

## The symbolic self

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**Abstract:** *Most views of personal identity are based upon either psychological or materialistic principles. This paper approaches the conception of the self from the standpoint that the principles of signification/representation are primary to any consciousness or recognition of the self, and tries to unveil some key consequences concerning the self through an application of Peirce's Semiotic to the conception of the Self and by drawing on many novel insights Charles Peirce had on the issue of personal identity.*

**Keywords:** *Personal identity. Semiotics. Indeterminacy. Purpose.*

### O Eu simbólico

**Resumo\*:** A maior parte das concepções sobre a identidade pessoal baseia-se em princípios psicológicos ou materialistas. Este ensaio aborda a concepção do eu a partir do ponto de vista que os princípios de representação/significação são anteriores a qualquer consciência ou reconhecimento do eu, e tenta desvelar algumas conseqüências chave no que diz respeito a isto por meio da aplicação da Semiótica de Peirce à concepção do Eu, apoiando-se também em muitas das últimas visões do filósofo quanto ao tema da identidade pessoal.

**Palavras-chave:** Identidade pessoal. Semiótica. Indeterminidade. Propósito.

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This paper will attempt to apply Peirce's Semiotics to the conception of the Self.<sup>1</sup> Such a paper is hardly the first of its kind, and if it were completely new, it could hardly fail to prove completely false (CP 5.11, 1.368): it has been quite deftly interpreted by a number of learned scholars. Kenneth Ketner (1981) was one of the first to address the issue, and noted its power over the Cartesian and Kantian views. Patricia Muoio (1984) has addressed the topic from Peirce's theory of the categories, while Vincent Colapietro (1989) has given the most systematic, developmental, and comprehensive account of Peirce's view of self. Finally, André De Tienne (1997, 2002) has addressed the topic from the standpoint of its semiotic unity over transcendental unity, and has written an excellent paper that focuses on the notion of semiotic personhood over any particular mode of instantiation of it. While the above list is not fully inclusive, this paper is a purpose and seeks to grow only out of these and Peirce's original representation of his thought. This paper fails in many respects, e.g. it does not show the development of his theory, but attempts to combine Peirce's early unification of the sense manifold found in the "New List" and cosmological views found in the 1904 "New Elements" with his Semiotics upon the conception of the self. A number of topics must be ignored for the sake of brevity, as such, this representation of Peirce's position is far from complete.

The importance of "On a New List of Categories" cannot be undervalued.<sup>2</sup> It was the product of three years of devoted effort and from Peirce's point of view "perhaps the least unsatisfactory, from a logical point of view, that I ever succeeded in producing" (W2:502). He regards it as one of his strongest philosophical works, and in

his Logic Notebook remarks that his theory of the categories is the gift he makes to the world: “That is my child. In it I shall live when oblivion has me – my body” (W2:502, W2:1). The expression, while seemingly figurative, hints at a grand reconfiguration of the conception of self that makes viable Peirce’s association of his self with his theory of the categories. It is within this text where Peirce presents a clear and directed presentation of his categories, i.e. he gives for the first time a systematic account of his theory of the categories, and in so doing shows how the sense-manifold manifold can be unified.

Peirce contends that unification of the sense-manifold is achieved neither by a transcendent external power nor a psychological source, but is found in the internal power that is present in representation itself. For Peirce, our capacity to understand our own self is not powered by own personal will, but is instead powered by the already established representation of our identity. Furthermore, it is not our *consciousness* of a particular representation that powers a unity of consistency; instead, consciousness itself of a representation only allows for the *recognition* that unity has occurred. Peirce understood as early as 1865 in his first Harvard lecture that the power to unify is not driven by a particular consciousness, but consciousness of a representation allows for the *recognition* that representation has occurred. In this first lecture Peirce argued for a nonpsychological definition of logic, one in which “the logical form is already realized in the symbol itself” (W1:166). If I tell you that “every spider is black”, in uttering this judgment which I take to be true of every spider, it is not necessary for a transcendental ego to account for the unification of this judgment; instead, the power of unification stems from the already present representation. The spider (object), which is the subject, and evilness (quality), the predicate, are unified in a representation, which in English is signified by the copula.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, in attempting to give our own Self a unity of consistency, the conception of a transcendental subject is not only ad hoc, it is superfluous, and our psychological consciousness fulfils the function of recognition of a self that is already represented. So while every thought may have a psychological character to it, this character is not the essential character for rendering our sense-impressions coherent or making them unified. The essential character for Peirce inheres in the symbol itself.

