



The self in Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*: a Peircean and a Hegelian reading

*O Eu em O desespero humano de Kierkegaard:
uma leitura Peirciana e Hegeliana*

Darin McNabb*
darinmex@gmail.com

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Abstract: The first six paragraphs of Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death* are among the densest and most difficult passages to interpret in his entire oeuvre. There, he expounds the nature of the self in terms of relations, and many have interpreted it as an expression of Hegel's dialectic. In this essay, I read those paragraphs from Peirce's logic of relations and show that Peirce allows us to understand Kierkegaard much more clearly than Hegel. Moreover, despite all that Peirce and Hegel have in common, Peirce criticizes him severely with respect to the reality of Secondness. In analyzing this criticism and also what Peirce and Kierkegaard say about the importance of doubt vis-a-vis consciousness, I show that a Peircean reading of Kierkegaard is much more fruitful than the Hegelian framework that Kierkegaard knew. In the end, I reflect on the possibility of speaking of a semiotic Kierkegaard and an existentialist Peirce.

Keywords: Consciousness. Dialectic. Relations. Secondness. Self.

Resumo: Os primeiros seis parágrafos de *O Desespero humano*, de Kierkegaard, estão entre as passagens mais densas e difíceis de interpretar em toda sua obra. Nelas, ele expõe a natureza do eu em termos de relações e muitos têm interpretado isso como uma expressão da dialética de Hegel. Nesse artigo, leio aqueles parágrafos da lógica das relações de Peirce e mostro que Peirce nos permite entender Kierkegaard muito mais claramente do que Hegel. Além disso, apesar de tudo que Peirce e Hegel têm em comum, Peirce o critica severamente com respeito à realidade da Segunda. Analisando essa crítica e também o que Peirce e Kierkegaard dizem sobre a importância da dúvida vis-à-vis consciência, eu mostro que uma leitura Peirciana de Kierkegaard é bem mais frutífera do que a estrutura Hegeliana que Kierkegaard conhecia. No final, eu reflito sobre a possibilidade de falar sobre um Kierkegaard semiótico e um Peirce existencialista.

Palavras-chave: Consciência. Dialética. Eu. Relações. Segunda.

1 Introduction

Kierkegaard's definition of the self in the opening paragraphs of the *The Sickness Unto Death* is well known for its complexity and for its resemblance to Hegelian dialectic. The idea of the self as a "relation which relates itself to itself" seems to depart from the existentialist image we have of "that individual", of a subjectivity determined directly by the will rather than by some mediating activity that the notion of relation seems to imply. Given Kierkegaard's rhetorical prowess, it would be easy to read these paragraphs in an ironical register, or even as a straight-out parody of Hegel. Most commentators, however, simply accept the dialectical terms of the self as Kierkegaard explains it and treat the "relation which relates



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* Instituto de Filosofía. Universidad
Veracruzana - México.

to itself” in generally Hegelian terms as the reflexivity which characterizes self-consciousness or in the existential language of authenticity. As Jon Stewart has convincingly shown, the famous polemic between Kierkegaard and Hegel is overblown, and that it is high time that more sympathetic and productive analyses of the relationship be made (STEWART, 2003). With respect to *The Sickness Unto Death*, Hannay, Westphal and others have made such analyses (HANNAY, 1987; WESTPHAL, 1987), showing how Kierkegaard’s conception of the self can be understood in Hegelian terms. However, their analyses center on what I will call the “how” of the self (in Hegel) rather than on the “what”, leaving the reader of Kierkegaard’s complex and concentrated definition at a loss as to how to interpret and understand what is being described.

This essay seeks to contribute to this interpretative tendency, but not through Hegel. On the one hand, a Hegelian reading is, undoubtedly, historically more pertinent, but on the other, the polemic between these two authors, though perhaps exaggerated, is not non-existent. Taken to its logical conclusion, Hegel’s dialectic deprives the Kierkegaardian self of the individuality that is characteristic of it. It seems to us that, conceptually, Charles Sanders Peirce, famous logician and theorist of relations, is a more important interlocutor. His logical analysis provides a more nuanced and differentiated taxonomy of relations than Hegel’s does, which allows for a more complete explanation of the diverse elements that compose the human self in Kierkegaard.

