

Resenha

Book Review

TOPA, Alessandro. *Die Genese der Peirce'schen Semiotik. Teil 1: Das Kategorienproblem (1857-1865)* [A gênese da semiótica peirciana. Parte 1: O problema das categorias (1857-1865)]. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2007. 443 p.

Marco Anonni

Università degli Studi di Pisa - Italia
marco.anonni.guide@gmail.com

Charles Sanders Peirce is an emblematic case in the history of ideas. He passed away in 1914 almost forgotten by his contemporaries, but today is at the centre of a renewed interest from both the philosophical and the scientific circles. In the last years the growing attention toward his thought has been reflected in an increasing number of publications, research-centres and conferences dedicated to him. The genealogy of this sudden shift in Peirce's fortune is now well known among his scholars. Once the old commonplaces, which had so far placed Peirce in the role of an incoherent genius, were finally overcome, it was possible to appreciate the unity of his thought under a very different critical light. This has completely changed Peirce's image, giving us a far more systematic and fascinating author than it was conceivable even a few decades before. If this has been made possible the merit is due to a series of editorial enterprises undertaken with determination by some American scholars. They believed both in the unity of Peirce's thought and in the possibility of a chronological reconstruction of his manuscripts, in spite of four major difficulties. The first was represented by the messy condition of the unpublished material left by the American author, estimated in more than 100.000 pages. The second was that Peirce never published an entire book, which could have summarized even a small part of his complex system, during his whole life. The third was that, during his intellectual career, the father of pragmatism dedicated himself to an astonishing number of different fields of inquiry, from mathematics to cosmology and from chemistry to metaphysics. The fourth was that his thought was, due to both his holistic perspective and his inner nature, always in constant evolution. Concerning this last point, one can rightly say that every central notion upon which Peirce has built his architectonic system, being it the one of sign, the one of continuity or the three fundamental categories of firstness, secondness and thirdness, has been more a work in progress never completed rather than the realisation of a stable philosophical intuition. This situation explains why interest has been grown so much around those publications that focus *both* on the extension of his work *and* on its chronological development. It has become quite clear that, without an adequate reconstruction of the genesis of Peirce's system, and of its main notions, it is almost impossible to gather into a coherent image the thousands of splinters in which the original design is fragmented.

The volume written by Alessandro Topa, *Die Genese der Peirce'schen Semiotik. Teil 1: Das Kategorienproblem (1857-1865)*, places itself among this kind of scholarly

work. Its aim is to inquire into the genesis of Peirce's semiotic from the point of view of the reflections made by the American author in those years on the problem of the categories. This work, as the subheading shows, represents only the first half of a study which will soon be extended to cover texts dated 1873. The partition in two volumes mirrors the result achieved by the author. The thesis which Topa seeks to vindicate is that between 1864 and 1865 there was a critical change in the relation of preeminence between metaphysics and logic which had widely characterised the previous writings. The present volume is dedicated to the former half of this transition, when Peirce still conceived the categories as processing structure of an original *ens* in the act of its creation, and attacked the problem of their relation "in a speculative, physical, historical and psychological manner" (p. 89). The underlying theme of the text is therefore the emergence of the belief, in the early Peirce, that only through a renewed logical and semiotic position it was possible to correct the flaws that have previously undermined Kant's transcendental deduction.

From a general point of view, Topa's reconstruction possesses two qualifying points. The first derives from the intrinsic interest of the period taken into consideration, together with the scarcity of already dedicated critical studies. Although Peirce's thought was the object of continuing revisions, nonetheless much of his later system was, *in nuce*, already present in the fundamental 1867 paper *On a New List of Categories*. It is certainly not an accident that, in a letter written to the Italian pragmatist Mario Calderoni in 1905, Peirce himself wrote that "it was in the desperate endeavor to make a beginning of penetrating into that riddle –the one of the categories- that on May 14, 1867, after three years of almost insanely concentrated thought, hardly interrupted even by sleep, I produced my one contribution to philosophy in the *New List of Categories*" (CP 8.213). In spite of the centrality of this fundamental phase, there exist today only few critical studies that aim at a whole reconstruction of it. Inside this framework, and after an introductory section focused on kantian philosophy (pp. 30-64), Topa's analysis begins with the presentation of the context in which Peirce first encountered the philosophy of Kant. In particular, the third chapter (pp.113-152) is of remarkable interest. It concentrates on the central passage "von Schiller zu Kant". In fact, it is from the hermeneutical perspective opened by the readings of Schiller's *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* that Peirce first came in contact with Kant's first *Kritik* during the early years of his attending at the College of Harvard. The volume proceeds to examine in a chronological order the main texts of these years, when Peirce advances toward his own list of categories through a plurality of diverse influences coming from Kant and Schiller, but also from Hamilton, Cousin and Whewell. It is worth noting, in these early years, how Peirce, who was still in his twenties, had already established some of the most fundamental properties that will structure the future triads of categories (firstness, secondness, thirdness) and of signs (icon, index and symbol). Among them, the triadicity of the basic references and the mutual irreducibility of them are two essential features that Peirce, notwithstanding the continuous revisions, will never cease to ascribe to his fundamental trichotomies. The emergence of this plane of reflection is already clear in the *Treatise on Metaphysics*, a text where Peirce operates a radical change concerning his former metaphysical perspective. The undertaking which is carried on in this text is the definition of the "true idea" of metaphysics as the resultant of three diverse and irreducible historical tendencies: the dogmatic, the psychological and the logical one.