Representation involves the introduction of a consistency. A piece of paper or a chair has the potentiality of being unified so long as it is *capable* of a representational consistency. There are a number of phenomena of the sense-manifold that escape our representation, for example distant stars or minute particles, but so long as these objects are capable of being stood for, i.e. so long as they have the capacity for representation, they are capable of being unified consistently. Peirce himself is found of illustrating this point with following example: take a diamond that had never undergone any pressure, and suppose that it had been consumed by fire, was that diamond *really* hard (EP2:356)? The answer for Peirce is yes, because the meaning of hardness consists not in the sensible result that actually took place, but the sensible result that would have ensued if there had been pressure on the diamond. The introduction of a unity of consistency is found in the diamond’s capacity for being represented in a certain respect. If the diamond was not capable of being represented as being hard, it would fail to be a diamond at all.

However, Peirce’s method of unifying the sense-manifold involves not only representation, but two other necessarily presupposed categories. One of the categories presupposed by reference to an interpretant (representation) is that of reference to a

ground or quality, or as Peirce later put it, a First. Another category presupposed by reference to an interpretant is that of reference to a correlate, later called a Second.

While unification is complete when there is reference to an interpretant, which unites the manifold directly, also tied to substance is the presupposition that there is something which is represented, i.e. reference to a co-relation, and with this reference to something actual there is the necessary presupposed something possible. No unity of consistency is gained from reference to mere possibility for it only serves as a reference to a ground or quality. It is only the conception of pure abstraction from representation, and being always the nature of something mediate, it escapes the full capacity of representation for it is possibility itself. Furthermore, no unity of consistency is gained from the second conception which is reference to a correlate for there fails to be any connection between that which is possible and that which is actual. As mentioned, unity of the manifold is gained by the third conception, that of reference to the interpretant, whose essential power is that of *comparison*.

Moving on, Peirce writes in “On a New List of Categories”:

But since there is a manifold of impressions, we have a feeling of complication or confusion which leads us to differentiate this impression from that, and then having been differentiated, they require to be brought to unity. Now they are not brought to unity until we conceive them together as being *ours*, that is, until we refer them to a conception as their interpretant (EP1:6)

In order for anything to be brought to unity, it must have at least the capacity to be brought to unity in some manner. Unity is *recognized* as being achieved once the conception becomes *ours*, but recognition that something is united can only take place if the manifold in question is already represented in some manner. *The principles of signification then are more fundamental with regard to the unity of consistency than the particular consciousness in which it occurs or any human will that it is associated with*, but since we cannot usefully distinguish a representation that occurs completely outside of the mind, the distinction is only useful insofar as we remember that the principles of signification are primary to a particular psychology, and therefore, the principles of representation provide the principles that regulate any clear understanding of the self.

To summarize: Peirce’s first novelty with regard to understanding the self is that the self gains its unity of consistency as a sign, and this representational (logical) consistency is primary to any psychological recognition and is not in need of a transcendental ego. Peirce puts this concisely when he says “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” (EP1:54). It follows that the self is first and foremost a sign. This insight is key for it avoids trying to begin understanding selfhood from a particular psychological or materialistic perspective.

Every sign stands for an object and stands to an interpretant, so one manner in which we might address the nature of the self is to examine the connection between the Sign and the Object – with respect to the self, this relation is *symbolic*.

The Self is not merely an icon. With respect to the sign-object relation, the self does not merely resemble its object. Peirce says that “Icons are so completely substituted for their objects as hardly to be distinguished from them” (EP1:226). This is not the case with the self. Who we are now has changed in many considerable respects from who we were. The Self is not merely an index either. With respect to the sign-object relation, Peirce tells us that the pure indexical relation “asserts nothing; it only says ‘There!’ It takes a hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a

particular object, and there it stops” (EP1:226; Cf. EP2:306). The index and the icon cannot convey meaning on their own (EP2:306-307; EP1:6).

