

Semiotic paradoxes of the absolute

Paradoxos semióticos do absoluto

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Abstract: The paper gives a survey of major concepts of the absolute in the history of Western philosophy, postulates that discourse about the notion of the absolute involves a fundamental aporetic paradox, and distinguishes five specific paradoxes of the absolute. First, the paradox of the inconceivability of the absolute (as an object of knowledge), second, the paradox of the defined absolute, third, the performative paradox of the indefinability of the absolute, fourth, the structuralist paradox of the concept of the absolute, and fifth, the paradox of the absolute from the perspective of Charles S. Peirce's pragmaticist semiotics.

Keywords: Absolute. Paradox. Aporia. Charles S. Peirce. Leibniz. Spinoza. Hegel. Schopenhauer.

Resumo: *O trabalho apresenta um panorama das concepções principais do absoluto na história da filosofia ocidental, postula que qualquer discurso sobre do absoluto implica em um paradoxo aporético fundamental e apresenta cinco paradoxos específicos do absoluto. Primeiro, o paradoxo da inconcebibilidade do absoluto, segundo, o paradoxo do absoluto definido, terceiro, o paradoxo performativo da indefinibilidade do paradoxo, quarto, o paradoxo do ponto estruturalista do conceito do absoluto e quinto, o paradoxo do absoluto do ponto de vista da semiótica pragmaticista de Charles S. Peirce.*

Palavras-chave: *Absoluto. Paradoxo. Aporia. Charles S. Peirce. Leibniz. Espinosa. Hegel. Schopenhauer.*

1 Brief history of the idea of the absolute

The idea of the absolute has seen a gradual decline in the history of Western thought. From its glorification in the Age of Absolutism, it passed to its utter rejection, if not actually derision, in the philosophy of the second half of the nineteenth century. A brief encyclopedic survey may illustrate this development.

Some of the earliest philosophical definitions can be found in the writings of the Scholastics, as quoted in Rudolf Eisler's *Dictionary of Philosophical Terms* of 1904. For the Scholastics, the absolute is that which is *sine ulla conditione* ("without any condition"; "unconditional") and *non dependens ab alio* ("not depending on anything", "independent"). These criteria correspond rather closely to the

etymology of the Latin word *absolutum*, which means “released” or “set free.” The etymologically derived semantic feature “lack of relatedness” is also in the focus of an eighteenth century philosophical dictionary by Johannes N. Tetens (1735-1807) quoted by Eisler (*ibid.*), which defines the absolute as “that which has no relation to anything else” or is simply “unrelated.” The etymological root of the word is also the essence of Schopenhauer’s definition of the absolute as “that which is connected to nothing” (*Neue Paral.* § 96), which radicalizes the idea of unrelatedness by substituting “anything” for “nothing” as the correlate of the absolute. The absolute is not only without any relation to something in particular but it is simply related to nothing, which may logically be the same but sounds rhetorically more expressive.

Theological interpretations of the absolute begin with Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464). With reference to God, Cusa uses expressions such as *absoluta maximitas*, *entitas absoluta*, or *unitas absoluta* (“absolute greatness”, “absolute entity”, or “absolute unity”) (KUHLEN, 1971, p. 14). Five centuries later, we find Schelling calling God the “absolute all” or simply, “the absolute” (*ibid.* p. 22).

In the Age of Rationalism, Baruch Spinoza, who sees himself as a “geometer of the absolute”, considers the idea of the absolute as well as its incorporation into the idea of God as a logical *necessity*, which no rational mind could reasonably question, ignore, or deny. The main characteristics and manifestations of the divine absolute, according to Spinoza, are infinity, indivisibility, and unconditionality (cf. SCHWEMMER, 1995, p. 33). God is by necessity absolutely powerful, absolutely infinite and indivisible, absolute in his existence, and he is the first, unconditioned, cause of everything (cf. KUHLEN, 1971, p. 15).

