal Study of General Logic. Chapter I. The Categories," 403.

22) Originally published in *The Monist* 2 (July 1892): 533–59; Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, vol. 1, 312–33; and Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 88, 135–57. EP followed by a number refers to one of the two volumes of *The Essential Peirce*.

23) Robin, *Annotated Catalog*, 403: ISP 2–3.

to deny that every one of us “occupies” just one organism, one body, no matter whether we are schizophrenic or even polyphrenic. But the unicity of the organism entails little about the symbolization it sustains and hosts. It is easy to count bodies one by one, but that ease entails nothing regarding the real metaphysics at work. There is here an unwarranted assumption that had better be avoided, born from the ordinary confusion of self-identity with self-identicalness (or symbolic unity with numeric unity).<sup>24</sup>

For Peirce as for Shakespeare, for us to persist in believing in our unity is to remain ignorant of what we are too assured, “our glassy essence,” an essence whose reflection gets dispersed in the mirror that shatters as soon as looked into. Any conception of personal identity that would reduce us to a box of flesh and blood is purely barbarian, says Peirce, who in one place (the eleventh Lowell Lecture of 1866), using that same word, exclaims how “barbarian” and miserably material is the “notion according to which a man cannot be in two places at once; as though he were a thing!”<sup>25</sup> Nominalistic spirits might get scandalized upon hearing this. That a person is a countable thing is an elementary commonsensical assumption that grounds the work of every administration in the world. Everyone must be indexicalizable through a unique alphanumeric identifier assigned and inscribed within a standard register. If we were absurdly ubiquitous, would that not undermine every theory of personal identity, besides the functioning of every society? May the nominalists relax: administrative reductionism is impervious to sound metaphysics. The groundless nominalistic assumption that a person is a singular human being is one of the most successful errors of all times, and it just happens that its repudiation may not be necessary or even wise within the realm of quotidian practicalities.<sup>26</sup> Now, as Peirce makes it clear in his 1905 article “What Pragmatism Is,”<sup>27</sup> it is important that the notion of person be not reduced to that of an individual (EP2, 338) – to the extent of a nominalistic understanding of individuality that mixes it with singularity, for there is another extent according to which individuals are actually also general: on the one hand it is true that only individuals exist (EP2, 341–42), but on the other hand, the reality entailed in a “person” cannot be restricted to mere existence, for mere existence by itself is unintelligible while personhood entails an agency of intelligibility. In order to understand this, we need to better understand the stuff our glassy essence is made on, and for this we need to return to the theory of signs. Why? Because the main key to the question lies in a well-known Peircean analogy, the analogy between a person and a word.

## 5. Prosopogenic Semiotics: How Indetermination Works Itself Out

Peirce always believed in the force of that analogy, which first appeared in 1866 in the last Lowell Lecture,<sup>28</sup> and which will be preserved until the last writings. In Peirce’s semiotic terminology, words are a type of symbol.

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24) That several persons emerge from a “same” organism happens not infrequently, though it could plausibly be rendered in terms of one person endowed with more than one personality or manner of self-impersonation. A good example is Fernando Pessoa, the first of several poets equally talented that manifested themselves within the same organism, to the infinite though tolerant surprise of its first or principal inhabitant. In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein claims that it matters little whether we are dealing here with four different persons, or just one that happens to be merely changing: “We can say whichever we like. We are not forced to talk of a double [or multiple] personality,” see Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 62. Wittgenstein devotes many pages at the end of the *Blue Book* unraveling the linguistic habits and conventions regarding the “I,” its proper nouns, and its embodiments. He does the same of course in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, for example in I.404–18; not without distress – a distress due, perhaps, to the difficulty of disentangling the indexical from the symbolical, to put it in Peircean terms.

25) Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 1, 498.

26) See Stango, “I Who?: A New Look at Peirce’s Theory of Indexical Self-Reference,” 221–22.

27) First published in *The Monist* 15 (April 1905): 161–81. Reprinted in EP2, 331–45.

28) Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, 494–98.

We are going to see that the ground of the analogy between person and symbol rests on the fact that the semi-otic theory of symbol amounts to what we could call a logic of the quasi-person. Readers familiar with the later writings will have guessed that this expression comes from what Peirce will call the “quasi-mind,”<sup>29</sup> which is a way of designating any logical agent capable of symbolization and interpretation.

