On the Interpretants of the Dicent Signs¹

A Respeito dos Interpretantes dos Signos Dicentes

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Abstract: Dicent signs are necessarily composed signs, since it is the syntax of two rhematic ones that determines the final interpretant of existence. For Peirce, as for a certain group of thinkers like Hume and Kant, existence is not a predicate attributable to some classes of subjects but a mode of synthesis. However, in contrast to Kant, Peirce does not consider existence as a plus of perfection to a potential being, but as a restrictive state of being immerse in the theater of reactions. So, there would not be any sense to discuss the existence of the Supreme Being or to suppose things-in-themselves as the realm of beings outside the representative domain of human Reason.

Keywords: Existence. Essence. Being. Dicent. Rhema. Realism. Nominalism. Final interpretant.

Resumo: Os signos dicentes são necessariamente signos compostos, uma vez que é a sintaxe de dois signos remáticos que determina o interpretante final de existência. Para Peirce, assim como para um certo grupo de filósofos como Kant e Hume, a existência não é um predicado atribuível a algumas classes de sujeitos, mas um modo de síntese. Contudo, diferentemente de Kant, Peirce não considera a existência como um acréscimo de perfeição a um ser potencial, mas como um estado restritivo do ser imerso no teatro das reações. De tal modo que não haveria nenhum sentido em discutir-se a existência do Ser Supremo ou de se supor coisas em si como o domínio dos seres fora do domínio representativo da Razão humana.

Palavras-chave: Existência. Essência. Ser. Dicente. Rema. Realismo. Nominalismo. Interpretante final.

The interpretation of a sign as a sign of existence highlights an extremely interesting aspect of the constitution of all semiosis. Peirce's writings that insist on the central

The present article was read by the author in a provisional version, at the Second Advanced Seminary on Peirce's Philosophy and Semiotics, COS/PUC-SP, October 2004. A very incomplete version, in Portuguese, can be found in: MACHADO, Fátima Regina et alii (Orgs.). Caderno [da] 7. Jornada [do] Centro de Estudos Peirceanos, São Paulo, p. 23-8, out. 2004.

relevance of the experience in every form of knowledge have to surpass the challenge of the existence representation. It is not possible to put the problem of knowledge without taking position before the possibility conditions of representing by a sign an object designated as effectively existing.

An exaggerate abuse would not be committed by trying to identify three historically assumed positions before the question of the representation conditions of the existence. The Classic Greek thought, here identified with the first position, did never see a conflict between representing beings in their identity and representing them as existents. Notwithstanding all the variations found in the way philosophers belonging to this position took to understand the nature of Being in its reality, there was not for them any possible dissociation between knowing a being as it is and considering it as existing. By instance, if for Plato the realm of what really belongs to the World of Ideas and for Aristotle what really is can only be found in the beings as first substances, for both the philosophers and his ancient followers wherein the being is it exists. The same could be said of the Neo-Platonics, like Plotin.²

A second position would be that which restrains knowledge to the representation in its original form of attributing predicates to subjects, taking existence as an attributive predicate. For such a position the content of representation would never ontologically correspond to the represented individuals. Since the early Scholastics, this position opposes its claims to those of all the others, who recognize some ontological statute of the objects corresponding to their representation. Although not always unanimous in the adoption of their theories, the nominalists from Roscelinus³ to the nowadays-logical positivists claim for this position against those that notwithstanding the differences found in their doctrines become known as realists.

A third position, that together with the first one is frequently called realist, admits a distinction between the representation of beings and the attribution of existence to them, though not conferring to the later the character of a predicate attributable to Being as to a subject. Among the scholastic thought, par example, the Thomism insists in the distinction respectively between the orders of knowledge and of being, claiming for the doctrine of the really distinct participation of the creatures in the Being of God and so accepting that the create being does not exist necessarily but always depends on the creative act of the Supreme Being. In the eighteen century, this third position can be met in the thought of both Hume and Kant and, afterwards, in the work of some thinkers inspired in it.

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, for instance, Hume claims that existence and existent cannot be thought separately, do not existing any difference between them. Existence, he concludes, does not add any thing to the idea of an object. So, it can be read:

² See GILSON (1948, p. 39-45).

Scholastic thinker, born in 1050 and died in 1123/25 whose school was frequented by Petrus Abelardus. He is considered one of the first medieval nominalists. His claim against and real correspondence between the words and the beings was combated by Abelardus, John of Salesbury and others. All that is known of his teachings depends on the writings of other thinkers, like Abelardus and John of Salesbury. Cf. BOEHNER; GILSON (1970, p. 296, 306 s., 329); SCHMIDT (1969, p. 526).