The sign-object relation of the Self is *symbolic*, as such it involves an index (a replica) to indicate what the object is, and an icon whereby the sign resembles the object in question. One distinction that Peirce makes between the three is that the symbolic relation is purposive, if you subtract this purposive relation an index results. If then we subtract the power of the index to refer, i.e. its denotative power, it becomes an icon. Additionally, there is an infallible criterion for determining whether the sign-object relation is indexical or symbolic (Cf. EP2:318). If an index were never interpreted, it would remain the same sign despite not having been interpreted. However, a symbol, if it were never interpreted, would either not be a sign at all, or would be a sign in a very different way. The reason for this is that for the sign to stand to its object, it needs an interpretant to ground it.<sup>4</sup> In grounding the sign-object relation, the interpretant allows the symbol to grow, or to mean more than it did before; the interpretant provides the sign with the reason that allows it to stand for an object. Without our interpretation, our personal self would remain wholly vague.

What the symbol desires is an interpretant that decreases the indeterminacy, followed by another interpretant that further decreases the indeterminacy, and so on. The symbol seeks out interpretants to represent itself, or as Peirce put it “The symbol represents itself to be represented” (EP2:323). Applied to the Self, we engage in interpretation in order to represent ourselves. It is not then that thought is in us, but we are expressed by thought. Our self is expressed by the gamut of our expressions: all our feelings, actions, and habits as they are expressed build upon and reach out to make our conception of who we are more determinate. This semiotic process is what our personality is, and because it is teleological, and because previous habits determine present habits, who we are now is already determinative of acts in the future (EP1:331).

The Symbol (Argument) is distinguished from the Index and the Icon in a number of ways. I have already referred to one manner, that being the symbol contains purpose, but a more explicit way of addressing this point is considering the ground of the sign. The ground of a sign is that which allows the sign to stand for its object, i.e. the basis or reason that allows the sign to represent its object. With respect to the object-sign relation, the ground of the symbol is found in the interpretant, as opposed to the index, where it is found in the object, and the icon, where it is found in the sign itself.

But while the ground of a symbol is found in the interpretant, the interpretant is also a sign, and therefore its ground cannot be found in itself, but must be found in another interpretant. Peirce writes in “New Elements”:

Hardly any symbol directly signifies the characters it signifies; for whatever it signifies it signifies by its power of determining another sign signifying the same character (EP2:317).

The ground then of any symbol lies in the interpretant, and the ground of this interpretant (which is a sign), is found in another interpretant. What is the ground of the interpretant of a symbol? Answer: another interpretant, which is a symbol.<sup>5</sup> And what is the ground of that symbol? Answer: another interpretant, which is a symbol. So, since each interpretant of a symbol is another symbol, a symbol can be said to grow or reproduce itself for the purpose of gaining a ground. Each determination of an interpretant by a symbol demands another symbol for the relation of the object to the sign to be revealed. But this is not a mere reproduction of identical symbols – rather,

the symbol grows for it acts as a ground for all previous sign-object relations. The symbol then is a purpose because the whole signification of a symbol is found in its determining an interpretant, and the whole signification of that interpretant consists in the interpretant it determines, and so on.

If the manner in which the sign stands for its object is symbolic, the relation is powered by the interpretant (which is its ground). When we consider that Peirce conceives that:

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, it is its expressing something (EP1:54).

Then in order to determine what the Self is, we only have to determine what the Self does, and for Peirce, making this determination involves determining what the symbol will ultimately express. Determining the self then involves at least two hurdles. The first pertains to symbol growth. It isn't as if we can simply tally up all of the effects that we *currently* have and say we have made the self totally determinate. In attempting to make sense of the self, we are contributing to its growth. Each new interpretant calls for another interpretant in order to ground the previous interpretant, and in doing this the symbol seeks to make itself become more meaningful. This isn't merely true of the Self; Peirce asks "does electricity mean more now than it did in the days of Franklin?" (EP1:54). Does your conception of C.S. Peirce, personal identity, semiotics mean more to you now than it did at the beginning of this paper? If symbols remain stagnant, then who we are now means no more today than it did on the day of our birth.