Let us begin by recalling a few essential features of Peirce’s conception of a symbol. A symbol is of course a type of sign, and as such it is capable of standing for some object in such a way that this standing-for can be recognized by another representational agent, called the interpretant, in which this symbol produces a modification formally related to the represented object. The triadic relation that constitutes the signhood of any sign can be described or formulated in many ways, and the latter is but an instance of it. The power of a sign to refer to an object for an interpretant has three possible origins – three grounds, as Peirce says. Either that power belongs to the sign itself, which is possible only if the sign possesses a form or a potential that is also manifested in the object – in which case the sign is iconic.<sup>30</sup> Or the sign’s power comes from the object itself, due to the fact that something in the object occasions the sign to react to it – in which case we know we are dealing with an indexical sign. Or this power is conferred upon the sign by the representational agent, or interpretant, that the latter is soliciting – in which case only we are dealing with a symbol. This is well known, since it is part of the ABC’s of Peircean semiotics, but we need to appreciate what makes it so significant.

Of all signs, the symbol is the only kind whose power of referring to an object is not automatic but depends principally on its being recognized by something else which, in that capacity, must itself possess the complete structure of a symbol. To understand this, let us remember that symbols are signs in part because their mode of being is neither possible nor actual or existent, but general (all symbols are “legisigns” in Peirce’s nomenclature). Something is general if certain states of things or events comply with the prescription they stand for. Whatever complies with a given generality is an expressed “replica” of it. A symbol, therefore, has no reason of being unless it can be realized in actual “replicas.” For example, the substantive “person” has been written in this paper twenty times already, and each occurrence is a particular symbolical individuation – a replica – of the same general symbol which the word “person” is, independently of its actualizations. Any replica of a symbol, therefore, even before it refers to a given object, first refers to the general form that it embodies. That general form carries itself a general meaning, that of its reference to its immediate interpretant, which is everything that the word “person” is capable of evoking prior to, or at the moment of, any particular utterance. That evocative capacity depends entirely on the interpretant and its competence, and is partly a function of the richness of what Peirce calls its collateral experience.<sup>31</sup> Put briefly, collateral experience is the sum total of all habits of recognition, comparison, and interpretation, which the representational agent or interpretant has accumulated throughout its history, that is, throughout its encounters or interactions with the diverse replicas of a given symbol. This baggage is likely to grow and get weightier and heavier with each new encounter and is itself of a general nature. Abstracted from its replicas, any symbol has thus the nature of a law. The law that constitutes a symbol is a principle that governs or determines the process of association of general instantiations that are in agreement with the principle itself. This principle will thus prevent one’s confusing a “person” with a “stone,” but will allow for instance all speculations, philosophical and otherwise, about the general reality that the

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29) See Peirce, “The Basis of Pragmaticism in the Normative Sciences”; see especially the pages published in EP2: 389, 391–92. See also EP2: 544 n. 22 and 545 n. 25.

30) Iconicity does not require “resemblance.” Peirce’s best definitions of iconicity avoid using the latter question-begging word (for resemblance is an experiential effect that accompanies some iconic signs without being essential to them). The only condition is that there be within a sign some potential, some form of which is also found in or suggested by the object.

31) On Peirce’s notion of collateral experience, see EP2: 404–409, (1907) and 493–95, (1909).

concept “person” may evoke, even if this means that the principle itself undergoes modifications as interpretation continues to grow, as when some new discovery is made about its object or a new linguistic use sets in.

We may note in passing that the later Wittgenstein offered suggestions that appear to be congruent with the idea just developed. The multiform notion of “language games” implies that no player controls or edicts the rules that define the game. Rules develop and change throughout the game’s history, at all levels, and often owing to localized, if not even individual, impulses – but it would be meaningless, and without any practical advantage, to attribute them at any moment to a particular player, even if that was legitimate. In other words, but this will remain an undeveloped suggestion at this stage, it might be interesting to compare at least certain descriptions that Wittgenstein gives of language game operations with those Peirce gives of the work performed by symbolical signs, especially when one pays attention to the exact nature of the lawmaking power of such “legisigns.”