Leibniz extends Spinoza’s idea of the absolute by projecting the absolute from the macro-universe of the infinite into the micro-universe of the monads, which can be found in all substances and individual beings. The absolute is the perfect, and God is the absolutely perfect being (*Dieu est un estre absolument parfait*), but the domain of the absolute is not restricted to God’s infinity because, according to Leibniz’s monadology and his doctrine of pre-stabilized harmony, monads are micro-universes serving as living mirrors of the macro-universe (*un petit monde qui exprime le grand*). The absolute can thus be found within all of us (*L’idée de l’absolû est en nous intérieurement*) (quotes from KUHLEN, 1971, p. 16).

In the Age of Enlightenment, Christian Wolf and Immanuel Kant transform the negativity inherent in the earlier definitions into the positive logical form of a universal proposition, which ascribes the quality of *autonomy* to the absolute. According to Wolf, the absolute is that which “contains the cause of its reality within itself” (*Vern. Ged.* 1, §925), and from Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Eisler (1904) quotes a definition which characterizes the absolute as that which is “unrestrictedly valid in all respects”.

The philosophy of Idealism takes up and develops further the idea of the autonomy of the absolute. According to Hegel, the absolute is “the All conceived as a timeless, perfect, organic whole of self-thinking Thought” (quote from LONG, 1942, p. 2). Whereas the predicates of “perfection” and “wholeness” take up the well-known criteria from the past, Hegel’s characterizations of the absolute as something “organic” and “self-thinking” is novel in the genealogy of the idea of the absolute. The term “self-thinking” anticipates to two key notions which twentieth century cognitive philosophy defines as autopoiesis and self-reflexivity,

although these contemporary terms have certainly no direct connection to Hegel's idealism. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see how the idea of self-reflexivity, once a key concept of Romanticism, has drifted from the metaphysical idea of the absolute to the domains of cognitive philosophy and biosemiotics, in which autopoiesis and self-reflexivity are currently two defining characteristics of life (see also NÖTH, 2007).

Arthur Schopenhauer's polemical comments on the idealist theories of the absolute of his century mark a first low of the idea of the absolute. In Hegel's theory of the absolute, Schopenhauer saw nothing but empty verbal sounds (*leerer Wortschall*). Schopenhauer's devastating verdicts on those who held that the human mind may have rational knowledge of the absolute include his famous characterizations of the idea of the absolute as a Cloud-cuckoo-land (*Wolkenkuckuksheim*) and his caricature of those convinced of having knowledge of the absolute as being endowed with the "sixths sense of the bats" (*sechster Sinn der Fledermäuse*) (KUHLEN, 1971, p. 25).

Nietzsche finally denounces the ideas of the absolute as errors and superstitious beliefs of "badly informed theologians pretending to act the philosopher" (*Birth of Trag.*, §11). The ideas of absolute knowledge and absolute value have their origin in nothing but mere fictions of human minds. The error of those who believe in the idea of the absolute is that they confuse their own mental fabrications with reality and existence. Philosophical and theological minds first created the idea of the absolute and then committed the error of attributing a fake autonomous agency to the idea created by their own invention (cf. KUHLEN, 1971, p. 27).

In sum, the once glorified idea of the absolute became highly controversial. One of the reasons for the controversy about the idea is that rational discourse concerning the absolute must ultimately lead to unresolvable paradoxes. The purpose of this paper is to consider some of these paradoxes, first from general, then from semiotic perspectives.

2 The semiotic paradox of the signs of the absolute

The absolute, in the sense of something unrelated to anything else and free from any determination, involves a fundamental semiotic paradox. The word and the idea represented by it constitute a verbal sign with a determinate meaning since to suppose that a word has meaning we presuppose that this meaning is determinate. When we speak in a rational way about the absolute as the indeterminate, we can only do so by making use of signs that are determinate in form and meaning by the rules and conventions of our language. Our signs about the absolute are determined, but we claim, at the same time, that the object of our discourse resists any determination. Can a sign whose meaning is determined represent an object whose meaning is by definition indeterminate? This is the fundamental semiotic paradox of the idea of the absolute.