The second difficulty pertains to the fact that symbols are doubly indeterminate, i.e. they are both vague and general. This difficulty was well recognized in connection to the conception of self by André De Tienne in his paper titled "The Sign in Person." In it he recognized that the self is *general* in so far as it leaves a level of latitude to the interpretant and *vague* in so far as there is a level of latitude of symbolization within the symbol itself (15). In presenting an explanation of these two important conceptions, we might begin to frame the discussion with a definition that includes a sop to Cerberus: a symbol is always a sign of expectation and memory; it always needs further development and is always restricted by previous interpretations.<sup>6</sup> This need for further development makes both the sign's relation to the object and the sign's relation to the interpretant indeterminate.

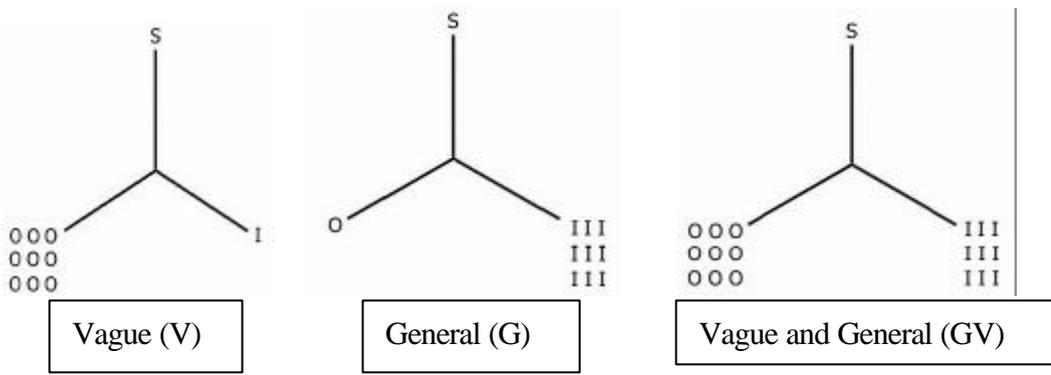
First, if the sign-object relation to the interpretant is indeterminate, it is because its expression to the interpretant allows for a high latitude of interpretation, where there is no obvious restriction by the object. This is what it means for a sign to be *general*. For example, in the statement "Only hire employees that are hard-working", the sign-object relation to the interpretant allows room for the interpreter to further narrow exactly which employees to hire. There are a number of hardworking employees in the world, and developing a criterion for choosing is up to the interpreter. Peirce gives the example "paint this room a light color", the painter is given a degree of latitude of interpretation as to which color should be chosen (EP2:395).

Second, A sign is *vague* if its relation to the object is lacking in sufficiency to make a determinate interpretation, whereby there is restriction on the interpretant by the object. For example, the statement "Paint the walls of this room my favorite color" is vague because I do not specify what my favorite color is and my favorite color is not strictly dependent upon the sign's relation to the interpretant; rather, it is determined by

what I attest my favorite color to be, i.e. the object is “my favorite color” and the painter’s interpretation is restricted by this object.<sup>7</sup>

As was mentioned, the self is a symbol and it is both general and vague. It is *vague* insofar as determining who you are is indeterminate because the object restricts your interpretation of who you are. Your identity consists of your habits, and your habits will not all change unless this is a result from a previous cognition or habit. What is unclear to your self is that the object of your self is not fully revealed by your previous interpretation.<sup>8</sup> Your particular self, at any moment, is not wholly determined by your interpretation, but is restricted by the object and what it expresses to the sign. The self then is vague, because in attempting to determine the self, this determination is partially restricted by the object of the sign.

Furthermore, the Self is *general* insofar as determining who you are is partially dependent upon the choices you make regarding your Future Self. Determining who you are involves symbolic preparation, i.e. shaping your habits.