This paper has three objectives. First, I wish to remedy the aforementioned problem by making explicit the “what”, or essence, of the self in Hegel, by which I mean an analysis of the basic structure of the dialectical movement of the concept in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Science of Logic*. This structure could be described as Hegel’s logic of relations. The problem is that his discussion of this logic is prolix and abstruse, which leads me to the second objective, namely, to show that a nearly equivalent but better reading can be made using C. S. Peirce’s logic of relations. Peirce was undoubtedly influenced by Hegel, but was a much better and more profound logician. His logic of relations is a model of clarity which explains all of the relations in Kierkegaard’s definition of the self, shedding light on some of the more obscure details which are not altogether clear if seen only through Hegel’s dialectic. Regarding the “what” of the self, that is, its nature or essence, the difference between a Hegelian or a Peircean reading of Kierkegaard is minimal, but regarding the “how”, that is, how the self achieves the relations which define it, there is an important difference which leads me to my third objective. This will consist in showing, first, that the real polemic between Kierkegaard and Hegel is not in the “what” of the self but in the “how”, and second, that the places in which Peirce differs from Hegel make him, precisely for that reason, a much more fruitful interpreter of Kierkegaard. If my argument is correct, this will lead us to a conception of the self in Kierkegaard as more semiotic than dialectic. But also, *mutatis mutandis*, it will lead us to reinterpret the mediating and rational conception of selfhood in Peirce in terms of the volitional element of the synthetic relation as Kierkegaard sees it, thus bringing to the fore a sort of existentialist Peirce.

In spite of the order in which I mentioned the three objectives, I think it better to begin with Peirce, then proceed dialectically to Hegel, then back to Peirce. We will begin with a Peircean interpretation of the opening paragraphs of *The Sickness Unto Death*, for which we will need to briefly discuss, first, the basic outline of his logic of relations.

2 Peirce’s logic of relations

Peirce’s philosophical categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness form the basis for an understanding of the logic of relations. Every phenomenon can be considered in relation to itself, monadically, in immediate relation to something else, a second, dyadically, or in relation to a second through the mediation of a third, triadically. A monadic character can be given in just one way, but dyadic

and triadic relations can be given in diverse ways which Peirce terms either degenerate or genuine. A genuine dyadic relation Peirce defines as a fact concerning two subjects – a single fact, not two separate facts. “Cain killed Abel” is an example. The single fact expressed here requires the relation of the two. Had Abel never existed, Cain could never have been his murderer. “Cain and Abel are sons of Adam and Eve” is a degenerate relation because two facts are simply brought together. If Abel had never existed, Cain would still be a son of Adam and Eve.

Things are a bit more complicated with triadic relations. Peirce says:

Every triad is either monadically degenerate, dyadically degenerate, or genuine. A monadically degenerate triad is one which results from the essence of three monads, its subjects. A dyadically degenerate triad is one which results from the conjunction of two dyads. A genuine triad is one which cannot be resolved in any such way. (CP 1.473).

One of Peirce’s favorite examples of a genuine triad is the relation of giving: A gives B to C. The dyadically degenerate form of this relation would be one composed of two dyads: A – B and B – C. For example, A puts B on the table, and then C takes B. We have a triadic relation here because it is composed of three elements, but it is degenerate because it is composed of two dyads, two independent facts. Genuine relations have to do with one fact concerning the relates in question. What is missing in the dyadically degenerate triad is the mediating element between A and C that makes what is expressed be an act of giving. With these preliminary remarks, we can move on to the opening of *The Sickness unto Death* and to an interpretation of the self therein described in terms of Peirce’s logic of relations.

3 Kierkegaard’s definition of the self: a Peircean reading

In the opening paragraph of his text, Kierkegaard gives a nearly complete definition of the self. “The human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation which relates to itself, or that in the relation which is its relating to itself. The self is not the relation but the relation’s relating to itself”. Kierkegaard spends the rest of this brief first section unpacking this rather dense formulation. In spite of its density, it is clear from the second part of the definition that there is a relation which is not the self. We learn in the following sentence that this relation is a synthesis of various pairs of elements: “the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal, freedom and necessity”. Taking the latter pair, Kierkegaard tells us that to be human is to be neither entirely free nor entirely determined but rather a synthesis of the two.

In Peircean terms, a relation of two elements is a dyad, and as we saw above, a dyad can be either genuine or degenerate. If the freedom and necessity that make up a human being were a mere combination in which one could be given without the other, or in which one could be striven for and the other eliminated, we would have a degenerate relation. But Kierkegaard speaks not of a combination but of a synthesis; being human comprises a relation in which both elements are necessary, one not being possible without the other. This would be a genuine dyad. “Looked at in this way,” however, “a human being is not yet a self”. Kierkegaard tells us that this basic or initial relation of contradictory pairs is a necessary but not sufficient condition of selfhood.

Kierkegaard begins the second paragraph by introducing a third element: “In a relation between two things the relation is the third term in the form of a negative unity”. The introduction of this third term brings us closer to selfhood, but we are still not there because the unity which the relation itself brings about is merely negative. Kierkegaard explains what he means by this by saying that the two elements in the relation “relate to the relation, and in the relation to that relation”, and attempts to illustrate this with the following: “this is what it is from the point of view of soul for soul and body to be in relation”.

This second paragraph is perhaps the most confusing of the entire book, but we can begin to make sense of it by returning to Peirce.