If every symbol is the formulation of a rule (most broadly understood) that defines the general conditions presiding over the replicating associations or expressions of ideas solicited by the reality the symbol refers to, the symbol’s mission is akin to the continuous institution of what Peirce called in his first writings, as explained earlier, the unity of consistency: the unity that stems from the representational process in which Peirce saw the manifestation of the phenomenon of personal identity. What now appears more clearly is that, in so far as personhood is this aspect according to which an organism behaves as a symbol, in so far the notion of person is formally equivalent to that of a rule as has just been defined. There is nothing categorical about such a law. On the contrary, it is entirely conditional and it includes two characters that deserve attention. On the one hand, it expresses a would be, that is, an indeterminate project awaiting determination. On the other hand, it formulates what Peirce does not hesitate to call a “final cause,” in homage to Aristotle.

Let us begin with indetermination. Every symbol is naturally indeterminate – but in what sense? In one of the texts that share the title “The Basis of Pragmaticism,” Peirce associates indetermination with the notion of “latitude of interpretation.”<sup>32</sup> Some symbols are more open than others to interpretation, and some others are almost completely closed to it. Consider for instance the sequence of the two following statements, “all surrealist painters are mortal. René Magritte is a surrealist painter.” This sequence is not only a congeries of sub-symbols but is also itself, as a whole, a symbol: the conjunction of the two premises, the form of which Peirce sometimes calls a “copulative proposition.” Such a symbol, as formulated, is only open to extremely narrow interpretation, as is typical of deductive syllogisms. The conclusion, or interpretant proposition that seals the coupling of the two propositions by becoming the fruit of their union, has no freedom whatsoever as far as deciding how to set itself into signs. Consider now this other sequence, “only famous painters attract huge crowds. René Magritte is a surrealist painter.” The interpretation that is here possible, that is, the drawing of the conclusion, is not as automatic as before, and does not go without thinking, since the conclusion that some might be tempted to draw does not necessarily follow from it. It is very likely that a Magritte exhibition would attract a huge crowd, but since the second proposition says nothing about his fame, the interpretant proposition that would conclude that he is very popular will need to recognize the hypothetical leap or the speculative character of its conclusion.

Peirce distinguishes between two fundamental types of indetermination, both of which are symbolical features, that is, characters that belong to every symbol sign. The first is that of generality, and the second that of vagueness. If one says, “there are many surrealist painters who are ignored by the public,” the proposition is general in that it applies to an indefinite collection of painters. It leaves the interpretant free to narrow down this collection by determining more precisely who might be its members. If one says instead, “I know

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32) See EP2: 392–94, (1906).

a surrealist painter who is definitely famous,” the proposition is vague since the utterer does not provide the exact name of the person they have in mind, and it is not up to the interpretant of this proposition to decide who it is that is being referred to. Symbols are thus capable of a double indetermination, one general, which leaves a latitude of interpretation to the interpretant, and the other vague, which takes stock of the latitude of symbolization retained within the symbol’s own compass. When Wittgenstein contends that a conception like that of “game” has blurred edges, and that this blurriness offers many advantages, he is signaling that vagueness is irreducible and that it is a natural logical property of conceptions that should not be seen as a flaw but as a fecund openness to inquiry.<sup>33</sup> Symbols are blurred, and that blurriness is essential for language games to be fertile and multiply.

Generality and vagueness have something in common: both are distinct types of indetermination (other types include potentiality, chance, even “longitude”) (EP2: 118). Key to understanding any sort of indetermination is the realization that by definition indetermination is not static but dynamic. Whatever is genuinely indeterminate is never permanently so because indeterminacy is an active urge toward determination. As Peirce put it in 1897,<sup>34</sup> “the logic of freedom, or potentiality, is that it shall annul itself. For if it does not annul itself, it remains a completely idle and do-nothing potentiality; and a completely idle potentiality is annulled by its complete idleness.” The tendency to cancel itself is the very nature of indetermination, otherwise it would not properly be indeterminate but “adeterminate,” and the “adeterminate” falls outside the realm of intelligibility and reality. How distinct types of indeterminations cancel themselves varies according to their metaphysical modalities. Vagueness does not cancel itself in the same way a potentiality does or a generality does.