Topa analytically follows the argument of the *Treatise*, dedicating one paragraph to each of these theoretical directions. Thereafter it follows an extended analysis of another manuscript, entitled *The Place of Our Age* and dated 1863, in which Peirce aims to realise a “Metaphysik der Geschichte”. Here one can observe how the proto-categories so far elaborated are still combined with other elements coming from the kantian philosophy of history and religion. The following part is concentrated on the reading that Peirce gave of Kant’s thought in a lecture delivered in 1865 at Harvard, where it became clear that he finally resolved to attack the problem of the categories from the side of logic conceived as semiotic. The text ends with a last section entitled “Überleitung zur objektiven Symbolistik” that should act as an ideal pivot between this and the next volume.

The second qualifying point which was previously pointed out is represented by the methodology followed by the author. The general intention that pervades the whole volume is to provide a richer historical picture of all the relationships that have animated and guided the first peircean reflection. The whole book is interleaved with *excursus* centred on other authors and on particular aspects of their thought. Among them, two are dedicated to the concept of modality in Kant, two to Schiller and one to the relationship between Peirce and Hegel. In particular, the analysis made by Topa strives to enlarge the picture that one can get from the reading of just the first volume of the *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition (1857-1866)*. It should be kept in mind that both the two major editions of Peirce’s writings feature some gap, even if for diverse motivations, concerning the first years of his reflection. On one hand, the publishing of the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, at the beginning of the ’30, had the huge merit to be the first extended publication of Peirce’s texts but, on the other hand, it was heavily affected by the arbitrariness of both the order and the content of the selected material. The necessity of a definite chronological edition began to be finally satisfied only in 1982, thanks to the printing of the first volume of the *Writings*. However, even the latter cannot be considered alone as a definitive resource for every issue. The necessity of reconstruction and selection of thousands of manuscripts has forced the editors to include only a part of a much larger bulk of material, obliging them to leave out the rest. One of the most problematic consequences of this forced selection was that it privileged the main relationship Kant, but at the price of overshadowing the richness of other influences. On the other hand, a growing series of studies in the last years have clearly shown that also the confrontation with Whewell’s or Schiller’s thought played an essential and propulsive role for the speculations of the younger Peirce too.

In front of this situation, Alessandro Topa’s works satisfies most of its aims and helps to provide a more complete reconstruction of this phase. If we take as a touchstone all the other studies available today, together with the lists of books studied by Peirce in this period -as recorded in the manuscripts numbered 1555 and 1555a in the *Robin’s Catalogue*- it is possible to ascertain that most of the influential works and authors in this phase are affectively present also in Topa’s reconstruction. There are only a few exceptions, as the one represented by the absence of any references to the work of the brothers Hare, which was nonetheless relevant to trace the origin of some central terms used in 1861 texts. The only general criticism that can be moved to the plan of the work is that it leaves out, or at least in the shade, the bibliographic dimension of the author which, in the case of a complex personality as was Peirce’s, might have been useful to

complete the map of all the motivations that guided the father of semiotic in those years.

In conclusion, the volume written by Topa presents a useful instrument able to provide an adequate theoretical and historical reconstruction of the initial genesis of Peirce's semiotic. These characteristics, together with the choice to examine one of the most neglected period in Peirce's production, make *Die Genese der Peirce'schen Semiotik. Teil 1: Das Kategorienproblem (1857-1865)* a valid contribution to the contemporary literature on Peirce.

Address/Endereço

Marco Annoni
Via Parini 6, Saronno (Va), 21047
Italy

Recebido em: 18-3-2009

Aprovado em: 21-10-2008