The idea of existence [...] is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on anything simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are not different from each other. That idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form.⁴

Kant, by his side, after reading Hume's *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, not only acknowledges the relevance of Hume's thought to demystify the concept of causation considering it only a mode of synthesis, but extends this conception as the most adequate statute for all kinds of relations, including existence.⁵ Most probably the merit he recognizes in the Hume's claim for causation would be extended to the way existence is presented in *A Treatise*, had him the opportunity of taking contact with this early work of the Scottish thinker. His opinion would be enforced by the position taken by Philo, one of the fictional participants of the *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion* and most probably taken by Hume himself, when it is said:

In short, I repeat the question: Is the world, considered in general and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man or such a limited being would, *beforehand*, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity? It must be strange prejudice to assert the contrary. And from thence I conclude that, however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence. The consistency is not absolutely denied, only the inference. Conjectures, especially where infinity is excluded from the Divine attributes, may perhaps be sufficient to prove a consistency, but can never be foundations for any inference. (p. 73)

However, Kant's probable acceptance of humean theses could not be extended to what, following the assessment of the editor of the *Dialogue*, ⁷ Hume defended in the *History of Natural Religion*. There, Hume had manifested his preference to a devotional and humble position before the Deity against any attempt of a rational proof its existence. Although not accepting the validity of any proof of God's existence, Kant did never deny that this same existence was a legitimate question to be settled by Reason.

The third position can be distinguished from the first one, while searching for the form of the judgment of existence in the synthesis of the attribution, neither confusing essence and existence nor submitting one to the other. It can be distinguished from the second position by not conferring to existence the statute of a predicate properly.⁸

⁴ HUME (1966, p. 240).

⁵ KANT (1783, Introduction).

HUME, David. Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. Ed. by Henry D. Aiken. New York: Hafner, 1948.

⁷ Cf. HUME (1948, p. viii–ix).

Jaakko Hintikka considers that the position taken by Kant referring to the Anselm's Argument does not eliminate the possibility of attributing existence to God as a logical predicate since it could be thought in God existing in some other world than ours. However, Hintikka acknowledges that what Kant is discussing is the error of considering existence as a real predicate belonging not only to the realm of Logic in General but to the transcendental domain of experience. See HINTIKKA (1986, p. 262-5, 287).

Charles S. Peirce devoted a good time searching for a sound foundation to this third position. Acknowledging the objective ground of the judgments of existence and, also, of the genuine general character of thought, Peirce took account of the arguments provided by all the thinkers who had faced the question of the relations between knowledge and existence and, very earnestly an humbly, tried to discover in their inquiries the contribution each of them could brought to unveil this mystery. All his philosophy proposes to set a well-founded explanation of the relations between representation and existence or knowledge and experience.

In sequence to Hume and Kant, Peirce recognizes that only the experience permits the work of knowledge to get on. By this way, Peirce will be able to assert to his diligent interlocutress, Lady Victoria Welby that "experience generally is what the course of life has *compelled* me to think." In 1905, taking up again the pragmatist maxim and settling once more the necessary and sufficient conditions for rigorously conceiving a class of phenomena, he considered as publicly accepted the assertion that "...obviously nothing that might not result from experiment can have any direct bearing upon conduct..." Therefore, whatever be the method for scientifically proceeding, it requires that the relations settled between representation and experience be subject to inquiry and that adequate hypotheses be formulated to represent such relations.

However, one distinction between the position assumed by Peirce and those of his several precedent thinkers must be considered, namely, that concerning the very notion of existence. The relations Peirce established between *would be, to be,* and *must be* confer to his thought a rigor, probably, never reached before. Taking, once more, as reference the work of Etienne Gilson, indisputably one of most assiduous and clever reader of the metaphysical tradition, although never referring to Peirce's thought, the reader certainly will conclude by the singular originality of this thought on that subject.

In *L'Etre et l'Essence*,¹¹ Gilson examines the western theological and philosophical tradition tracing for the direction given to the relation between being and existence, or, often, between essence and existence. Whatever be the position taken, errors and omissions excepted, the existence always takes place under the form of an increase into the essence of the created being. Indeed, it is assumed by tradition that when denoting the absolutely perfect Being, to be and to exist could not be distinguished one from the other. To the authors who confer preeminence to existence, the essence of the creature manifests its limited participation into the being of God; to those who confer preeminence to the essence, the existence will appear as an accident to the creature essence.