#### (a) Generality

As to generality, let us remember that Peirce distinguished two kinds:<sup>35</sup> the first kind is “the permanent or eternal (for permanence is a species of generality),” and the second kind is “the conditional (which equally involves generality).” Generality of the first kind is “of that negative sort which belongs to the merely potential, as such, and this is peculiar to the category of quality.” Generality of the second kind is “of that positive kind which belongs to conditional necessity, and this is peculiar to the category of law.” The first kind is associated with the category of quality, and thus the category of firstness. It cancels itself merely by actuating itself, and thus by emerging within an existent, for the potency of qualities resides in their realizability or capacity to transition from the modality of the possible to the modality of the existent. The second kind is associated with the category of law or thirdness. It cancels itself by manifesting itself in replicas that seek to apply it through instantiations within the existent. What does this have to do with personhood? Everything when one comes to realize that personhood, too, is not static but dynamic. Nobody gets born, let alone conceived, as a full-blown person. Personhood is continuous work in progress, a condition of growth and becoming. From this standpoint, personhood is better understood in terms of prosopogenesis. From Peirce’s standpoint that would then be equivalent, when generalized, to a form of symbologenesi: a processual generation of symbols. “Symbols

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33) Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I.71 (see also I.88). Note that the illustration (the injunction “Stand over there, more or less”) that Wittgenstein gives following his remark about a concept’s blurred edges is both vague – since the utterer does not find it useful to provide the exact position he might have had in mind (if we suppose he had one, otherwise the injunction is actually not vague) – and general, since it concedes a “latitude of interpretation” to the person addressed, who is free to decide the exact location of the “there” where he will stand within the limits of the “more or less” he has been indicated.

34) Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 6, 219.

35) *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 427.

grow,” Peirce wrote in early 1894, “it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. *Omne symbolum de simbolo*” (EP2, 10).

Personhood is subject to a double indetermination, one of the general kind, which appears to us when through the telescope we observe its internal multiplicity while also witnessing how it manages to hold that multiplicity together, and the other of the vague kind, when the same telescope makes us realize its lack of absolute demarcation with neighboring persons.

There are two aspects to the general indetermination associated with personhood, and this becomes apparent when thinking about the sort of determination that generality as indetermination urges upon the person-in-becoming. It is useful to refer once again to the “New List of Categories” of 1867, the text that describes the genealogy of “judgment ownership” as it were. The “New List” describes, in part, how one passes from the indeterminately general manifestation of the manifold of sensory impressions that Peirce catches in the phrase “present in general,”<sup>36</sup> to its unifying determination expressed in a judgment that gets crowned through the ultimate mark of symbolization provided by the representational copula Being, whose role is at once – first, and second – intentional. Personification or prosopogenesis can be similarly accounted for as a special case of continuously developing representational and interpretational agency. Whatever grows more and more into a person grapples with its own permanence in the form of an oddly local yet indeterminate reservoir of possibilities – Peirce called it “it” to mark its status as that which is in need of predicative connotation (or actuation of selected possibilities), an “it” whose only determination is denotative: an unnamed subject calling for discovery through experience and inquiry. That permanent proximate indeterminacy appears to be “one to the naked eye,” but that unity is not a result of unification but merely a holistic connexity in need of telescopic analysis. There is certainly something unique to it, a permanent unity capable of persisting a lifetime, the irreducible primordial firstness that is the unique birth mark of a being destined for personalization. Such a proximate indeterminate presencing is indeed general, but it is the generality of a negative kind, the generality attached to potentiality. Key to that reservoir of potentiality is that determinability, actualizability, and generalizability form the core of its potency. That is the reason why that “it” is no mere index. It is an index since it is denotative, but what that index stands for is precisely its inner determinability and symbolizability. Any “it” is destined to be talked about, in lay terms. Whatever is “it” triggers the chain of its symbolical actuation. A baby’s first breathing cry is one such trigger, both for the baby as person-in-becoming and for everyone else around who are welcoming the infant within a vast symbolical network that the baby will tap into with enormous energy.

Personhood as process of personalization or prosopogenesis is the continual discovery of what is, and what is not, within one’s reservoir of potentialities. The process is at once hypothetical and inductive, extraordinarily fallible and precarious: the passage from substance to being, from the “who one might be” (one’s irreducible itness or, better, ipseity, when the “it” is specific to the process of becoming a self),<sup>37</sup> to the “who one is turning into,” entails vast amounts of interpretation. The process takes countless experiments, some more successful and enduring than others, and each one leading to the acquisition and nurturing of distinct sets of dispositions, habits, and competences, adjusted to distinct activities, communities, or environments. To each set may well correspond distinct expressions of the person that telescopic observers might discriminate into

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36) Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 2, 49.