3 The paradox of the inconceivability of the absolute

Kant was the first to discover that any attempt at defining the absolute must result in a logical antinomy, but although he knew that the absolute is inconceivable as an object of rational thought he was not willing to give up the idea of the absolute. This

contradiction led him to become entangled in *the paradox of the inconceivability of the absolute*. Evidently, if it is unthinkable, we cannot pretend to have any rational insight into the nature of the absolute. After all, rational discourse on the absolute is impossible without thinking about the absolute. Kant's thesis that the human mind cannot conceive of anything absolute may be summarized as follows: since all of our knowledge depends on our cognitive means of representing it to our mind, nothing absolute can exist in the sense of a known object (SCHWEMMER, 1995, p. 33). If something absolute and unconditioned existed in the universe, our mind could neither think nor describe it since the human capacity of cognition and the human means of representation are too limited to conceive of the unlimited.

Despite these insights, Kant was unwilling to give up the concept of the absolute. He argued that "it has been of such great concern to reason" that "to abandon it would be a disadvantage to the system of transcendental philosophy" (KUHLEN, 1971, p. 19). Kant also taught that there is no absolute totality in the phenomena but that absolute totality must be conceived of in the noumenal world (idem, p. 20), but the Kantian noumenal world is the one of the things as they are as such, so that this world is itself equally inaccessible to rational thought and human cognition.

As a solution to the antinomy to which rational thought about the absolute leads Kant proposes to project the absolute from the spheres of the exterior world into the inner world of the thinking subject. Since the absolute cannot be an exterior object of cognition, it must be a phenomenon of the cognizing mind. Nothing but the human mind itself enables the subject to know the absolute as an object of thought so that the absolute must be sought within the mind of the autonomously cognizing subject and not outside of it. For Kant, the autonomously cognizing subject is insofar absolute as it does not depend on its objects of cognition for having the knowledge of these objects which it has (SCHWEMMER, 1995, p. 33).

Since only the paradoxes of the absolute are in our focus here, we can restrict ourselves to summarizing as follows: according to Kant, we cannot think the absolute because the restrictions of our mind make any mental representation of the unrestricted impossible. By excluding the absolute from the universe of external phenomena and reserving it an exclusive place in the human mind, Kant creates a rationalist dualism separating the world as it presents itself to the human mind from the inner world which represents it. This dualism runs the risk of ending up in another paradox, the one of the origin of the human mind. If only the human mind is absolute in its unique capacity of knowing the external universe, how can it ever have originated in this universe, in which nothing is absolute except for human minds? This is an evolutionary question, but problems of evolution did only appear on the philosophical and scientific agenda until the nineteenth century, almost a century after Kant.

4 Contradictions and paradoxes of the defined absolute

Unrelatedness, so far the predominant criterion of the absolute, is a very general concept, which can mean the lack of all kinds of logical relation, dependency of the specific on the general in a hierarchy, of the parts on the whole in a meronymy, of the consequent on the precedent, of causality, of conditionality, of implication, of similarity, etc.

If all of these relations were subsumed under the general criterion of unrelatedness, contradictions are likely to arise in the framework of theology. When Spinoza defines the divine absolute as a necessity of rational thought, he makes the absolute dependent on the necessity of being thought, and when we define God as absolute because he is the cause of all things, this definition implies that causality is inherent in the absolute. From the perspective of a theology that finds God rationally inscrutable, by contrast, any attempt at defining the divine as absolute must be considered a contradiction in terms since rational thought cannot conceive of the rationally inconceivable.

Why does the *absolute* have so many definitions at all? Should it not have one definition only if it were really what is free from any determination? Should not all scholars agree that there can only be one definition of the absolute and that any further definition could only do injustice to the idea of the unconditionally absolute? Here we have with *the paradox of the many definitions of the absolute*. If it were really what it pretends to be, the absolute would not need more than one definition, but since it has so many definitions, the idea of the absolute cannot itself be absolute.

