

Peirce's Neglected Views on the Importance of the Individual for the Advancement of Civilization

As Concepções Negligenciadas de Peirce Sobre a Importância do Indivíduo para o Progresso da Civilização

Nathan Houser

Indiana University (Indianapolis) - USA
nhouser@iupui.edu

Abstract: Peirce is well-known for his claim that man is a sign and, therefore, essentially general. He also taught that the individual person is of little account except as a member of a social group. Yet in Peirce's metaphysics it is the individual that brings the general into existence just as in human affairs it is the sheriff who provides the dynamic power necessary for the rule of civic law. Notwithstanding his frequent admonition that individual glory must give way to communal achievement, throughout his life Peirce was fascinated with the phenomenon of individual greatness. Through his studies of great men he concluded that special individuals, with their unique capacities and powers, account for much that we count as human progress and that an exaggerated regard for morality is detrimental to scientific progress. The aim of this paper is to consider Peirce's somewhat neglected views on the importance of individuals as distinct from whatever communities they may be a part of and to reflect on the implications for Peirce's theory of personhood.

Keywords: Peirce. Individual. Personhood. Genius. Greatness.

Resumo: *Peirce é famoso por sua afirmação de que o homem é um signo e, portanto, essencialmente geral. Ele ainda nos ensinou que uma pessoa é de pouca importância exceto como membro de um grupo social. Contudo, na metafísica peirciana é o indivíduo que dá existência ao geral, da mesma forma que nos assuntos humanos é o delegado que fornece o poder dinâmico necessário para a regulação da lei civil. Não obstante sua frequente repreensão de que a glória individual deve dar caminho às conquistas comuns, Peirce foi por toda a vida fascinado com o fenômeno da grandeza individual. Através de seus estudos sobre os grandes homens, ele concluiu que os indivíduos especiais, aqueles com capacidades e poderes únicos, são responsáveis por muito daquilo que nós contamos como progresso humano e que uma estima exagerada pela moralidade é prejudicial ao progresso científico. O objetivo deste texto é considerar a concepção peirciana, um tanto negligenciada, sobre a importância dos indivíduos como seres distintos de uma comunidade qualquer da qual eles façam parte. Algumas breves comparações serão feitas sobre a visão de Peirce em relação aos indivíduos e às visões mais conhecidas de Nietzsche e outros.*

Palavras-chave: *Peirce. Indivíduo. Pessoaalidade. Gênio. Grandeza.*

It is well-known that Peirce believed that we, as persons, are essentially signs and that, as signs, our very identity—who we really are—depends fundamentally on how we are regarded by the members of the communities we belong to. Just as the meanings of words depend on their interpretation within their linguistic communities, and thoughts must address future thoughts for their content, so we as persons depend on “the ultimate decision of [our] community” for our meaning. Peirce expounded this view in 1868 in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* where he argued that

[...] as the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an *external* sign, proves that man is an external sign. That is to say, the man and the external sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought. (EP 1:54).

Twenty-four years later when Peirce again took up the question of man’s essence in the fourth paper of his 1891–93 *Monist* metaphysical series, he wrote that previously he had been too nominalistic in equating persons with symbols involving general ideas and that he had failed to see that every general idea has the unified living feeling of a person (EP 1:350). Consequently, he added to his conception of personhood that man is “a congeries of feelings,” but he understood feeling so broadly that he attributed real personality even to like-minded groups of people and argued that esprit de corps, national sentiment, and sympathy “are no mere metaphors”—churches and even corporations can have real personalities.¹ This has come to be known as Peirce’s theory of corporate persons and has affinities to parallel theological and legal doctrines—although Peirce’s semiotic theory is closer to the religious idea than the legal one. So for Peirce, as we have come to understand him, persons are general beings, fundamentally social, defined by the meaning attributed to the signs they are taken to be by their peers and, from the inside, by the symphony of feelings that completes their personality.