We have a relation with three elements (the two elements and the relation itself) which makes it a triad, but it is in some way defective; it is, as Kierkegaard says, a merely negative unity. In Peirce's terminology, this negativity is expressed in terms of degeneracy. Recall that, for triads, there are two possible grades of degeneracy: the conjunction of three monads and the conjunction of two dyads. The negative unity that Kierkegaard speaks of is a degenerate triad of the latter kind, the conjunction of two dyads. He says as much when he speaks of each relate relating to the relation, as, for example, when the unity of soul and body is seen from the point of view, or under the aspect, of the soul. The soul relates to the soul-body relation in a negative or degenerate way because, though the body is included in the relation, it is seen from the soul's perspective as derivative or secondary, as something to be controlled or diminished, in short, as an inessential element for the being of soul. This independence of the elements is what makes a relation degenerate.

If sense is to be made of the synthesis of soul and body, and not their mere combination, the three elements distributed between the two dyads must become a genuine triad, and this happens when a third, the relation itself in this case, unites the other two. This is effected not by soul but by spirit. "If, on the other hand, the relation relates to itself", Kierkegaard tells us, "then this relation is the positive third, and this is the self".

This relation, however, is not done relating. Kierkegaard tells us that the relation which is the self "must either have established itself or been established by something else". If the self assumes the latter case, then, in addition to being a relation that relates to itself, it "relates in turn to that which has established the whole relation" which, though not explicitly stated, is assumed to be God.

For Peirce, the highest and most evolved form of relation is a genuine triad which, as we have shown, is the positive third that Kierkegaard calls the self. So why does Kierkegaard, having already accounted for the emergence of the self, introduce this additional act of relating? Does he intend to introduce an even higher order relation? If the self is a positive third term, the "something else" that establishes the whole relation and to which the self relates could be read as a fourth term. Is Kierkegaard, then, speaking of a tetradic relation? Peirce's Reduction Thesis states that "every tetradic relation, or fact about four objects can be analyzed into a compound of triadic relations" (CP 7.537). Assuming, then, that this relation is triadic, what does it add to our understanding of the self?

Logically speaking, it adds nothing. The self as a positive third, introduced at the end of the second paragraph, is the highest or most evolved form of the human psyche from a functional or structural point of view. We could say that the argument up until this point answers the "what" question with which Kierkegaard begins – What is spirit, what is the self? But it does not answer what we can call the "how" question. How does the self carry out its function of relating? According to Kierkegaard, it does so either well or badly or, in Peircean terms, genuinely or degenerately. A self that, in addition to relating to itself, relates to that which established the whole is balanced and therefore healthy. A self not so related is imbalanced; it suffers a sickness that Kierkegaard calls despair. The rest of the book is a very detailed analysis of this condition. Now, given that the self is a triadic relation, we know that there are two forms of degeneracy, and in fact Kierkegaard identifies two forms of what he calls authentic despair. The first form consists in the self not wanting to be itself, wanting to be rid of itself, in other words, refusing the work of relating. The second form is wanting to be itself, wanting all on its own to do the work of relating, the work of achieving equilibrium between the elements that it relates. These forms of existence are what Kierkegaard analyzes in the aesthetic and ethical registers, respectively, of such famous works as *Either/Or* and *Fear and Trembling*.

The religious register, which is the culmination of Kierkegaard's dialectic, corresponds in this context to the relation of the self with that which established the whole. Kierkegaard derives this relation from a consideration of the two forms of despair. He says: "That is why there can be two forms of

authentic despair. If the human self were self-established, there would only be a question of one form: not wanting to be itself, wanting to be rid of itself". Since there are two forms of despair, the self cannot be self-established. In order to explain the facts at hand, not only that there are two forms of despair, but also that there are selves that achieve the relational equilibrium that characterize health, Kierkegaard introduces the further relation of the self to that which established it. What it adds to our understanding of the self, as we asked earlier, is a complete picture of the "how" of its existence.

For Peirce, the "what" question is descriptive, but the "how" question is normative. What is a genuine triadic relation? It is a sign that relates an object with an interpretant. The interpretant is the meaning of the sign which stands for the object. Now, any given interpretant is never final or complete because the sign which represents the object represents it only partially, in a determinate way or from a particular point of view. Any particular sign captures only an aspect of the object, for which reason Peirce calls the object at any determinate time in a process of semiosis the "immediate object". The real or "dynamical" object is the object in its totality, being the sum of all possible representations which, in the course of semiosis, constrains any particular interpretation.

Now, if the aim of the interpretation of a given sign is the truth, and any given interpretation is partial, then this implies for Peirce the need for a long series of inferences. But this presents a problem. As Peirce says: "Now the number of risks, the number of probable inferences, which a man draws in his whole life, is a finite one, and he cannot be absolutely *certain* that the mean result will accord with the probabilities at all" (EP 1:148). The fact of man's death means that his inferences or interpretations have a finite reach, which excludes the possibility of certainty in the interpretation of any given sign. The solution Peirce finds to this dilemma is the following:

It seems to me that we are driven to this, that logicity inexorably requires that our interests shall *not* be limited. They must not stop at our own fate, but must embrace the whole community. This community, again, must not be limited, but must extend to all races of beings with whom we can come into immediate or mediate intellectual relation. It must reach, however vaguely, beyond this geological epoch, beyond all bounds. He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is, as it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences, collectively. Logic is rooted in the social principle. (EP 1:149).