At the root of these paradoxes is the *paradox of the definition of the absolute as such*. Any definition means delimitation, as the etymology of the term teaches us. Literally, to define means to set up boundaries. However, if the absolute is by definition free from any boundaries any attempt at defining the absolute results in the paradoxical attempt at defining the undefinable, at setting boundaries to a term that should have no boundaries by definition. This is probably the most fundamental paradox of the many definitions of the absolute: any definition of the absolute establishes boundaries to a definiendum that is by definition boundless.

5 The performative paradox of the indefinability of the absolute

The performative paradox of the impossibility of defining the absolute is a characteristic of those *definitions that define the absolute as undefinable*. This paradox is actually a metaparadox, a paradoxical metastatement. A sentence such as *I define A as B* is a performative speech act because it does not only define *A* as *B* but also explicates, by means of the performative verb *to define*, that it is a definition. The paradox consists in the performative self-referentiality of defining a definition in conjunction with the self-contradictory negation of the definability of the definiendum of the definition. Besides the verb *to define*, there are other performative verbs, such as *to say*, *to conceive of*, *to think*, or *to add*, which can turn a definition into a performative metaparadox if their syntactic object specifies whatever should be said about, thought of, or added to the idea of the absolute.

The performative metaparadox thus consists of defining the undefinable. The very speech act constituted by the utterance, namely the speech act of defining, is simultaneously negated by the metastatement formulated by the utterance. Instead of stating predicates valid for the term to be defined, the definition states the inadmissibility of formulating such predicates which might complete the definition as a definition.

It is not surprising that the performative metaparadox of defining the absolute as undefinable can first be found in theological writings. Around 500, the Latin

Church Father Priscianus defined the absolute as follows: *absolutum est quod per se intelligitur et non eget conjunctione nominis ut 'deus', 'ratio'* (quoted from KUHLEN, 1971, p. 14); that is: “Absolute is that which can be understood in itself; it needs [and allows] no addition of any [other] name, such as ‘God’ or ‘reason’.”

Priscian’s definition is a metadefinition insofar as it says what one should not say in a definition of the term *absolute*: one must not add any other word to the term *absolute* in any definition of it, but how can the understanding of a concept in need of a definition be improved and how can we think and speak about the absolute if no other word can be added to clarify its meaning? Notice that the Church Father himself does not obey his own rule since he cannot avoid adding several other words to the notion of the absolute when he presents his metadefinition.

In Priscian’s formulation, the term *absolute* is only loosely associated with the idea of God. The author merely remarks that the term is as self-evident as the terms *God* or *reason*. The absolute is merely compared to God with respect to their common denominator of being self-evident terms. Later authors begin to use the predicate *absolute* as a defining characteristic of God, as we have seen above in Spinoza’s and Leibniz’s definitions. In the language of German Idealism, God finally becomes a synonym of the absolute. Fichte’s concept of the absolute is of this kind. Faced with the dilemma of a divine absolute that is absolute but still requires many definitions, Fichte formulates the following metaparadox of the undefinability of the absolute: *Jedes zu dem Ausdrücke: das Absolute gesetzte zweite Wort hebt die Absolutheit, schlechthin als solche, auf* (apud KUHLEN, 1971, p. 22): “Each second word added to the expression of the absolute does away with absoluteness as such.” Fichte actually invalidates all philosophical definitions of the absolute that are not metadefinitions using predicates such as “unrelated”, “independent”, or “unconditional” to define the absolute. By banning any predicate to be used to define the absolute, he prohibits definitions of the absolute in general.

Fichte’s characterization of the absolute is reminiscent of the literary topos of the unspeakable, a variant of the rhetorical trope of *aporia*. We find it, for example, in the discourse of a lover who says *I cannot say how much I love you*. By performing this speech act, he actually expresses what he pretends to be impossible to say.