As a corollary of this enhanced semiotic view of persons, Peirce frequently expressed his disapproval of any tendency to extol the individuality of persons qua individuals. If our essence as a person is to be a train of thought-signs with a related congeries of feelings, then surely our individuality is incidental to our essential generality. To suppose that our meaning as a person, our essential being, is to be found in our individuality is analogous to supposing that we can find the meaning of a word in its physical being in sound or in print, in which case the words “man” and “homo” would forever have different meanings. According to Peirce we are mere cells of the social organism: “Our deepest sentiment pronounces the verdict of our own insignificance. [...] [T]here is nothing which distinguishes [our] personal identity except [our] faults and [our] limitations—or if you please, [our] blind will, which it is [our] highest endeavor to annihilate” (CP 1.673). So at our best, as we are essentially, we are social beings and our highest duty is to that generalized social body we are merged with. To let go our distinct individuality and become continuous with this

1 See HOUSER, 2009 for further discussion of this development in Peirce’s thought.

generalized social being is to fulfill what Peirce called “the supreme commandment of the Buddhisto-Christian religion” and to prepare ourselves “for transmutation into a new form of life, the joyful Nirvana in which the discontinuities of [our] will shall have all but disappeared” (CP 1.673). But it is important to note that Peirce did not arrive at this view of man’s essential being as the conclusion of religious meditations; it was the conclusion of his long and deep study of logic and semiotic. In 1902, in a letter to Josiah Royce, Peirce wrote: “My feeling is that the individual just fills his little place in the revelation of the universal and except for the sake of what fragment of universal meaning he bears is [of] no account” (CP 8.117, n. 12).

For those who are well acquainted with Peirce’s thought, this sketch of his conception of man will likely bring to mind his doctrine of fallibilism with which it has close affinities. As an epistemological doctrine, fallibilism holds that knowledge is never absolute—we can never be certain that we have achieved any final truth. There is no source of knowledge, whether by instinct, perception, inference, common sense, intuition, revelation, or by any other means that can provide a guarantee that we have been served up the absolute truth. But fallibilism is also, in a sense, a moral doctrine, and it is in that respect that it comports so well with Peirce’s conception of man. Fallibilism calls for intellectual humility; it tells us that we as seekers of knowledge are beholden to an external reality that may well teach us some hard lessons that will force us to modify or even to give up beliefs we hold dear—or, after we are gone, will reveal that we had unwittingly been led into error. Fallibilism teaches us that the contribution of any one person to the advancement of knowledge is likely to be disproved over time and, at best, will be a small step forward in a process that can only succeed as a community endeavor. To play a part in the great work of advancing knowledge, an individual must be a member of a community of investigators that will in all likelihood carry on long after his or her contributions have been forgotten. “The scientific world,” Peirce said, “is like a colony of insects, in that the individual strives to produce that which he himself cannot hope to enjoy” (CP 7.87).²

Peirce’s idea of the semiotic self and the corporate personality as I’ve just sketched it is the generally accepted view of Peirce’s theory of personhood—I’ll call it the standard view. According to Max Fisch, Peirce’s dismissal of the individual in favor of the community heralded the late 19th century rejection of the Cartesian “isolation of mind as something wholly individual.”³ Vincent Colapietro gives clear expression to key components of the standard view: “Peirce insists that a person is not whole as long as he or she is single: The person is *essentially* a possible member of society (5.402 n.2). Not only is the subject a possible member of community; the person qua subject possesses the actual form of community (5.421).”⁴ And in a recent paper, Rossella Fabbrichesi argues that Peirce’s idea of a collective self has deep roots in Western philosophy—she references Leibniz, Goethe, and Nietzsche in particular, as well as Peirce’s follower, Josiah Royce.⁵ Fabbrichesi especially

2 See, also, HOUSER, 2006.

3 FISCH, 1951, pp. 37–38.

4 COLAPIETRO, 1989, p. 43.

5 FABBRICHESI, 2009, pp. 2–3.

praises Peirce, Nietzsche, and Royce for helping us “to start thinking of a process of depersonification of humanity.”⁶ So we see that the standard view aligns Peirce with an important intellectual tradition, a tradition that gained momentum in reaction to the rise of social Darwinism in the late 19th century, which Peirce characterized as an unchristian “gospel of greed” having as its motto “Every individual for himself, and the Devil take the hindmost!” (EP 1:357). But is Peirce’s semiotic theory of persons that contributes to the “depersonalification of humanity” the full story as far as his theory of persons is concerned? I believe it is not the full story and I will try to illustrate this by contrasting it with a different conception of persons implied by Peirce’s lifelong fascination with the phenomenon of individual greatness. I will then sketch an amplified theory of persons that takes account of both the semiotic generality of man as well as individual uniqueness.