A vague sign then has a number of possible objects, but the interpretant is limited by the intended object. A sign that is general has a number of possible interpretants, and there is an absence of explicit restriction of interpretation by the object. Thus, since all symbols are general and vague, indeterminacy is double: there is a restriction put on the interpretant by an indeterminate object as well as a latitude of interpretation given to the interpretant by a level of absence of restriction by the object.

Who you are then is general insofar as there is some latitude of interpretation with regard to determining who you will be – you can prepare the way for your future symbols by imagining possible scenarios that you are likely to encounter and readjust how you act depending on the scenarios that might ensue. The ground for any symbol is found in the interpretant of future symbols, and likewise the purpose of your life is found in your future or final symbol, and, insofar as no one’s purpose is fully revealed to them, our self, as a symbol, is doubly indeterminate.

As mentioned earlier, if symbols remain stagnant, then who we are now means no more today than it did on the day of our birth. If there is no indeterminacy with regard to the conception of our self, then there is no room for the conception to grow. If we profess total and utter knowledge of the self then our future discoveries and experiences will not alter who we are. Peirce’s conception of the self allows for the level of present indeterminacy which is present in any self. Our self then is general insofar as it leaves much of the interpretation up to us to determine, i.e. our determination lies in the future, as something potential, and the process of our lives is an effort to reach this final interpretant which is a symbol. A self is also vague insofar as who we are is restricted by our previous habits and what we are capable of doing.<sup>9</sup>

Let me skip past Peirce's notion of the index and move straight to his conception of *replica*. The central features of the index seem to be its singular relation between the object and the sign, the actual existence of the object and the sign/representamen, and that if either of the related objects were to be destroyed the relation would not persist, and the fact would be impossible (EP2:163, 274; EP1:253-254). A replica is an embodied symbol in indexical form. An example of a replica would be the word "self". The word "self" occurs throughout this paper; it has been inked on the page by a printer a number of times, but as a pure index it does not communicate any information. For any index to convey information it must be connected with an icon, i.e. the sign must resemble the object in some respect. An index empty of an icon fails to convey information because it merely points, it directs our attention, it localizes, but does little else. But, when an icon is employed, or when an index "forces something to be an icon" then information is conveyed. If I were to shriek, your immediate attention would be directed towards its origin, but the nature of the shriek would lack information unless it resembled another shriek you may have heard previously, and, by comparison, you would be able to extract information concerning the nature of this sign. Since the word "self" looks similar every time we notice it, we could say that the symbol is the common character among these indices, i.e. the common icon employed by each index, but Peirce explicitly says "a law [symbol] is not a mere common character of events" (EP2:313). An index that employs an icon is *meaningless* without the care of a symbol.

Peirce tells us that "a law [symbol] necessarily governs, or 'is embodied in' individuals, and prescribes some of their qualities", but that "individuals do not constitute the matter of a general" (EP2:274, 316). This is because Peirce held that a symbol is not the total aggregate number of individuals or the common character among the indices, but is instead that which defines these real individuals facts and is that to which the individuals *will* conform (EP2:314, 316, 274). The meaning of every index of the word "self" on this page is governed by the symbol, and it is this symbol which governs our association with those icons present in an index. So, we see that the symbol is not the mere common character among the indices, but instead the law that governs our association of icons that are found in an index.

Present in the symbolic self is the indexical self and an iconic self. The indexical self consists of the reacting singulars; the iconic self consists of the qualities (possibilities). It is the symbol that regulates the association of qualities that are present in an index, and as the symbol grows, it reorganizes old configurations of qualities and selects new possibilities that are present in the index. This insight gives us a method for differentiating one person from another. A person is a purpose, and persons can share a purpose. If there was no difference with regard to two purposes, then they are replicas of one symbol or purpose: both will stand for the same immediate object. The above shows that we are capable of sharing in personhood because we are capable of sharing in symbolhood, i.e. we share, by degree, in the law that organizes possibilities that found in actual reacting singulars.

The self is, as Peirce says, a wave not a vortex. It is a

"form assumed by parts of a body which are out of equilibrium, such that as fast as the particles return they are replaced by others moving into neighboring positions of stress, so that the whole disturbance is continually propagated into new parts of the body while preserving more or less the perfectly the same shape and other characters" (EP2:515n12).