Perhaps, the *haecceitas* proposed by Duns Scotus, due to its specific character of strict individuation, could be put a little aside of this generalized conception.¹² And it

⁹ PEIRCE (1977, p. 26).

¹⁰ PEIRCE (1934/1974, v. 5, § 412).

¹¹ GILSON (1948).

Besides certain kinds of specific differences, permitting a more precise definition of a concept; or the "transcendental" differences – in the scholastic sense of "transcendental" highest ultimate forms of being – as the ultimate modal determination of genera of a class of being declaring them as necessary, infinite, accidental, etc.; haecceitas, for Scotus is the ultimate difference concerning individuality. By haecceitas a being becomes an irreducibly individual one. For more elucidation see WOLTER (1987, p. 166).

would not be deprived of any sense to attend to the relevance conferred by Peirce to this Scotist approach. Nevertheless, this acknowledged relevance of *haecceitas* (sometimes referred as *thisness*) when present in the Peircean thought assumes some systematic dimensions never reached before, while receiving a much more unifying treatment face to both the other modes of being, namely, the affirmative potentiality and the generality. For instance, such relevance can be confirmed, when Peirce confers to the indicative signs an specific role related to their Objects, different of that exerted either by the signs of potentiality or the signs of law. Notwithstanding the future considerations about the subject, it seems opportune to read the following text:

An indexical word, such as a proper noun or demonstrative or selective pronoun, has force to draw the attention of the listener to some haecceity common to the experience of speaker and listener. By a haecceity, I mean, some element of existence which, not merely by the likeness between its different apparitions, but by an inward force of identity, manifesting itself in the continuity of its apparition throughout time and in space, is distinct from everything else, and is thus fit (as it can in no other way be) to receive a proper name or to be indicated as this or that. Contrast this with signification of the verb, which is sometimes in my thought, sometimes in yours, and which has no other identity than the agreement between its several manifestations. This is what we call an abstraction or idea. The nominalists say it is a *mere* name. Strike out the "mere". and this opinion is approximately true. The realist says it is real. Substitute for "is", may be, that is, is provided experience and reason shall, as their final upshot, uphold the truth of the particular predicate, and the natural existence of the law it expresses, and this is likewise true. It is certainly a great mistake to look upon an idea, merely because it has the mode of existence of a haecceity, as a lifeless thing. (CP 3.460)

Then, the mode of being of hecceity, of the existent being, is irreducible to its representations either at the level of the ideal predicates that can attributed to it or at that of the regularity of the laws permitting the phenomena to be represented in the space-time continuum. Indeed, each mode of Being has a logic and phenomenological specificity.

At the level of Phaneroscopy, it becomes perfectly clear that Secondness distinguishes itself from Firstness and characterizes a *sui generis* mode of appearance not by adding something to the characteristic potentiality of Firstness, but due to the conflict resulting of the mutual negation of affirmative struggling qualities. Existence consists in the concretion of qualities that, by the standpoint of consciousness, presents itself as the non-*ego*, or as a limit, that give place to the *ego* as its antagonist, so that Peirce can say:

All the operations of the intellect consist in taking composite photographs of *quale*-consciousness. Instead of introducing any unity, they only introduce conflict that was not in the *quale*-consciousness itself.¹³

The Normative Sciences have as their aim to direct the conduct face to an Other. The later, as an existent, being admirable in itself, attracts the volition, giving place, at a

¹³ CP 6.233. Cf. also CP 1.332, 334; 8.330.

third moment, to a representation. Ethics, the second of the Normative Sciences, stands between Esthetics and Logics or Semiotic, as a convergence point to these two other sciences. The Admirable, object of Esthetics, while presented by Ethics as the ultimate Good for the conduct, suffers an actual restriction in its affirmative and original potentiality. Being all the phenomena admirable *per se*, they will present themselves as good only when accessible as an end to the conduct. By other side, only those goods that can be represented as true *in futuro*, will become the object of Semiotics. For the conduct and to every thing that keeps reference to it, the genuine existent will take the central place and will attract volition as a satisfactory desired end.¹⁴