Peirce’s interest in the question of individual greatness was apparent from his earliest writings. In 1857, when he was eighteen years old and in his junior class at Harvard, he wrote a composition comparing Raphael and Michelangelo with respect to artistic genius and overall greatness. For his senior class he wrote a composition analyzing the nature of genius. Peirce had already studied deeply Schiller’s *Aesthetic Letters*—he had read them during his freshman year when he was sixteen and had fallen intensely under Schiller’s spell. Schiller, of course, gave much attention to the question of genius and the attributes of greatness and had observed that “true greatness of thought is seen associated with what is gigantic and extravagant, and the sublimest feeling is found coupled with the most horrible excess of passion.”⁷

Following his study of Schiller, Peirce took up Kant, and made such a thorough study of his work that Peirce would later claim that he was the only one among his early philosophical companions for whom Kant had been mother’s milk.⁸ As Schiller had, Kant, too, dealt with the question of genius. It seems certain that both Schiller and Kant nurtured Peirce’s interest in the study of individual greatness, and probably also Goethe, who was revered by Peirce’s influential Aunt Lizzie (W6: xlvi), but it is likely that Peirce’s fascination with the subject had something to do with the fact that from his earliest youth he himself was said to be a genius.⁹ While this may have been a source of pride for the young Peirce, there are indications that as he matured he became aware of certain peculiarities about his own psychology and character and was anxious to understand his own make up. In 1860, in a notebook in which he recorded his private thoughts, Peirce reflected on human error in relation to genius and concluded that a great man should be revered “notwithstanding his mistakes” (W1: 5). Perhaps Peirce already had an intimation that society would exact a high price for his own creative originality. As Peirce matured, his friends and colleagues often remarked on his unique powers but also on his rather prickly character. In his notebooks, Henry James remarked on his time in Paris in the winter of 1875: “I saw a good deal of Charles Peirce that winter—as to whom his being a genius reconciled

6 *Ibidem*, p. 8.

7 SCHILLER, 1845, Letter 16.

8 FISCH, 1986, p. 103, n. 18.

9 SKAGESTAD, 1981, p. 15

me to much that was intolerable in him.”¹⁰ William James teased his brother Henry about his newly developed intimacy with Peirce, writing that “their mutual friends were agog at the news,”¹¹ but he agreed with Henry that Peirce was “a man of genius” and that there is “always something in that to compel one’s sympathy.”¹²

So from his earliest days Peirce took a decided interest in the question of genius, partly to better understand himself but mainly, I believe, to understand how originality is born and how great ideas manage to take hold. Peirce understood that individual humans are the agents for the growth of knowledge and the advancement of civilization and his historical writings reveal that he believed that the most significant advances have been due to relatively few great men and women who have somehow risen above the rest. Because Peirce was a systematic thinker and an indisputable polymath, he cannot be said simply to have been just one thing or another—a philosopher, a scientist, a mathematician, a semiotician, a linguist, a psychologist, or whatever. He was all of them, and more. He was also, quite importantly, an historian of ideas and among the first historians of science in the modern sense to come out of the Americas. Peirce began studying chemistry in 1847, when he was eight years old, and he claimed to have written a history of chemistry three years later, when he was eleven (W1: 2). For the rest of Peirce’s life, his practice would be to study deeply the history of whatever discipline or subject occupied him, not only with respect to the development and growth of ideas but also to learn about the lives and practices of the leading figures in each field.

In the fall of 1883, during the final year of Peirce’s lectureship at Johns Hopkins University, he taught a course on the psychology of great men. The subject of human character with respect to genius had become a topic of widespread interest, in part due to Francis Galton’s 1869 book, *Hereditary Genius*, and Galton’s development of psychometrics and historiometry. Peirce employed the historiometric method for his course, using statistical analysis on impressionistic data systematically gathered from biographical texts by him and his students. The plan was to settle on a list of 300 great persons, ranked in order and type of greatness, and to see if any inductive conclusions could be drawn about the kinds, causes, and characters of greatness. The study was not completed in the academic year and was carried on informally until Peirce left Baltimore in the fall of 1884. Peirce’s departure brought a premature end to the study, which had concluded with a list of 287 great men.¹³ Peirce took up the study again around 1892, his interest perhaps rekindled by the 1891 publication of *The Man of Genius* by Cesare Lombroso and the 1892 *New Calendar of Great Men*, edited by Frederic Harrison (and based on Comte’s positivist calendar),¹⁴ and

10 MATTHIESSEN and MURDOCK (eds.), 1947, p. 25. It has been speculated that Peirce was the inspiration for the anti-hero in Henry James’s late story, *The Beast in the Jungle* (QUIGLEY, 2007, p. 363).