The relation and identification of one's personal interests with those of an indefinite community, unbounded by space and time, is Peirce's version of the Kierkegaardian self that relates to that which established the self-relation.

Before continuing this analysis, we should take a moment to ask what advantage has been gained so far by reading Kierkegaard's notion of the self with Peirce rather than Hegel, especially now given the fact that Peirce's identification of the self with the community seems to be very similar to Hegel's "I that is We and We that is I". To answer this, we turn now to a Hegelian reading of Kierkegaard's argument.

4 The dialectical self: Hegel

If we were to pose Kierkegaard's question to Hegel – what is the self? – an obvious but misleading, or at least incomplete, answer could be found in the famous master-slave dialectic of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. There we see that the self is a consciousness which becomes conscious of itself through being recognized as such by another consciousness. If this is the point at which the self emerges, then at least some of what occurs in the journey of consciousness from the beginning of the *Phenomenology* up to that point could be considered as integral to the dialectical process of the constitution of the self. In general, I think this is correct, but it is misleading because it leads us to concentrate on a level of the

dialectic in which we take the “how” for the “what”. What I mean by this is that the whole sweep of the *Phenomenology* from the emergence of self-consciousness to absolute knowing is the story of *how* consciousness, or the self, resolves epistemic conflicts. But at each and every point of this process there is one and the same dynamic that repeats itself. *What* is this dynamic? It is the basic structure of the dialectic. We now turn to an analysis of its components as laid out by Hegel in the last chapter of the *Science of Logic* – “The Absolute Idea”.

Applied to consciousness, the components of Hegel’s dialectic are states of consciousness which attempt to comprehend the external world. Consciousness initially understands its object as given immediately and as being determined in-itself. For Hegel, the concept by which reality is comprehended at any particular moment is abstract and partial, being only a one-sided moment of the absolute idea which is implicit in existence. Through the movement of the dialectic, that implicitness is made increasingly explicit.

The properly dialectical moment comes when “the initial universal [the partial concept] determines itself from within itself as the other of itself” (SL, 741). This determinate negation posits the contrary of the first concept. Being the negative of the immediate, “it is therefore determined as the mediated – [and] contains as such the determination of the first in it. The first is thus essentially preserved and contained also in the other” (SL, 744).

For Hegel, the relation of these two opposing terms forms a unity which, he says, “can be expressed in the form of a proposition in which the immediate is placed as the subject but the mediated as its predicate; for example, ‘the finite is infinite’, ‘one is many’, ‘the singular is the universal’” (SL, 744). The predicate or mediate term is no longer taken as in-itself but rather for-itself since it is its very other that it passes over into. For Kant, as we know, these opposites or antinomies express the limit of the understanding and of positive knowledge and impose on reason as such a merely regulative rather than a constitutive function.

Hegel surpasses Kant, or at least attempts to, by attributing to reason not only a negative, dialectical exercise, but also a positive speculative one. The latter consists in negating the first negation, in sublating the contradiction into a shape of consciousness in which the two terms are preserved in a new and expanded unity. Hegel describes the operation of this third term as synthetic “because it is the connection of the differentiated, as differentiated, to that from which it is differentiated” (SL, 746). This latter is the concept itself, the absolute idea which, Hegel says,

is both the universal that exists in itself and the negative that exists for itself, and also the third term that exists in and for itself, the universal that runs through all the moments of the syllogism; but this third is the conclusion in which the concept mediates itself with itself through its negativity and is thereby posited for itself as the universal and the identity of its moments. (SL, 747).

Though we think of Hegel’s dialectic as three-termed, popularly understood as thesis-antithesis-synthesis, it is structured in terms of binary pairs: the initial concept is understood as abstract, universal, immediate, and positively in-itself. With the first negation it sees itself in another that is concrete, particular, mediate, and for-itself. The third term which mediates the initial pair Hegel describes as in-and-for-itself, but it is so with respect to the contradictory pair. With respect to the implicit absolute idea, the third term is still an abstraction and reverts to be taken as an immediate universal in-itself. And the dialectic continues.

Let us see how this can help us understand the self in Kierkegaard’s analysis. Recall that, for Kierkegaard, there is (1) a basic synthesis of two opposed elements (the infinite and the finite, freedom and necessity, etc.); (2) a third term, the relation itself, which he describes as a negative unity; and (3) the relation’s relating itself to itself, a positive unity.