37) Michel Henry grounds personhood on the idea of a living affective ipseity that necessarily adheres to itself without deliberation: it coincides with itself “passively.” As Frédéric Seyler explains, ipseity for Henry is inherent to life, begins with it, and maintains itself as long as it lasts. Ipseity thus “ensures the continuity of selfhood through the changes that characterize individual history: whatever happens to us, it is always to us that it happens; whatever we do, it is always done by us, that is, by ourselves as living ipseity. Ipseity therefore singularizes each experience, making it, irreducibly, our experience,” see Seyler, “Personal Identity,” 515. With Peirce, however, such a phenomenological account of ipseity is not sufficient; it needs a semiotic and relational-logical account.

variations of personalities. Thus most persons would evolve throughout their history a “multiplicity” of ways of being (sometimes multiple more or less full-blown personalities), yet gathered of course within a numerically identical organism, but more fundamentally within the compass of a comprehensive symbol that still manages to recognize itself across its diverse inner replicas. Indeed, it follows that if the initial ipseity starts from a unique reservoir of potentials, the translational and interpretational history that will consequently evolve will in turn reflect a multiplicity of realized potentials, each the effect of a more or less distinct symbolizing history.

Each such generation of symbols is at its core process of interpretance, a process that works through correlation, contrast, comparison, recognition, attribution, expression of hypotheses, replication, experimentation, and so on, within the highly symbolized environment of a community, a society, a whole culture. Personhood grows one experientially ampliative inference at a time, one tentative conclusion at a time, expressed through an army of symbolic terms, of propositional concatenations (tacit or not), and of formulated beliefs all of which get accompanied by their experience of being “one’s own.” So the person grows, continuously emerging above the iceberg that feeds it. Continued interpretance both enriches and challenges the targeted unity of consistency, always threatened by inconsistency. Interpretance is recurrent inquiry, and inquiry comes with the sustained assessment of choices and decisions as opportunities come and go.

#### (b) Vagueness

The vague indetermination of a person refers to its external manifold. It refers to the fact that a person, as a symbolizing agent, cannot be isolated from other neighboring symbolizing agents with which it is constantly interacting. Saturated as we are each of us with the expression of other people, and inversely, it is impossible to distinguish precisely, that is to say absolutely, where lies the individual anchorage of some given utterance or initiative. It behooves the symbolizing agent to create the necessary contrasts so that a personal style, a collection of habits endowed with a recognizable pattern, allow it to detach itself progressively from neighboring “stars,” to any possible extent. One hallmark of vagueness, besides its capacity to restrain interpretation, is that the principle of contradiction does not apply within it. Vagueness’s indetermination does not allow straightforward identification and recognition, it blurs the work of correlation and comparison, because anything that appears within its compass can be at once a dog and a cat, Charles Peirce and Benjamin Peirce, true and false. Like any kind of sign, symbols need to appear – but they can appear only through instantiating replicas that may to some extent miss their mark: symbols can be betrayed by their own replicas, and replicas are bound to fail to some extent in their efforts to comply with the rule that binds them. To that extent, symbols are clothed in a veil of vagueness. Vagueness can cancel itself by provoking ampliative inquiry, the exploration of the borderland that manifests its ambiguities and equivocalities. Ampliative inferences increase the connotative or denotative power of symbols and therefore affect their informative potential. Vagueness may thus decrease incrementally though not absolutely. Personhood as a process of symbolization is itself affected by vagueness, in part because what confers symbolicity to any symbol is the chain of interpretation it solicits, but vagueness puts a brake on that solicitation. Hence a person is perpetually in-becoming, perpetually tentative and incomplete, but also perpetually entangled in a complex network shared with multiple other parties themselves entangled. Symbols as legisigns transcend their multiple imperfect replicas while also unifying them all through their common compliance. Symbols are to their replicas like an electromagnetic field that causes charges and currents to move while also being affected by them – for symbols grow and thus learn lessons from their replications. And so it does with persons and the communities and societies they are embedded in. They share symbols, symbols are such that they cannot be owned or monopolized. Hence the difficulty that telescopic observation incurs when trying to discriminate whom from whom.