11 QUIGLEY, p. 365.

12 PERRY, 1935, p. 353.

13 At least one of Peirce’s students, Joseph Jastrow, who became a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin, made use of the study in subsequent publications (see W4: lxii, n. 54).

14 See W8: lxx–lxxvii.

he completed the list of 300 names, renaming his list *The Great Men of History* (the finished list included 290 men and 10 women).

Peirce understood that greatness revealed itself in individuals with widely differing characters and kinds of genius and he and his students had taken that into account. Using his categories as a guide, Peirce classified the principal types as men of feeling, men of action, and men of thought. As we would expect, Peirce's list included philosophers and mathematicians and scientists from many fields, but it included equally many theologians and poets and novelists and painters and musicians and dramatists. Also included were political figures and soldiers and medical doctors and jurists and philanthropists. Here is a sampling of Peirce's great men of history:

Alexander the Great	El Cid	Homer	Molière	Schiller
Aquinas	Cleopatra	Horace	Montaigne	Schopenhauer
Aristotle	Confucius	Victor Hugo	Moses	Scipio Africanus
Attila	Copernicus	Hume	Mozart	Duns Scotus
St. Augustine	Cortez	Isaiah	Napoléon Bonaparte	Shakespeare
Bach	Dante	Jacquard	Newton	Shelley
Balzac	Jeanne Darc	Jesus	Ockham	Sixtus V
Thomas à Becket	Darwin	Kant	Omar I	Adam Smith
Beethoven	Descartes	Keats	Paganini	Socrates
Bellini	Diderot	Kepler	Pascal	Solomon
Bentham	Emerson	Legrange	St. Paul	Sophocles
The Bernoulli brothers	Euclid	Laplace	Peter the Great	Spinoza
Bismark	Fichte	Lavoisier	Philip of Macedon	Thales
Bolivar	Galen	Leibniz	Plato	Titian
Tycho Brahe	Galileo	Leonardo da Vinci	Priestley	Toussaint
Gutama Budda	Garibaldi	Abraham Lincoln	Ptolemy	Vesalius
Byron	Goethe	Linnaeus	Pythagoras	Virgil
Julius Caesar	Grotius	Locke	Rabelais	Voltaire
Carlyle	Händel	Louis XIV	Rachel the actress	Wagner
Casanova	Hannibal	Luther	Raphael	George Washington
Catherine II	Haydn	Machiavelli	Rembrandt	Watt the Inventor
Charlemagne	Helmholtz	Mencius	Ricardo	Wesley
Chaucer	Herodotus	Michelangelo	Rousseau	William the Conqueror
Chopin	Hippocrates	John Stuart Mill	Rubens	Zeno
Cicero	Holbein	Milton	Saladin	Zoroaster

These were individuals who were the agents of crucial advances or turning points for civilization as we know it. Their vital lives cannot be simply merged with a generalized social body or some community of purpose. The implication of having been included in Peirce's list was that these individuals, qua individuals, really mattered.¹⁵

Peirce wrote book reviews of Harrison's *New Calendar of Great Men* and of Lombroso's *The Man of Genius* and those reviews reveal more about Peirce's conception of greatness. In his review of Harrison, under the title *The Comtist Calendar*,¹⁶ Peirce criticized Comte's method as unscientific and claimed that Comte's great men were only figureheads, selected for the purpose of serving "as factors in the advancement of the human race, abstractly considered." Peirce said that Comte was "utterly wanting" in genuine "admiration and sympathy for great men." No study of truly great persons can be valuable if it is beholden to an agenda that turns heroes into biased abstractions that neglect their "living reality and passion" or their "concrete souls." Toward the end of his review, Peirce reflected on the conditions necessary for the emergence of greatness. Kepler's great work, "the most marvelous piece of ampliative reasoning ever executed, as well as the most momentous in its consequences, was rendered possible only by his wife's riches and the bounty of the Emperor," and it was "only a sinecure professorship [...] that enabled Newton to do his work." Peirce's favorite example of the dependence of greatness on opportunity and material support was Aristotle and Alexander. Without Alexander, Aristotle "would scarcely [...] be heard of today. [...] the greatest man of thought of all time was beloved by the greatest man of action."¹⁷