Stage (1) clearly seems to mirror Hegel's so-called thesis and antithesis, though Kierkegaard does not speak of one term being derived from the other. Rather he begins his argument with two terms being given as a synthesis. It is important to note that they are a synthesis. They are not merely combined or juxtaposed but rather form a unity. "A synthesis," says Kierkegaard, "is a relation between two terms", the relation itself constituting a third term which he describes as a "negative unity". In order to understand this latter, it is also important to see that this synthesis is seen as given. In Hegelian terms, it is immediate or in-itself. If we take the example of the synthesis of soul and body that Kierkegaard mentions in the second paragraph, the human being is seen as just this synthesis, given naturally or immediately. Kierkegaard says that the terms of the relation "relate to the relation, and in the relation to that relation; this is what it is from the point of view of soul for the soul and body to be in relation". The soul relates to the relation soul-body as something in-itself, as does the body from its point of view.

But this is not what Hegel describes in the *Science of Logic*. He says:

Because the first or the immediate is the concept in itself or implicitly, and therefore is the negative also only implicitly, the dialectical moment in it consists in the positing of the difference that is implicitly contained in it. The second is on the contrary itself the determinate, the difference or relation; hence the dialectical moment consists in its case in the positing of the unity contained within it. (SL, 745).

This positing of the unity is mediated and thus no longer taken as immediate, and it is therefore for-itself. But we don't see this in Kierkegaard's text, for which reason we might think that Hegel's dialectic does not describe what Kierkegaard is doing. But this is not the case. The reason is that in the *Science of Logic* Hegel is not speaking from the point of view of consciousness, as he does in the *Phenomenology*, but rather from our point of view as observers of the dialectic, as readers of his text. "For us", the nature of each term, what it is in-itself, is made possible by its relation with the other, with *its* other, which makes the mediating term for-itself. From the point of view of consciousness, however, the situation is as Kierkegaard describes it, each term seeing the relation from its point of view as naturally or externally determined. Given that these terms are contradictories, there would seem to be no solution to their cycling back and forth from one point of view to the other – an epistemic dead end, or as Kierkegaard says, a negative unity.

However, if what relates to the relation is, as Kierkegaard says, not either of the terms but the relation itself, "then this relation is the positive third, and this is the self". This is precisely what happens with the third term in Hegel's dialectic. The first negation which created the contradictory pair is, in its turn, negated. As we commented earlier: "this third is the conclusion in which the concept mediates itself with itself through its negativity and is thereby posited for itself as the universal and the identity of its moments" (SL, 747). What from our perspective is the in-itself of the first term and the for-itself of the second term is sublated by the third term into a unity that is in-and-for-itself. This is the equivalent of Kierkegaard's self.

Now, at least in terms of our reading of Kierkegaard's text, this positive third is the "what" of the self, its basic structure, which I believe Hegel's three-termed dialectic describes to a great degree. However, the self in Hegel cannot be so easily reduced to this structure. We see the dialectical movement at play from the first forays of consciousness at the beginning of the *Phenomenology* up to the master/slave discussion, but it isn't until this latter takes place that the self as such can be said to emerge. The important point is that the *Phenomenology* does not end at this point. Returning to the *Science of Logic*, Hegel says, regarding the negation of the negation:

In this turning point of the method, the course of cognition returns at the same time back into itself. This negativity is as self-sublating contradiction the restoration of the first immediacy, of simple universality; for the other of the other, the negative of the negative, is immediately the positive, the identical, the universal. (SL, 746).

At any point in the dialectic, save at the very end, the concept created by the sublation, insofar as it relates to the experience of the external world, reverts to conceiving it as immediate and in-itself, and the dialectic continues. Although this is also true for the point where self-consciousness emerges, a very important change occurs which shifts us from the “what” to the “how”. As Westphal comments:

[The] crucial moment in Hegelian thought comes as an amplification of the Cartesian-Kantian thesis that the “I think” must be able to accompany all my representations, or, to put it more directly, that (human) consciousness is inseparable from self-consciousness. The Hegelian move is simply to go one step further to the thesis that self-consciousness is inseparable from other-consciousness, that my awareness of my own self is always mediated through my awareness of another self. (WESTPHAL, 1987, p. 43-44).

In order to be a self, consciousness must address other selves through the mediation of ever-widening social and cultural contexts such that the possibility of its individuality becomes inseparable from the community - the “I that is We and We that is I” which Hegel describes as “absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses”.

5 Peirce or Hegel?

We ended section two asking what advantage there is to reading Kierkegaard with Peirce rather than Hegel. Now that we have seen the Hegelian reading of the text, we can venture a judgment. Given that Kierkegaard undoubtedly modeled his argument on Hegel’s dialectic, a Hegelian reading is clearly of historical and philological interest, but also, as we have seen, of philosophical relevance. In spite of its conceptual and expository density, the structure of the dialectic is capable of explaining the different relations which constitute the Kierkegaardian self. The principal advantage of reading the text from Peirce’s logic of relations is the almost mathematical formality of the latter. His categorial scheme and the degenerate-genuine distinction lay out in a clear hierarchical taxonomy the different possibilities of relation, allowing the reader of Kierkegaard to identify in each turn of the argument the kind of relation that is being discussed. It does so at least much more clearly than Hegel’s in-itself – for-itself distinction.