It turns out that both indeterminations, that of the vague and that of the general, work together to define the specific mission of the symbol qua sign: the mission to give birth tirelessly to new interpretant symbols that keep decreasing the initial indetermination so as to simultaneously increase the symbol's own identity – or own identities, as the case may be.

## 6. Teleological Personhood

The suggestion of a symbolical “mission” evokes another essential character of the symbol taken as a governing rule or law, that of its teleological dimension.<sup>38</sup> Given that every symbol is essentially preoccupied with its own development into new interpretant symbols, every symbol is directed toward the future, not the indicative future, but the conditional future. Every symbol in that sense is a program, that is, a general and vague representation of what could happen in the future given certain conditions that it behooves that symbol to spell out. It is in the nature of a program to predict an outcome in the form of a general result, without however describing precisely either the actual turn of intermediary events leading to the production of the outcome, or the detail of the individual outcome itself. That rules not fully determinate are elastic is an idea also found in Wittgenstein, he who recognizes the non-deterministic and yet teleological character of rules operating within language games. Those rules, he says, are like sign posts the constraint of which, though real, remains relative. They indicate the direction one should follow toward some destination, sometime unambiguously but often equivocally (leaving room for variable interpretation and implementation), and are justified “if, within normal circumstances, they fulfill their end (Zweck).”<sup>39</sup> Here appears the idea of purpose as a character inseparable from the notion of a rule, a kind of purpose that points to nothing other than a general result that in average tends to get actually achieved in ordinary circumstances.

Let us imagine that the symbol consists of a set of instructions, like the precise instructions Peirce wrote down for the benefit of his Coast and Geodetic Survey assistants so that they would know how to set up and swing the geodetic pendulum and measure its oscillations and the decrement of its arc.<sup>40</sup> This set of instructions contains a list of instruments, some very precise (“2 Peirce pendulums,” of which only four existed); others more generic (“1 oil can with pump,” “1 step ladder”); and a series of more or less vague, more or less general recommendations to be followed sequentially and to be adapted to varying circumstances: “the pendulum should first be compared in Washington, by means of the vertical comparator, a metre pendulum with Metre B, and the Yard pendulum with Yard and Metre Bar No. 1. The knife-edges should first be carefully scrutinized; but they should not be removed unnecessarily” (etc.). Notice how, on the one hand, these instructions contain strong indexical signs (“Metre Bar No. 1,” which refers to a unique object serving as a standard), and how, on the other hand, despite all the precision wanted, these instructions acknowledge that leeway must be granted to the operator's own judgment (“should be,” “should not be unnecessarily”). The actual implementation of these specialized instructions may vary infinitely, but if circumstances are favorable (say the pendulum operator is well trained and competent, and no blizzard impedes the observations), any implementation will lead to the production of an outcome, such as a scientific report detailing each swinging and affixing a series of carefully measured numbers to each, suitably

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38) On Peirce's conception of final causation and teleology, see especially Hulswit, *From Cause to Causation*. See also Short, *Peirce's Theory of Signs*, chapt. 4; as well as Wang, “Rethinking the Validity.”

39) Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, I.85 and I.87; see also I.198.

40) This set of instructions is found on two large typed sheets in Robin, *Annotated Catalog*, 1096: ISP 4–5 (1889). Published in Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 6, 476–78.

reduced to take into account various sources of errors, like fluctuating temperature or air pressure. No series of experiments by any number of operators applying the same set of instructions will ever yield an identical final report. Some reports will end up being more rigorous than others, some more error-free than others. But all will have been produced through individual observance of the same set of instructions and will thus share a family resemblance. It is in this sense that the set of instructions can be said to act as a final cause, exactly, and in this sense that Peirce affirms that a symbol can be the cause, the final cause, of real individual events.<sup>41</sup>

The concept of personhood is naturally open to such a teleological perspective – as a program turned toward the conditional future, a hypothesis in the form of a hypostasis, which seeks to learn itself in learning to read signs, signs which it will have itself solicited while working out its own consistency by detecting and eliminating contradictions, building its identity through trials and errors, adopting and revising habits. As Peirce explains in his landmark paper “The Law of Mind,” what turns anything – ourselves for instance, into a person – what confers on it the character of a person, is a “general and living idea” that has the power to determine the course of our future actions to a degree that we cannot foresee or imagine, although it is very real.<sup>42</sup>