Peirce's review of Lombroso was also highly critical but equally revealing. Lombroso was a biological determinist and one of the founders of criminal anthropology. He gave an inductive argument purporting to prove that genius is a mental defect or disease, with the unintended corollary, Peirce quipped, that "the whole of civilization is due to insanity." Peirce showed that Lombroso's method was flawed though he did not dispute the obvious fact that genius is abnormal—later he would say that the greater of great men "somewhat partake of the nature of monstrous births in that their exceptional natures are largely due to causes that very rarely operate at all" (W5: xxiv)—but if genius is a disease, as Lombroso claimed, then "we had better try to propagate it" rather than committing "our Napoleons, our Pythagorases, our Newtons, and our Dantes" to "Genius Asylums." Peirce devoted the final two paragraphs of his review to a consideration of the importance of abnormality for genius and speculated that the source of the abnormality might be in brain physiology. But if the brains of the greatest geniuses are significantly different than ordinary brains, perhaps by being more complicated or by unusual connectivity, it will likely be "less adapted to the ordinary purposes of life" making its possessor "the victim of his own higher organization." Peirce supposed that such brains can benefit mankind in ways "ordinary heads" cannot but that the genius would "have to pay for it [...] vainly trying to make [his brain] do things for which it is entirely unadapted, though other brains do them with ease."

15 See W8, selection 43, for the complete list.

16 W8: selection 44.

17 Much of this and the following paragraph is taken from my introduction to W8.

Peirce remained interested in the lives of great men for the rest of his life. In late 1892 he gave a series of lectures on the history of science at the Lowell Institute in Boston where he gave special attention to Pythagoras, Archimedes, Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton. In 1901 he published a paper on *The Century's Great Men of Science* in which he asked the question: "How shall we determine that men are great?"¹⁸ If we are considering great men of science, for example, would we choose those men who have made the greatest and most fruitful discoveries? Should success be the standard of measure? Not necessarily, Peirce thought, because frequently important new ideas are in the air, as it were, and it is a matter of accident who wins the prize of priority. "Shall we, then, by a logical analysis, draw up an abstract definition of greatness, and call those men great who conform to it?" This wouldn't work, Peirce believed, because even among those who have studied the question there is too much disagreement: consider what Shakespeare says in *Twelfth Night* through his character Malvolio: "Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Given so much difference of opinion, Peirce thought that "any definition of greatness would be like a disputed rule of grammar." Besides, to define greatness in this way would necessitate first identifying examples of greatness making the use of the definition moot. Peirce expressed his own method as follows:

[...] the way to judge of whether a man was great or not is to put aside all analysis, to contemplate attentively his life and works, and then to look into one's heart and estimate the impression one finds to have been made. This is the way in which one would decide whether a mountain were sublime or not. The great man is the impressive personality; and the question whether he is great is a question of impression.¹⁹

Peirce understood that his opinion about how to recognize greatness might seem arbitrary, even banal, but he emphasized that it had not been lightly formed and was the result of "long years of experimentation."

Now in giving this overview of Peirce's investigations and considerations of great men I do not mean to imply that his fascination with individual persons of genius was diametrically opposed to his standard view of personhood. Indeed, he held that the distinctive characteristics of the scientific great men of the 19th century had been "devotion to the pursuit of truth for truth's sake" and "self-effacement before the grandeur of reason and truth."²⁰ This has a tone that is harmonious with Peirce's communal view of man and his contrite fallibilism. Nevertheless, Peirce often stressed what the irredeemable loss of particular great men would likely have been for civilization. Consider, for example, his claim that "Kepler's discovery rendered Newton possible, and Newton rendered modern physics possible, with the steam engine, electricity, and all the other sources of the stupendous fortunes of our age" (CP 7.275). According to Peirce, "lofty results require for their attainment lofty

18 "The Century's Great Men in Science" (12 January, 1901), *The New York Evening Post*. Published in EISELE 1985, vol. 1, pp. 489–96.

19 EISELE, 1985, vol. 1, p. 490; see also EISELE, 1985, vol. 2, pp. 872–76.

20 EISELE, vol. 1, pp. 490 & 491.

thinkers of original power and individual value. You cannot silence or stifle or starve a single one of them without a loss of civilization from which it never can wholly recover" (CP 7.275). It seems to me that Peirce's view of the importance of special unique individuals is at least in tension with his standard view of persons and has to be reconciled with it.