If we pass from the “what” to the “how”, both Peirce and Hegel suffer limitations in their explanatory power. Let us recall that after discussing the positive third which he calls the self, Kierkegaard says: “Such a relation, which relates to itself, a self, must either have established itself or been established by something else”. This something else is God. As we discussed earlier, the relations that constitute the self, its “what”, are given, but “how” it does the relating is not; the self has options. It can either (1) refuse to be a self, which means refusing to relate the contradictory terms which constitute it, thus taking itself as a naturally determined object; (2) desire to be a self and do the relating all on its own; (3) relate to that (God) which established the relations. This latter is the condition for the health of the spirit; the other two are forms of imbalance or sickness, what Kierkegaard calls despair.

One thing that Peirce and Hegel have in common and that distinguishes them from Kierkegaard is the clearly epistemic cast of their systems. Regarding the “how” of the cognitive activities of consciousness, both move beyond the conceptual capacities of the individual toward that of the widest possible community in order to remedy experiences of doubt and limitation. But this community, the “I that is We and the We that is I” is not God. It pertains not to the dimension that Kierkegaard calls religious, but to the ethical. As Westphal comments:

From the ethical point of view (understood by Kierkegaard in Hegelian terms) it is the social order that is the self's ground ... Such a view treats one's fellow humans as the primary other to whom one relates. Since a right relation to this power that has established the self constitutes the self's health, the result is that each seeks "to be like others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man." "Surrounded by hordes of men [...] such a person forgets himself [...]" (WESTPHAL, 1987, p. 46).

In Peirce and Hegel, given their cognitive focus, the *I* does seem to get lost in the *We*. In Kierkegaard, the focus is not cognitive but volitional and the will is something that concerns the individual.

There is another important difference, related to the first, which is especially salient in Hegel. The dialectic, though it preserves the terms in a higher sublated unity, eliminates the contradiction as such. The point of the entire dialectical process is to arrive at the absolute in which all contradiction is overcome. But this doesn't happen in Kierkegaard. As Hannay comments: "spirit posits the synthesis as a *contradiction*; spirit 'sustains' the contradiction (CA, 88), it doesn't resolve it" (HANNAY, 1987, p. 34). For Kierkegaard, we are a synthesis of the finite and the infinite, of necessity and freedom, a synthesis which must be sustained rather than overcome. A constant dialectical mediation of these terms dilutes them to the point where, for Kierkegaard, they are no longer efficacious or at least where they no longer serve to define the self, the self being this very activity of balancing the two terms, of taking a stance toward them.

Do we find in Peirce the same result as in Hegel? In one sense, yes. Man is a sign in development, a sign whose meaning is understood in terms of the generalized habits of inference that he acquires over time thanks to the mediation of the community of inquirers. In terms of his categories, man is characterized to a great extent by Thirdness, which is precisely the category of mediation and generality. However, being categories, all three are essential; none can be prescind from or overcome. Here we find one of his greatest differences from Hegel, a difference which, in some degree, I believe can make him a philosophical ally of Kierkegaard.

6 Peirce beyond Hegel: doubt and secondness

Peirce was very much influenced by Hegel and shares with him a great deal: objective idealism, the rejection of an unknowable thing-in-itself, triadic structure, among other things. However, he states that Hegel is guilty of a capital error, one that has repercussions in every part of his system, namely, that "he almost altogether ignores the Outward Clash" (CP 8.41). Peirce refers here to the brute, dyadic, surprising character of experience, to that which resists, is direct and unmediated. It is not only that Hegel ignores this aspect of reality, which corresponds to Peirce's category of Secondness, but that it, along with Firstness – possibility, chance, and spontaneity – are *aufgehoben* in Hegel's system in favor of the *Begriff* (CP 8.268). The growth of knowledge implies the elimination or correction of inadequate beliefs, the only motive for which can be that one desires to remove the irritation of doubt caused by those beliefs. If there is no doubt, there is no reason to change the concepts which structure belief.

Now, one may object to this and say that doubt is the basis on which the whole journey of the *Phenomenology* is undertaken. In the Preface, Hegel famously describes the road on which consciousness will travel as: "the pathway of doubt, or more precisely as the way of despair", a path which is not a superficial questioning but consists rather in "the conscious insight into the untruth of phenomenal knowledge, for which the supreme reality is what is in truth only the unrealized Notion" (PS, 49-50). Excluding phrases such as "no doubt" or "without a doubt", in the rest of the *Phenomenology* Hegel uses the word "doubt" only twice more in the sense described here. This would not have surprised Peirce, since it is the Outward Clash (*aufgehoben* in Hegel) that makes us doubt. Peirce says that Hegel "reaches each category from the last preceding by virtually calling 'next!'" (CP 1.453). Though this

is rhetorical exaggeration, it is not far from the truth. It would seem that, for Hegel, it is not doubt but rather the *Begriff* “implicit in existence” that drives conceptual development, its unfolding, through a sort of mechanical negation of partial concepts, a negation through contradiction, that ends by making the Absolute concept or idea thoroughly explicit. Peirce says:

the idea that the mere reaction of assent and doubt, the mere play of thought, the heat-lightning of the brain, is going to settle anything in this real world to which we appertain, – such an idea only shows again how the Hegelians overlook the facts of volitional action and reaction in the development of thought. (CP 8.45).