In the realm of Semiotics, and then at the level of Thirdness and representation, existence keeps playing a restrictive intermediary role between possibility and the effective generalization. Here, the attention is directed toward the conditions of the existence representation, not supposed when phenomena was considered only as admirable *per se* or as *summum bonum*, the ultimate end to volitio n. The immediacy of summum bonum when considered as the proper object of ethics precedes the actuation of any kind of norm. In order to attain *summum bonum* in future, by a conscious way. logic as semiotics will be charged of explicitations of the norms to be followed. Therefore, it is only by the work of logics applying the pragmatistic method of research, that conceivable effects of a conception become explicit and the true general nature of summum bonum is shown as a continuous evolutionary process. In What Pragmatism is 16 Peirce will claim that the "pragmaticist does not make the summum bonum to consist in action, but make it to consist in that process of evolution whereby the existent comes more and more to embody those generals which were [...] said to be destined. which is what we strive to express in calling them reasonable. In its higher stages, evolution takes place more and more largely through self-control, and this gives the pragmaticist a sort of justification for making the rational purport to be general."

Considering the three trichotomies of signs more extensively worked by Peirce, namely, the tricotomy formed by the relations of signs with themselves, the trichotomy of the relations of signs to their dynamic objects and the trichotomy of the relations of signs with to their final interpretants, ¹⁷ the presence of the signs of existence is central in each of them, following the same principle that commanded its presence in Phaneroscopy and in the classification of the Normative Sciences.

¹⁴ Cf. SILVEIRA (2003).

For the immediate relation of volition and the end as *summum bonum* we can read Peirce when he claims: "...a man's ultimate end may lie in vague personification of the community nd at the same time we may contemplate a definite general state of things as the summum bonum, that is, his heart may be set upon the welfare and safety of the community. But this [...] is devotion, not conformity to a norm" (CP 1.588). For the role exerced by logical reason in order to attain the summum bonum in the future, the logical reason functioning as a medium to the achievement of the will, we can read "that truth the conditions of which the logician endeavors to analyse, and which is the goal of the reasoner's aspirations, is nothing but a phase of the summum bonum which forms the subject of pure ethics, and that neither of those [ethicians and logicians] can really understand himself until he perceives clearly that is so" (CP 1.575).

¹⁶ CP 5.433.

¹⁷ CP 2.243-53.

Under the first trichotomy, namely, of the signs considered in themselves, the class of sinsigns is composed by the existents that, as such, are signs. These signs, in one hand, suppose mutually confronting qualisigns to be constituted, meanwhile they sustain the qualisigns permitting them to actuate in the realm of experience. Sinsigns are also demanded to actuate as existential replicas for legisigns, while considered, it could be said, *cases of law*. Only by their way, law can exert its efficient causation within the theater of reactions.

Under the second trichotomy, under which signs are considered as referring to their Dynamic Objects, the indices consist of the signs of existence, interacting with their Dynamic Objects while denoting or relating their existence. In order to function as such, indices need to be existents in themselves or, whether being generals or signs of law, to actuate through their existent replicas.

Signs will always be interpreted as signs of possibility or signs of essence in the absence of any further determination. So, with reference to their final interpretant, single signs can only be interpreted as signs of possibility or Rhemes, being also called Semes. In order to be interpreted as signs of existence, they need to be composed by a certain pair of signs. By a Syntax, two signs of possibility have their range of signification restricted in their breath. A sign of existence, named by Peirce Dicent Sign or Feme, must, at least, originally be composed of an iconic rhematic sign in order do convey the idea of the Object and an indicial rhematic sign able to point to the object whose idea is represented by the first sign. It is the syntax formed by the confrontation of both signs, and, therefore, actually reducing their original possibilities, that gives place to an existential interpretant. ¹⁸

For existentially predicating an idea to a subject, an indicial rhematic sign must be bound to this idea through an equally significative Syntax. Therefore, the essence, belonging *de jure* to the world of ideas, being this world often identified by Peirce with the inner Platonic one, suffers a restriction due to the syntax that linking it to a rhematic index forces it to represent a determinate class of Objects even if this class be a general one. So as the proper names, rhematic indices, general or not, and in the first case actuating through their replicas, will never represent their objects as an unrestricted general classes¹⁹. Even pointing to a general class of phenomena, they point to this class excluding it from all the others by introducing it into the restrictive universe of the subjects of attribution. This task they accomplish by means of the syntax that links them to the eminently iconic signs of essence or predicable ideas.

Therefore, there is not in the peircean theory any predicate of existence being a single one, and the attribution of existence never adds any quality to its Object. Only icons make present new ideas²⁰. It must be noted that the restriction resulting from existence does not imply in any diminution of the active potentiality of sign, so as existence does not affect qualities in its own but only actuate as a shadow do not permitting the full range of qualities to appear with equal opportunity in the phenomenal field.