Let me reiterate the theory of persons that I refer to as the standard view. It is view based on the conception of man as a sign and, therefore, as general and fundamentally social, so that whatever value we can attach to a person is left to his or her peers. In addition to holding that persons are trains of thought-signs or systems of signs, the standard view affirms that persons are congeries of feelings as well, but feeling, as Peirce understood it, is also general. The standard view privileges Peirce's doctrine of synechism in that it extols the depreciation of the discontinuous individual by merging him or her into the generalized social being that gives us meaning. The standard view does not seem to easily accommodate Peirce's claim that "lofty results require for their attainment lofty thinkers of original power and individual value."

Of course I am not alone in questioning the adequacy of the standard view of Peirce's theory of persons. Even many who seem to favor the standard view enter caveats, typically warning against exuberant idealism. Consider Vincent Colapietro, from whose landmark work, *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, I've already quoted. After declaring that for Peirce, "the self is a sign," Colapietro goes on to say that "Peirce's theory of the interpretant provides us with a way of incorporating the subject within the study of signs without denying the extrasemiotic character of either this subject or the circumstances in which he or she is destined to act—in short, without lapsing into some form of idealism."²¹ The problem Colapietro is confronting here is how to account for a person's unique individuality given Peirce's stipulation that individuality is fundamentally a matter of secondness, or reactivity, which, as Colapietro notes, is extrasemiotic.²² Insofar as persons are signs, they are general and do not *as such* qualify as reactive existing beings with the secondness necessary to count as true individuals. This is still the case if we add that persons are also distinguished by some congeries of feelings, for feelings, in Peirce's sense, are also general and lack the secondness requisite for individuality. So in order to account for the individuality of persons, an individuality that endures through time, there must be a third component to personhood, one that accounts for our reactivity and vitality. To stipulate that persons must be existing living bodies capable not only of thinking and feeling but also of acting and reacting in the actual

21 COLAPIETRO, 1989, pp. 42 & 43.

22 *Ibidem*, p. 81. Colapietro notes Hookway's observation (HOOKWAY, 1985, p. 167) that "Peirce's theory of individuals is one of the most difficult and complex areas of his thought" but says that "it is necessary for us to come to terms with this theory, because whatever else the individual self is, it is an *individual* being." See RILEY, 1974 for an interesting early account of some divergent interpretations of Peirce's conception of persons with respect to their individuality. Riley argues that a person qua individual is not an independent existent for "to be an individual is to be a social-communal being" (p. 163). T. L. Short, on the other hand, asserts that "*Haecceity* or 2ndness is the root of individuality" (SHORT, 2009, p. 50).

material world we inhabit comes close to solving the problem, but while actions and reactions do satisfy the individuality requirement, they are discrete events and do not satisfy the condition that persons endure continuously through time. Peirce purported to resolve this problem by claiming that the robust or thick individuality we attribute to persons consists, first, in “a continuity of reactions” which constitutes a “logical individual” (CP 3.613), and, additionally, in “an enduring network of interpenetrating habits” that provide the basis for “the semiotic life of personal selves.”²³ This is a sketch of Colapietro’s enhanced semiotic account of personhood. Although Colapietro inclines toward the standard view, he recognizes its limitations and the need to ground personhood in the reactive world of secondness.

A somewhat more radical challenge to the standard Peircean account of personhood has been made by Robert Lane in a paper published in 2009 the *Transactions of the Peirce Society*.²⁴ To a degree, Lane is motivated by the same concerns as Colapietro, especially the need to augment the semiotic account of persons with a compatible account of our discrete individuality. Lane’s solution is to augment Peirce’s semiotic account with a naturalistic account which claims that in addition to being signs, persons are animals, and he supports this augmentation with a quotation from a late manuscript in which Peirce wrote that “[b]y a ‘person,’ [...] I suppose we mean an animal that has command of some syntactical language.”²⁵ Lane’s enhanced account accepts that persons are signs but emphasizes that, unlike other signs, persons are living organisms, a point also stressed by Colapietro.²⁶ According to Lane, Peirce’s “naturalistic account acknowledges the centrality of action and embodiment to personhood”: it is in their “animal aspect” that persons are “physically distinct from one another” and have their separate identities.²⁷ But this individuality that derives from our animal natures must be mitigated by our semiotic personalities which are not individually distinct and bring us into continuity with each other. Lane quotes Peirce on this point: “The individualism that denies this synechistic connection among individual persons is a “metaphysics of wickedness [...] your neighbors are, in a measure, yourself, and in far greater measure than, without deep studies in psychology, you would believe” (EP 2:2).²⁸ Although Colapietro’s and Lane’s arguments run differently, it seems to me that up to this point they support quite compatible accounts of Peirce’s theory of persons. Why I regard Lane’s account as more radical is that, unlike Colapietro, Lane explicitly rejects Peirce’s views on corporate personhood. To his account of Peirce’s theory of persons, Lane adds what he calls the consciousness requirement, which states “that only entities which are capable of consciousness are persons.”²⁹ He supports this by arguing that there is an essential link between personhood and interests and that