Actually, Fichte cannot escape the paradox of *aporia* himself, for his statement on the absolute is performatively self-contradictory. In writing about the one word (*das*) *Absolute* [“the absolute”], Fichte uses sixteen words altogether, thus adding fifteen words to the expression to which, according to his maxim, no single word should be added without doing injustice to its meaning. Evidently, the strict compliance with Fichte’s maxim would long ago have led to the death of the expression, for the word could never have been used again, except perhaps in one-word utterances.

6 The structuralist semiotic paradox of the concept “absolute”

If questions of meaning, definition, and logic are semiotic questions, all of the above-discussed paradoxes of the absolute are evidently also in part, if not wholly, semiotic paradoxes. Nevertheless, only the next two paradoxes can be considered

explicitly semiotic paradoxes in the sense that the arguments which make them appear paradoxical are based on specifically semiotic theories.

Semiotics is the study of signs, but signs stand for something else, concepts, objects or “meaning”. Is the absolute that causes so many paradoxes, a sign, or is it the meaning of a sign? The answer to this question depends on the definition of “sign” to be adopted, and the way a sign is defined is a matter of the underlying semiotic theory. We must restrict ourselves to two such theories, Saussure’s structuralist and Peirce’s semiotics, both of which reveal different fundamental semiotic paradoxes at the root of the idea of the absolute.

In the framework of structural semiotics, the sign we are concerned with is a verbal sign, the word *absolute*. Its structure consists of a *signifier* and a *signified* (Saussure) or, in Hjelmslev’s terminology, of an *expression* associated with a *content*. The first term in these dichotomies describes the word in its phonetic or written form; the second describes its meaning. The possibility that there might be an external referent of relevance to the sign is programmatically excluded by Saussure, who teaches that no “[...] ready-made ideas exist before words” (1916, p. 65) and thought, considered before language, “is only a shapeless and indistinct mass.” In sum, thought without language is nothing but “a vague, uncharted nebula” since “there are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (*idem*, p. 111-112).

According to such premises, the absolute can evidently not be a signifier since the word in its spoken form is certainly determined by the phonetic rules of its pronunciation according to the rules of the English language. Nor can it be sought outside of the system of signs to which the word *absolute* belongs. Searching for it there would be a search in “a vague, uncharted nebula.”

If the absolute cannot be a matter of the signifier, it is perhaps a matter of the signified or content of this sign. Now, the signified of a concept, according to the structuralist doctrine, is the value that it has within the semantic network of the language system. The meaning of a word is its value in a system of semiotic differences: “Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others”, says Saussure (1916, p. 114). Thus, the concept of the *absolute* derives its meaning from the network of semantic relations which differentiates this particular meaning from the one of all other words in its semantic field, in particular, from all those meanings which it negates, such as “the related”, “the determined”, “the conditional”, “the cause”, or “the effect of a cause”.

However, if such signifieds, of which the absolute is the opposite, determine the semantic value of the absolute, the meaning of the absolute *is* determined and cannot be the undetermined and unrelated, as its many definitions state. This is the structuralist paradox of the absolute: the concept of the absolute means “the unrelated” and “undetermined”, but the meaning of this concept *is* related and determined by its semantic value. The meaning that purports to be independent depends on a network of semantic relations to be meaningful. The structuralist paradox is similar to Kant’s paradox of the inconceivability of the absolute and the paradox of the defined absolute: we cannot think the idea of the absolute since what we conceive of as being undetermined becomes determined the moment we think of it or define it.

7 The absolute as a sign: Contradiction in terms according to Peirce

Charles S. Peirce was skeptic about the possibility of absolute exactness in the empirical sciences and he objected to using the concept of the absolute with its theological implications. The absolute, according to Peirce, is that which “relates to an unattainable limit of experience”; but since we can never attain the unattainable and since “whatever has no relation to experience is devoid of all meaning” the absolute must remain hidden to our mind (CP 7.566, c.1892).