Peirce refers here to the lack of reaction (the outward clash) in the Hegelian scheme as well as the lack of volitional action. And it is here that I think a case can be made for tempering Peirce’s Hegelian idealism with a bit of Kierkegaardian existentialism. To see how this might be plausible, let us organize the various pairs of opposed terms that Kierkegaard analyzes in his text in terms of Peirce’s categories. The pairs are:

Infinitude-finitude
Freedom-necessity
Eternal-temporal
Ideality- reality

They map quite neatly onto Peirce’s first and third categories:

Firstness: infinitude, freedom, eternal, ideality

Thirdness: finitude, necessity, temporal, reality

Firstness is the category of pure, qualitative possibility, chance, and spontaneity, of that which is undetermined. In *The Sickness Unto Death* and *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard characterizes these terms which we have associated with Firstness as the fantastical and unbounded, where one lives in daydreams and everything is possible, but nothing is realized. Thirdness is the category of regularity, mediation, and the habitual exercise of law. As we saw before, Kierkegaard characterizes this as the social or ethical order in which rules are followed, in which one seeks “to be like others, to become a copy, a number, a mass man.” “Surrounded by hordes of men . . . such a person forgets himself...”

Now, we saw what it means for these pairs to be joined in a negative unity, and how the emergence of the self which defines itself in terms of neither of these halves but rather in terms of the relation itself constitutes a positive third or positive unity. Using Kierkegaard as our guide, we can easily infer what Secondness would correspond to in Peirce’s scheme – quite simply *the self*. Our hypothesis is that the idealist, Hegelian, rational conception of the self in terms of Thirdness, as it is usually interpreted (including by Peirce himself), is exaggerated, and in an important sense incorrect.

It is not only Kierkegaard that suggests this hypothesis, but Peirce himself. Peirce says: “The actual world cannot be distinguished from a world of imagination by any description. Hence the need of pronouns and indices” (EP 1:227). What he means to say is that the real and ideal worlds (the worlds of Thirdness and Firstness that we mentioned earlier) remain indistinguishable so long as we merely describe them, that is, use symbols and general terms. They can be distinguished only through the use of indices (a pointing finger is an example of an index). Kierkegaard expresses the same idea in *Johannes Climacus* when he says that “In ideality, everything is just as perfectly true as in reality” (JC, 168). This is a posthumously published work that is subtitled “De Omnibus Dubitandum Est” whose central theme is doubt and its important role vis-a-vis consciousness. As we will see, what is needed to distinguish the two is consciousness itself. A few lines after the aforementioned quote Kierkegaard says:

Reality is not consciousness, ideality no more so. Yet consciousness does not exist without both, and this contradiction is the coming into existence of consciousness and is its nature.

Before proceeding any further, he [Johannes Climacus] considered whether or not what he at this point called consciousness was what usually was called reflection. He formulated the relevant definition as follows: Reflection is the possibility of the relation; consciousness is the relation, the first form of which is contradiction. As a result, he also noted, reflection's categories are always dichotomous. For example, ideality and reality, soul and body, to know the true, to will the good, to love the beautiful, God and the world, etc. are categories of reflection. In reflection, they touch each other in such a way that a relation becomes possible. The categories of consciousness, however, are trichotomous, as language also demonstrates, for when I say, I am conscious of this sensory impression, I am expressing a triad. Consciousness is mind, and it is remarkable that when one is divided in the world of mind, there are three, never two. Consciousness, therefore, presupposes reflection. If this were not the case, then it would be impossible to explain doubt. (JC, 169).

The concept of reflection here refers to the work of the understanding in positing rigid, one-sided concepts as we discussed regarding Kant and Hegel. Interestingly, Kierkegaard uses the existence of doubt as a way to infer how the human self must be structured. If the human being were no more than a synthesis of these opposites "doubt would not exist, for the possibility of doubt resides precisely in the third, which places the two in relation to each other". But mere consciousness with nothing to relate to, without these opposing terms, would not even exist. It arises as a response to them. "Reflection [the opposed terms] is the possibility of the relation". Reflection as such he describes as *disinterested*:

Consciousness, however, is the relation and thereby is interest, a duality that is perfectly and with pregnant double meaning expressed in the word "interest" (*interesse* [being between]). Therefore, all disinterested knowledge (mathematics, esthetics, metaphysics) is only the presupposition of doubt. As soon as the interest is canceled, doubt is not conquered but is neutralized, and all such knowledge is simply a retrogression. Thus it would be a misunderstanding for someone to think that doubt can be overcome by so-called objective thinking. Doubt is a higher form than any objective thinking, for it presupposes the latter but has something more, a third, which is interest or consciousness. (JC, 170).