23 COLAPIETRO, 1980, p. 86.

24 LANE, 2009.

25 From R 659, 1910. LANE, 2009, p. 1.

26 According to Colapietro, “Individual organic substances provide the proximate ontological basis for the semiotic life of personal selves (COLAPIETRO, 1989, p. 86).

27 LANE, 2009, p. 10.

28 Lane calls this “one of Peirce’s most radical claims about personhood,” *Ibidem*, p. 7.

29 *Ibidem*, p. 12.

"[a]n entity that has never been and will never be conscious is altogether devoid of interests."³⁰ Lane dismisses Peirce's arguments for group consciousness claiming that they are excessive, susceptible to Occam's Razor, and so given his consciousness requirement and his dismissal of Peirce's arguments for group consciousness, he rejects the theory of corporate persons.³¹ However, Lane does not believe that "the animal-body and semiotic-mind of an individual person are "wholly disjoint" nor does he reject that persons, even in their animal aspects, are continuous with each other.³² Thus, like Colapietro, Lane adheres too much of the standard account of Peirce's theory of persons but enhances it to account for personal identity.

I must point out that both Colapietro and Lane consider deep semiotic and metaphysical questions that are beyond the scope of my quite limited concern here. My sketch of their accounts of persons is intended to show that they each, in their own ways, have uncovered the need to supplement what I have called the standard view of Peirce's theory to make explicit the necessity of secondness to empower personhood. I believe it is the failure of the standard view to include significant reference to the reactive world of secondness that brings it into tension with Peirce's appreciation of the peculiar importance of great individuals. This failure can be further illustrated by a brief consideration of the nature of symbols and, then, by a quick look at Peirce's categories of being. This is as far as I will go into semiotics and metaphysics.

My reason for briefly taking up symbols is that insofar as persons are signs, it must be that they are symbols for symbols are the only kind of signs that convey the conceptual meaning that can carry forward through communal networks of interpretation to determine the essential meaning of a person. Of course there are different kinds of symbols, some of which carry meaning that is not indexed to any particular individual. These are rhematic symbols and insofar as a person is this kind of sign he is not distinct from any other person like him. According to Peirce, "[d]ifferent men, so far as they can have any ideas in common, are the same symbol" (EP 2:324). Another principal kind of symbol is propositional, a dicent symbol, and symbols of this kind do identify individuals. They do this by including non-general indexical elements which concretely connect the symbols' meanings with the discreet individuals they index. Peirce describes the indexical elements of propositional symbols as their "vital sparks" (EP 2:310). Propositions also include rhematic (or iconic) elements which represent the characteristics being ascribed to the individuals in question. Now considering the reference or the meaning of the different elements of propositional signs, we note that the overall meaning, the interpretant, is conceptual (or, at any rate, intellectual) and falls under Peirce's category of thirdness. It is general. The rhematic or iconic element represents general qualities or characteristics that fall under Peirce's category of firstness. But the indexical element picks out actual individuals (or events), with reference to a particular time and place, and is not general. This brings in secondness without which meaning could have no existential reference.

30 *Ibidem*, p. 13.

31 Lane also argues, quite interestingly, that Peirce's objective idealism does not require that all material objects exhibit consciousness. "Were it to have this implication, it would render the consciousness requirement for personhood trivial." *Ibidem*, p. 16.

32 *Ibidem*, p. 17.