²⁰ Cf. SILVEIRA (1996, p. 49-52).

¹⁸ CP 2.257, 262, 320, 3.419, 4.58.

Peirce will say that proper names and a fortiori, it could be said, Rhematic Indicial Legisigns are dopted with subjective generality but not with objective generality (CP 5.429).

Belonging to phenomenal universe, semiotic intelligences, also called by Peirce "scientific" intelligences²¹ only grow and learn, in a mutual interaction, attributing one to the others eidetic representations as truly new signs. Actuating by this way, those intelligences proceed by means of experience. Therefore, in the very center of the life of Spirit, indicative signs of existence can be always found, those who, by force of the object of desire, furnish the opportunity for the construction of representations of the effective determination of the conduct.

Resulting from Peirce's position concerning the statute of existence is position he takes before any argument respecting to God. As existence is for Peirce always second and reactive, by definition, it could not be attributed to God. Being the pure and absolutely perfect act, God does not suffer the effect of any act and, consequently, does not react to anything, mostly to his own. Creation, as the relation of God with his creatures, as all the tradition claims, does not affect him under any aspect. Creation is for God nothing more than his identity. Meanwhile, the relation of the creature with God would be of absolute secondness or otherness, since it depends absolutely on him. From this absolute asymmetry results that no mark of God could be present into World, being absolutely impertinent any pretended demonstration the "existence" of God.²²

The so beautiful neglected argument proposed by Peirce did never intended to prove God's existence, but his Reality. The resource to Musement is essentially esthetic and results from the absence of any intension of Reason to represent the absolutely perfect Being. Searching for Musement, the naked Reason aims to stay before the pure Admirable and, then, to recognize the being of God. The historical negligence concerning such argument certainly resulted of an inadequate prevalent conception of existence and of efficient cause prevailing in almost all the modern tradition.²³

Assuming a strictly restrictive conception of existence, Peirce does not need to dialectically consider the decidibility conditions of any proof of the "existence" of God as had Kant, in "Transcendental Dialectic" of the Critique of Pure Reason²⁴ to do before the impasses of a Reason which being transcendental in its specific functions, ought to think itself as transcendent but, always manifested in a conditional way, has no means to decide by the truth of one of two antagonist conclusions about its liberty, its immortality and the existence of God. And it is not only in that very case that the position assumed by Peirce on statute of existence makes him free of the impasse inherent to Kantian critical thought. The Kantian Realism must suppose the existence of things-in-themselves even before the eminent risk of a theoretical contradiction. If the judgment of existence, as Kant insists in demonstrate, consists exclusively in the assertive *mode* of synthesis by the Understanding over the data furnished by sensibility as the phenomenal matter for all the human knowledge. Then, to suppose the existence of thing-in-itself not only problematically as the Transcendental Dialectics presents it before the question of the existence of God but implicitly as Critique accepts as the statute of the Manifold of sensation, fatally lets escape the intended rigor and integrity of Critic of Reason. Indeed,

²¹ PEIRCE (1934-74) v. 2. § 227.

²² Cf. SILVEIRA (1985) p.1-24.

²³ PEIRCE (2003) and RODRIGUES (2003).

²⁴ A583/B611-A630/B658.

Reason, it could be concluded, in some way, at least, would be measured by the Object as a *Dasein*. Peirce conferring an affirmative status to "could-be" and acknowledging existence as an actual restriction to this same could-be, does not need to suppose a non-phenomenal and, so, unknowable and inaccessible realm to the Reason. The realm of Reason consists exclusively in the phenomenon, including the Admirable, the Good and Truth, as the three kinds of Goodness for all rational conduct. It is a begged question to postulate something behind or beyond that that appears, so that the pretended unanswerable questions implying the transcendent are not true questions but result from an equivocal way of putting them.

Finally, the phenomenological statute of existence claimed by Peirce permits to conclude that the *summum bonum* as the ethical ideal spite of belonging to the realm of the Reason will never let to present itself as an attractive Other to this Reason, insistently inviting it to assume the risk of throwing itself into it. Solicited to justify its choice, Reason will be able to present its reasons, but no representation can oblige Reason to unconditionally choose what presents itself as plainly satisfactory as an ultimate end.²⁵ Representation will always play the role of economic and conditional means available to Reason searching for its own perfection.

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²⁵ CP 5.136; SILVEIRA (2003, p. 72-3).

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