Against the dogma that absolute precision is scientifically possible, which prevailed in the natural sciences of his times, Peirce set up the doctrine of fallibilism, which states “that, our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy” (CP 1.171, c.1897). In such an ocean, there is evidently no place for Spinoza’s absolute. Against all putative certainties, Peirce declared, for example:

I object to necessity being universal, as well as to its ever being exact. In short, I object to absolute universality, absolute exactitude, absolute necessity, being attributed to any proposition that does not deal with the *Alpha* and the *Omega*, in the which I do not include any object of ordinary knowledge. (CP 6.607, 1893).

The alternative Peirce has to offer to those who hold that absolute certainty is possible is the doctrine of synechism, which teaches that, “all that exists is continuous” (CP 1.172, c.1897). For a synechist, no results of empirical investigation can be exact because empirical phenomena are never absolutely distinct. Absolute propositions should therefore always be substituted for merely “probable and approximate statements” (CP 6.603, 1893). The predicate *exact* is strictly inapplicable to the so-called exact sciences.

If empirical phenomena are never absolutely exact, the less can the idea of the absolute, which is a sign, be expected to be absolutely exact. According to Peirce’s definition, a sign has a triadic structure; it consists of (1) the sign itself, sometimes also called representamen, (2) the object, which the sign represents, and (3) the interpretant, that is, the final effect which the sign is likely to produce in some interpreting mind, in the form of a feeling, a knowledge, a memory, or an action. Let us consider, in the following, why none of these three correlates can be absolutely precise. The sign or representamen, in our context, is the word *absolute*, no matter whether spoken, written, or merely thought (as an ‘idea’). As a sign, the word *absolute* cannot be absolute in any of the senses of the word.

(1) *Determinacy and vagueness of the sign as a legisign.* The sign in itself, the word *absolute*, is a *legisign*, “i.e., a sign which is of the nature of a general type” (CP 2.264, 1903). Insofar as it is general, it cannot be absolutely precise. In every specific instance of its application, the legisign is realized in the form of a *replica* (*ibid.*), but individual replicas of a legisign, whether written or spoken, are never absolutely identical in their articulation; they always differ from each other, albeit only minimally. Thus, no replica can replicate the legisign to which it belongs with

absolute precision. An absolutely perfect sign would never change, but words and ideas change with time, which makes them imperfect and imprecise.

(2) *Determinacy and vagueness of the sign as a symbol.* Any sign can represent its object only imperfectly since a sign represents its object only “in some respect or capacity” (CP 2.228, c.1897). No sign can represent its object completely, if it did, it would be the object itself, not a sign of it. In relation to its object, the word *absolute* is a symbol, a sign associated with the idea it represents by a habit or convention (cf. NÖTH, 2010). Being determined by a habit, no symbol is absolute in the sense of being ‘undetermined’. Symbols are always indeterminate and vague in their meaning (cf. CP 5.449, 1905; NÖTH & SANTAELLA, 2009). Being vague and general, symbols are by definition imperfect signs.

A “perfect” sign of the absolute could only be an icon, not a symbol since only the icon is a sign that has qualities which it shares with its object. An icon of the absolute would be a sign that does more than only represent the idea of the absolute—it would itself evince the quality of being perfect. With the Romantics, we can dream of an iconic representation of the absolute in the form of an absolutely perfect work of art, but we must realize that no work of art in reality can be absolutely perfect. The very idea of an absolutely perfect work of art would mean the end of art because any subsequent work of art would be condemned to be inferior in quality to this absolutely perfect work of art.

(3) *Incompleteness of the interpretant.* In relation to its interpretant, the word *absolute* is a rheme, whereas its definition is a *dicent*. A rheme is a sign that corresponds to the predicate of a proposition. In the same way in which all words, irrespective of their particular context, a rheme represents the object of the sign as a mere possibility.