The person is a symbolical unity: a symbol growing into another symbol. It is a process embodied in existence, one that directs, influences, but never forces the index towards an end through the organization and selection of the possibilities that are found in it. A symbol without an index is empty, an index without an icon lacks possibility, and an index without a symbol is not even a nothing. A self without a body has no power or efficacy to be actual, a body without a purpose obeys no laws, has no habits, and lacks any meaning at all. And, a body without any qualities fails to even be a possible notion.

To conclude, let me make one small point on life after death. Who we are is something that is meaningful even after we die; just as Peirce thought that he would live on *in* his theory of the categories, we will live on in the growth of our symbol, a symbol which has an actual body, one that may exist in our children, our neighbors, or anything that takes on our purpose. Peirce claimed that thought is *not* in us, but it is *we* who are in thought. And, in the same way, you and I do not have a particular purpose that we “own” all for ourselves, but the expressed purpose produces as one of its products a *personal identity*, a symbol whom we serve temporarily with our physical bodies and eternally contribute to with other replica. Our physical body is not the sole replica of the self: our bodies may decay and fail, but each of us will continue to live in those whom we have inspired to make our purpose grow, and we all share in the self of universe, of our neighbors, and of each and every meaningful representation that seeks to make itself known by further representation. There is much calamity in this growth for behind each door lies the possibility of the strong hand of Secondness that bars our passage until we have solved its Riddle.

The purpose of C.S. Peirce lives on in all of those who interpret him; his symbol grows in a variety of different directions and the presentation of his message has been expanded beyond its original form and is found in new replica. He lives in and through all those notable scholars mentioned at the beginning of this essay, and the discovery of the meaning of his purpose, and our own, is our one task.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is an abridged version of a longer paper still in progress.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rosensohn (1974:31-32) for a more detailed account as to this essay’s importance.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. “Chapter I. One, Two, and Three” (W2:103) where Peirce notes the function of the copula. Cf. also “New Elements” (EP2:310 - bottom) where Peirce contends that it is the juxtaposition of words that signifies representation has occurred. There is no contradiction here; Peirce is using “is” as the sign which denotes conjunction; juxtaposition fulfills the same function, but denotes in a more ghostly manner.

<sup>4</sup> While the understanding of what Peirce meant by ground is not clear, I define it as follows: A ground is the “the pure form or abstraction which is the original of the thing and of which the concrete thing is only the incarnation” (W1:474); as such it is pre-relational, or a First, that is hypothetically applied to the sense manifold for the attainment of unification; the ground further gives the reason any sign is *potentially capable* of standing for its Object.

<sup>5</sup> On this point, see Liszka (1997:24), CP 5.594, EP2: 322.

<sup>6</sup> This is a Roycean inspired sop (Cf. Royce 244-245)

<sup>7</sup> Another example of the distinction between vagueness and generality can be found in logic in the difference between the selective pronouns “every” and “some.” “Every” supposes a selection by the *interpreter*, whereas “some” supposes a selection by the *deliverer* of the proposition. For example, in the proposition “Every man dies”, the interpreter can chose from every man in this world and he will, given due time, perish. I the statement “Some men die”, the selection is made by the deliverer of the proposition; the deliverer has in mind some particular group or some one man who will, given due time, die (Cf. CC: 129-130). Confer also Ransdell (1997:172-173) for an explanation of the utter’s intention relates to the object.

<sup>8</sup> Growth in the meaning of the interpretant allows for growth of the immediate object, and when the immediate object is equivalent to the dynamic object, truth is obtained (Cf. Ransdell 1997:169)

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Santaella (2003) for more discussion on the generality of the symbol.

<sup>10</sup> I owe explicit thanks to Dr. De Tienne who did a careful job in laying a semiotic groundwork so that this paper might be born, that I might flourish academically, and who inspired me to study philosophy. I also owe a thanks to Dr. Colapietro who provided a number of suggestions on an earlier draft, all of which I couldn't address in this paper.

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