I have quoted at length from this text in order to make clear Kierkegaard's basic objection to Hegel. His problem is not with the structure of the dialectic as such but with its tendency to erase what he considers to be the essential role of the self; the conversion of a subjective interest into the objective disinterestedness of a system which "reaches each category from the last preceding by virtually calling 'next!'".

Peirce makes an interesting comment that reflects what Kierkegaard has said about consciousness and doubt.

A belief is chiefly an affair of the soul, not of the consciousness; a doubt, on the contrary, is chiefly an affair of consciousness. It is an uneasy feeling, a special condition of irritation, in which the idea of two incompatible modes of conduct [is] before the doubter's imagination, and nothing determines him, indeed he feels himself forbidden, to adopt either and reject the other. (NEM 4:40-41).

Peirce distinguishes here between the soul and consciousness. Soul is the dimension of the self in which inferences and choices flow automatically as if they traveled on the tracks laid down by habit. It is the dimension of Thirdness. Consciousness is the dimension of the self in which the experience of doubt is

predominant and corresponds, according to our hypothesis, to Secondness. It is interested because, as Kierkegaard's etymology indicates, it is between, as Peirce says, "two incompatible modes of conduct". Now, it is true that, for Peirce, the "how" of the self is impelled by the motive to eliminate the irritation of doubt, but given his categorial structure, this doubt, though largely overcome over time, is never fully overcome. The Firstness and Secondness of man's nature cannot be *aufgehoben*, even though most of it is governed by Thirdness.

We see this aspect of the self most clearly in Peirce's conception of the "scientific man" and of the scientific enterprise. He was highly critical of the traditional notion of science as systematized knowledge, as an ordered collection of ascertained truths. Science is not a result, but rather an activity motivated by a passionate desire to learn. He says: "For it is not knowing, but the love of learning, that characterizes the scientific man; while the 'philosopher' is a man with a system which he thinks embodies all that is best worth knowing" (CP 1.43-5). He describes research as being scientific "from the first moment when the researcher casts aside all desire to prove his present opinions right, and burns with ardent desire to find out wherein they are wrong" (MS 426:12). Though one's soul is full of beliefs that one does not in fact doubt, the scientific man, *qua* scientist, is consciousness that lives in the possibility that he is wrong. He lives not in the comfort of belief (Thirdness) but in the uncertainty of doubt (Secondness).

7 Conclusions

In spite of Kierkegaard's famous dispute with Hegel, his conception of the self, at least what I have called the "what" of the self, can be profitably read through the lens of the Hegelian dialectic. This was the first objective of this paper.

As we have seen, it can also be quite clearly explicated in terms of Peirce's logic of relations. The problem comes with the "how" of the self. Both Peirce and Hegel assuage the despair of the self, which they understand in epistemic terms, by locating it in a social context which, as we mentioned, is not the same as the God relation proposed by Kierkegaard. Nonetheless, Peirce's critique of Hegel regarding the insuperable reality of Firstness and Secondness as well as the intimate link between the experience of doubt and the nature of consciousness make a Peircean reading of Kierkegaard perhaps more fruitful and wide-reaching. This was my second objective.

My third objective was to see in what sense this discussion would allow us to speak of a "semiotic Kierkegaard" and an "existentialist Peirce". Obviously, the term "existentialist" refers to a wide range of ideas that do not apply to Peirce. It would be very difficult to mistake one of his essays with one of Kierkegaard's. Nonetheless, I hope to have shown that insofar as Peirce was a scientific man, that he was an individual in the Kierkegaardian sense, not so much an objective soul filled with beliefs as a subjective consciousness perpetually straddled between "impossible assents".

As for a semiotic Kierkegaard, again, the term is very wide in its references and connotations. I would use it here only in contradistinction to the term "dialectic" and specifically the dialectic as Hegel understood it. I think the difference between Hegel's dialectic and Peirce's semiotic centers on the experience and role of doubt. The former is a logical unfolding, a remembrance guided by the past, by what already and always was, while the latter is an experiential progression oriented toward the future. There has to be an element of surprise in the experience of doubt, between what we currently believe and what we experience. If a response to this surprising shock (outward clash) proceeds by just calling out the opposite of the concept involved in the current belief, this does not seem to be an appropriate response to something surprising. If the response is foreordained, nothing it seems, could be surprising. For Peirce, genuine doubt is integral to the formation of concepts, or of signs. The appearance of concepts in Hegel's dialectic seems not to be guided by the experience of **doubt** but rather through a

mechanical negation guided by **contradiction**. The **internal development** of the *Begriff* is privileged over the **outward clash**, and the **cognitive** over the **volitional**.

In any case, perhaps the adjective “semiotic” is not appropriate. Whatever term might be used to indicate Kierkegaard’s affinity with Peirce’s thought in this regard, it is clear that a more detailed analysis than I have given in this paper would be needed to explicate it.

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