As a rheme, the idea of the absolute can neither be interpreted as true or false (CP 8.337, 1904). The interpretant of any rheme is therefore undetermined as to its truth-value (CP 2.95, 1902; CP 4.327, 1904). However, reflections on the idea of the absolute are never without a context in which the absolute is usually the predicate (rheme) of a proposition (dicent). In the proposition, *God is absolute*, the rheme *absolute* is a relational rheme (CP 4.354, 1903) insofar as it functions as the predicate of an argument to which it is logically related. As a *relational rheme* the idea of the absolute cannot be ‘unrelated’, as the definitions of the absolute postulate.

8 The semiotic paradox of the absolute as the object of a sign

Having arrived at the conclusion that the word *absolute* as a sign cannot itself be absolute, the question remains to be examined whether it is perhaps the idea of the absolute represented by the sign, in other words, the object of the sign, that may be absolute.

The object of the sign is something real or fictive, a thought, an experience, a fact, or a mere feeling, with which the interpreter must be familiar and which thus makes the interpretation of the sign possible (cf. NÖTH, 2011). A sign of an object

unknown to an interpreter cannot be interpreted. Peirce distinguishes between the immediate and the dynamical or real object of the sign (cf. PAPE, 1991; RANSDALL, 2007). The *dynamical* or also *real* object of the sign is the object as it “really” is, regardless of whether it is represented by means of the sign or not (cf. CP 7.659, 1903). We have no absolute knowledge to this “real” object in the world before the sign since we can only cognize this object by means of its signs. Although we can never grasp its real essence, we can hope to know more and more about it as scientific progress advances. Thus, in the long run we can hope to approach its reality, so to speak, asymptotically. Peirce says: “There is, we think [...] a limit to this, an ultimate reality, like a zero of temperature. But in the nature of things, it can only be approached; it can only be represented” (MS 599.35f; c.1902, quoted from RANSDALL, 2007). The incomplete knowledge that we have of this object outside the sign comes from the real effects that this object exerts on our mind. By means of these cognitive effects, the dynamical object “determines” the sign that represents it.

The *immediate object* is a mental representation of the dynamical object, an idea, knowledge, or mere notion that we have of the real object of the sign. This is why Peirce also calls it “the Object as the Sign represents it” (CP 8.343, 1910). The dynamical object can only be an incomplete representation of the dynamical object (CP 4.536, 1906; CP 8.183, 1903). The immediate object of the idea of the absolute cannot be unrelated since it is by definition related to its dynamical object. Its incompleteness shows itself in the many definitions of the absolute since for each new definition all previous ones are their immediate object to which it is related. Schopenhauer’s idea of the absolute was determined by Fichte’s ideas; Fichte’s ideas were determined by the ones of Kant, and Kant’s ideas were determined by Leibniz etc. The many differences between these conceptions of the absolute are evidence of how the immediate objects of the idea of the absolute can only represent their dynamical objects incompletely.

What could possibly be the nature of a dynamical object that might determine the idea of the absolute? According to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the absolute must be conceived of as a sign without a dynamical object. If a reality outside the sign consisting of something absolutely unrelated is unknowable and if “whatever has no relation to experience is devoid of all meaning” (CP 7.566, c. 1892; see above), it seems to make no sense to postulate it as something real of influence on the idea of the absolute.

Signs without a dynamical object are signs without any truth value, e.g., hallucinations, dreams, or lies. Such signs have only immediate objects in the form of mental representations to which they relate (cf. RANSDALL, 2007), although the individual sign of which such complex signs are composed may still have their own dynamical objects (W 2:175, 1868). In the long run, signs without a dynamical object constitute a semiotic paradox if we assume with Peirce that the teleology of signs and of rational thought is to reveal the truth and to uncover the false as false (cf. CP 2.444n1, 1897).