## 7. Conclusion: Personhood beyond the individual and beyond the human

It thus appears that Peirce’s analysis of symbols explains the nature, even the experiencing, of that special unity we find so natural to attach to the idea of person. Against reductionist nominalism, it supports the realist contention that unity is not one that individuation generates but one that at once grounds (as first) and presides (as third) over it. In addition, since every symbol lives and finds its nourishment in its own flesh-and-blood replicas (logical or metaphysical) whose plausible becoming it structures in a permanent negotiation with other symbols, symbols need be somehow “sensitive” to their instantiations by adjusting and correcting themselves in the face of changing circumstances, for symbols may perish. As a conditional law, every symbol governs most really the concrete course of experience – otherwise symbols would lose touch with their core purpose, grow silent, and fade away. Peirce’s realism is such that the idleness of genuine symbols (those whose thirdness is real) is inconceivable. Wittgenstein on that count, and this is an important difference, would find many reasons to doubt it.

At the end of another landmark text titled “Man’s Glassy Essence,” Peirce reaches the conclusion that not only a person is a symbol, but much more generally every symbol, every general idea, shares the living and unified feeling of a person.<sup>43</sup> Attentive observation will reveal that wherever two or three are gathered in the name of one same idea, that idea will be in their midst, with the same formal influence as an active and inspiring person. Those of us who are happy to live in love know well that a couple has its reasons that govern and transcend each of the two partners. For Peirce the same is the case with every social group, as large as

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41) See Peirce, “New Elements.” Note that in the *Philosophical Investigations* (I. 197–240) Wittgenstein devotes several central pages to the question of what it means to put into practice a set of instructions, or to obey a rule, and to the question of determining when a rule has been applied and obeyed. He hesitates to see in the practical activity that applies a rule an interpretation of that rule (contrary to Peirce who labels it an “energetic interpretant”) and prefers to reserve the term “interpretation” to the substitution of one expression of that rule by another (I.201). There are numerous passages where Wittgenstein’s nominalism prevents him (some would say “save him”) from considering hypotheses whose formulation would be no embarrassment to Peirce’s realism.

42) See EP1: 331; and Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 8, 154–55.

43) EP1: 350; and Peirce, *Chronological Edition*, vol. 8, 182. “Man’s Glassy Essence” was first published in *The Monist* 3 (October 1892): 1–22.

it can be, if it is animated by a common idea, the idea that gives that social group an identity that none of its members can selfishly monopolize, the idea that for the logician of signs is a quasi-person.<sup>44</sup>

One other consequence of Peirce's symbolical conception of a person cannot be ignored though this article will not broach it despite its significance: that conception is by no means, given its logical and semi-otic origin, confined to human beings, individually or collectively. It is to be expected, from both an evolutionary and synechistic point of view, that no regularities are unique or command unique implementations. Anything alive that is capable of symbolization in any guise (including the many non-linguistic guises) will display genuine personhood and the ability to interact personably with other persons: hence the universal symbolical welcome given to family pets, at once themselves symbolized and symbolizing. All it takes for signs to be symbols is to be genuine thirds ("legisigns") so recognized and interacted as such by other interpreting thirds. A herd of elephants, a pack of wolves, and a colony of ants will display modalities of personhood, as would suggest their inner hierarchies and their methods of "interpersonal" messaging or communication. To be a human person, therefore, is to be a person in a human fashion. It is also to be capable of sensing similar forms in other species, and vice versa. We cannot personalize our dog without being personalized by that dog in return. That is how symbols work.

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44) Robert Lane, who rejects the possibility of group consciousness by countering it with an account that reduces such supposed phenomena to the simultaneous conception or experience of some idea by multiple discrete individuals, criticizes Peirce's stance as expressed in "Man's Glassy Essence" in his 2009 essay 13–16. The present paper has sought to avoid, not completely but as far as it could, the philosophy-of-mind discussion related to consciousness and self-consciousness to avoid the effects of a psychologistic approach that is likely to beg the question through under-examined assumptions.

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