With regard to Peirce's categories or modes of being, "the being of positive qualitative possibility, the being of actual fact, and the being of law that will govern facts in the future" (CP 1.23), I only want to point out how these modes match up with the different aspects of personhood. A person as a sign has the being of law which, in human consciousness, we recognize as thought. A person as a congeries of feeling has the being of qualitative possibility which, in consciousness, we recognize as feeling. These are the only modes of being explicitly associated with personhood according to the standard view. What is missing is that part of the person that has the being of actual fact. This adds the critical existential component to personhood and is the reactive element in consciousness, the basis for self-consciousness. Peirce was insistent that a "reaction cannot be generalized without entirely losing its character as a reaction. A generalized reaction is a law" (CP 7.532). What is so critical about the being of actual fact? It is only when embodied that qualitative possibilities can become the defining characteristics of a person and it is only through reactive embodiment that a person, as a sign, can actually do anything at all in the world. Remember what Peirce famously said about the dependence of law on existential, or brute, force: "Law, without force to carry it out, would be a court without a sheriff; and all its dicta would be vaporings" (CP 1.212). Of course I do not want to downplay the regulative and guiding role of the semiotic or law-like component of personhood; it serves through a kind of Aristotelian final causation to direct the efficient causality supplied by our embodied selves toward the achievement of those purposes and ends that we, as whole persons, aim to accomplish.

It is time for me to do some summing up and to bring these rather sketchy remarks to a close. I hope I have made it plain that I believe the standard account of Peirce's theory of persons, which regards persons as systems of signs and congeries of feelings, has to be supplemented with the further stipulation that persons must be embodied as loci of force or action; that is, they must exist. This is what we might call the discontinuity condition. Just as points on lines all merge together with one another in continuity until an individual point is designated and, in being individuated, breaks the continuity of the line, so persons, in their general being as signs, merge into a continuous community of humanity until a living, breathing, man or woman steps forth to assert his or her vital and unique individuality.³³ While I concede that Peirce focused heavily on the general aspects of personhood when stipulating what persons are, I believe that his lifelong interest in the phenomenon of individual greatness and his belief that special individuals, with their unique capacities and powers, account for much that we count as human progress, proves that he implicitly accepted the discontinuity condition. This amplified theory of persons takes account of the qualitative and semiotic generality of persons without discounting their individual uniqueness.

In conclusion I want to simply point to what seems to be a surprising moral implication of Peirce's views on greatness; an idea that becomes consequential once

33 There remain important questions about the consistency and adequacy of Peirce's conception of individuality vis-à-vis continuity but I cannot go into that here. For an indication of the underlying mathematical theory that informed Peirce's views see KETNER and PUTNAM, 1992; PUTNAM, 1992, pp. 94–102; and MOORE 2010.

we accept the discontinuity condition for personhood. It is the idea that to be great an individual may have to risk being immoral. This is surprising in light of Peirce's frequent championing of community: remember his exhortation that to let go our distinct individuality and become continuous with the generalized social being is to fulfill "the supreme commandment of the Buddhisto-Christian religion." So it is rather a surprise when Peirce says that "an exaggerated regard for morality is unfavorable to scientific progress" (CP 1.50) and the advancement of civilization insofar as that depends on the creative forces of individual genius. Listen to what Peirce says about morality:

Morality consists in the folklore of right conduct. A man is brought up to think he ought to behave in certain ways. If he behaves otherwise, he is uncomfortable. His conscience pricks him. That system of morals is the traditional wisdom of ages of experience. If a man cuts loose from it, he will become the victim of his passions. It is not safe for him even to reason about it, except in a purely speculative way. Hence, morality is essentially conservative. (CP 1.50)

So the great person, the person who not only speculates but who cuts loose from old thinking and strikes out on a new path will likely be opposed by his or her community and may be thought to be immoral. Peirce says that this shows that morality is not wholly a good thing and that while morality may be a means to a good life, it is "not necessarily coextensive with good conduct" (CP 1.50). This is a position often associated with other great philosophers, perhaps especially Nietzsche, but it is not usually attributed to Peirce.

Finally let me emphasize that notwithstanding Peirce's contrite fallibilism, which teaches that individual achievement is always tentative and only meaningful in the context of a community of inquiry, our civilization is nevertheless beholden to our great men and women who have managed by their genius and force of will to cut loose from old ways of thinking. Sometimes, Peirce says, the future of civilization trembles in the balance as new discoveries confront old ideas. That is when the great individual must emerge from his or her community and stand apart.

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Endereço / Address

Nathan Houser
1010 Navajo Trail South Drive
46260-3557
Indianapolis, Indiana – USA

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