However, according to the premises of Peirce’s semiotics, the absolute does not necessarily have to be a sign without a dynamical object at all; the idea of the absolute relates to the real if we define the real in the much broader sense in which Peirce conceives it. This broad sense of the real is not only restricted to the universe of the existent. The dynamical object of a sign can be of three kinds: a mere possibility,

an existent, or a necessity (EP 2:480-481, 1908). In his “Neglected Argument for the Reality of God”, Peirce defines the first of these “Universes of Experience familiar to us all” as the universe of “all mere Ideas, those airy nothings to which the mind of poet, pure mathematician, or another might give local habitation and a name within that mind” (CP 6.455, 1908). This may be the universe of the idea of the absolute.

The reason why mere ideas, that is, rhematic symbols, are experienced as real although they do not exist lies in their semiotic potential of influencing our thoughts, in the potential of symbols to form our ideas and make thought possible. Peirce describes this aspect of the reality of ideas as follows: “The fact that their Being consists in the mere capability of getting thought, not in anybody’s actually thinking them, saves their Reality” (idem). Thus, the mere possibility of thinking the absolute constitutes an experiential reality. However, this reality is not the strong reality of the factual but the weak reality of the influence of symbols on our thoughts and actions. Even God is real in this sense. He is not a logical necessity of thought nor can his existence be proven by the facts of the universe. His reality consists in his potential of influencing human beings in their conduct in real life (cf. RAPOSA, 1989, p. 55).

The reality of the idea of the absolute is thus the reality of any symbol. It is the reality of a sign operating as a habit of interpretation with the “real effect” of influencing its interpreter’s “conduct and thoughts according to a rule” (CP 4.447, 1905). As a symbol, the idea of the absolute creates a reality in the experience of those who know, use, and interpret it. This reality consists in the power of the symbol to determine future representation of its object. Since such a potential is a mere possibility and “a Possible can determine nothing but a Possible” (EP 2:481, 1908) its real power is weak.

Although Peirce thus ascribes reality in the sense of his pragmatic concept of reality both to God and to the absolute, he nevertheless rejects the theological definition of God as the absolute. The reason is that he considers it as a definition “without effect” (CP 8.277, 1902). To define God in terms of the absolute is a definition “without effect” because the concept of the absolute feigns accuracy and at the same time excludes the possibility of further knowledge and lived experience of God (cf. RAPOSA, 1989, p. 57).

Spinoza’s and Leibniz’s absolute in the sense of a perfect and immutable original state of the universe and a defining characteristic of God is also incompatible with Peirce’s cosmology. According to Peirce’s cosmology, the universe did not begin with a state of absolute perfection but with a state of chaos evolving towards a final state determined by laws and habits (NÖTH, 2004). An absolute, eternally perfect, cannot change, and a world determined by a cause originally perfect could no longer have evolved. This is why Peirce’s idea of God was not the idea of an absolute power, but that left room for spontaneity, creativity, and change:

The universe is not a mere mechanical result of the operation of blind law. The most obvious of all its characters cannot be so explained. It is the multitudinous facts of all experience that show us this. [...] We see these laws of mechanics [...]. We suppose that [...] these laws are absolute, and the whole universe is a boundless machine working by the blind laws

of mechanics. This is a philosophy which leaves no room for a God! No, indeed! It leaves even human consciousness, which cannot well be denied to exist, as a perfectly idle and functionless flâneur in the world, with no possible influence upon anything—not even upon itself. (CP 1.161-62, c. 1897).

Spinoza's rationalist idea of an absolute God thus suffers from its claim for absoluteness. The absolutist conception of the absolute is also incompatible with Peirce's principle of the "growth of symbols" according to which "the highest kind of symbol [...] signifies a growth, or self-development, of thought" (CP 4.9, 1905). The highest kind of symbol is not the one which remains unchanged but which exhibits semiotic growth: "For every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech. The body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones" (CP 2.222, 1903).

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Brasil

Data de envio: 09-10-15

Data de aprovação: 01-06-16

