What is the semiotic self?[1]

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In its last issue, TECCOGS presented a dialogue on issues of Cognitive Semiotics, which Professor Vincent Colapietro, University of Rhode Island (Kingston, RI, USA), contributed to this journal in dialogue with Winfried Nöth.[6] Under the title "Cognitive Semiotics – Minds, and Machines", he outlined the foundations of Charles Sanders Peirce's philosophy of mind and its relevance to the study of human and artificial intelligence. TECCOGS now brings a new dialogue with Colapietro as the first of a series of three "Reflections", first presented in dialogue with Winfried Nöth on TIDD's YouTube channel under Lucia Santaella's curatorship. "What is the semiotic self?", "How can we change habits", and "Why sentiments can be logical" are the titles of the three Reflections. In this series, Colapietro adds new chapters to extend his introduction to cognitive semiotics. Among the topics of these Reflections are the self as a cognitive agent, the philosophy of intelligence, and the role of emotion in cognition and reasoning.

w.n.: Welcome, Professor Colapietro, and thank you for sharing your ideas with us. "What is the semiotic self?" is the question we are asking you today. The question sounds somewhat like carrying coals to Newcastle, for your book under the title *Peirce e a abordagem do self: Uma perspectiva semiótica sobre a subjetividade humana* was already published in 2014 so that some of us are already familiar with it. Nevertheless, the actu-

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1 The dialogue took place online on the channel @TIDDigital youtu.be/bXdr5VpU_aE, on September 11, 2020.

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6 Colapietro, Vincent; Nöth, Winfried; Cestari, Guilherme H. de O. A dialogue on cognitive semiotics: minds, and machines. *TECCOGS* – Revista Digital de Tecnologias Cognitivas, n. 21, jan./jun. 2020, p. 167-184.

ality of this topic for student and scholars of our program, TIDD – Technologies of Intelligence and Digital Design, has not diminished since your book came out. To the contrary, it has become a particularly hot topic of in our program, where much research is being done on how the so-called "users" present their selves in the social networks. This is one of the reasons why we are certain that you will have much to tell us about the semiotic self and its presentation, not in everyday life, but, so to speak, in the artificial life of the internet.

There are those who seek their selves and do not get tired in thinking about living their "own selves", their "real selves", and those, who – on the contrary – flee from their selves to various kinds of nonselves. In 2003, we saw the hype of a computer game that promised its gamers a "Second Life" in which the self could disappear in, or merge with another self, the so-called avatar. One self could become two or even many selves. The pathological variant of this short-lived generation of computer games is well-known under the name of multiple personality disorder. How do we have to understand this contemporary gap between those who seek a new self and those who seek to become other selves?

v.c.: Thank you so much for this opportunity. It is good to talk to you, especially since I always learn a great deal from our exchanges. Let me begin with answers to the philosophical side of the question. It seems to me that, without belaboring the obvious, we begin to get Peirce right when we see the depth to which he is anti-Cartesian. Now, of course, everybody knows he is anti-Cartesian. It seems to me however that the process of twisting ourselves free from Cartesian assumptions is not easy at all. What Peirce is doing, in part, is trying to twist free from any number of Cartesian assumptions. We are in the clutches of these assumptions even when we do not know it, even (perhaps especially) when we think we have already extricated ourselves from Cartesian presuppositions. They are much more subtle and tenacious than we imagine.

I cannot recommend highly enough an early book, by Lucia Santaella, on the anti-Cartesian Method.[7] I think this book is a very important place to go back to, since it not only provides us with deep insights but also simply offers a series of very helpful reminders. If we recall that René Descartes applies a method of universal, systematic and (by his own admission) hyperbolic doubt, in the hope of discovering what is absolutely indubitable, we begin to appreciate how anti-Peircean is his method. At his moment of triumph, Descartes asserts, "I think, therefore I am." But notice what he has jettisoned to secure this alleged victory over absolute skepticism (his hands and feet, his head and genitalia, his body in its

7 Santaella, Lucia. *O método anticartesiano de C. S. Peirce.* São Paulo: Editora unesp, 2004.

entirety; other selves, and indeed, the world of physical objects and other human minds in *its* totality. The triumphant "I" is a purely spiritual and solitary one. Because it is purely spiritual, the self is essentially disembodied. Because it is at this stage utterly alone or solitary, the self is not situated in the world of other bodies and selves. The victory of the Cartesian self over skepticism has thus been extremely costly. To reverse the biblical saying,[8] what does it gain the self so conceived to lose the world?

If you take all of those assumptions about the self and reverse them, you start to move in the direction of the Peircean self. The self is not solitary or monological from a Peircean point of view, much rather it is essentially dialogical and communal. The self, to use Heideggerian language, is "always already," linked to others in intimate, intricate, and indeed inextricable ways. The self and the other simply cannot be ripped apart. The very capacity of the self to think (to communicate with itself) depends upon having from the beginning been in communication with others.

On Peirce's account, then, the self is "always already" situated in a world of other embodied selves and is itself fully embodied. Contra Descartes, we do not begin inside our consciousness and are then forced to find a way outside of our consciousness. Peirce was very emphatic, as emphatic as Heidegger was, decades before *Sein und Zeit* (1927). We are "beings in the world". We do not begin in our own minds or in our own consciousness, but we are, in effect, thrown into the world by virtue of our sign-using and sign-interpreting capacities. It seems to me that we must reverse these fundamental assumptions regarding the Cartesian subject, arriving at a portrait of the self as situated, embodied, social, and dialogical.

On Peirce's semeiotic account, the self is not given. The self is in the first instance not an *explicans* (a principle of explanation) but among the *explicanda* (one of the phenomena needing to be explained). Semiosis is rather the explicans. What a semiotic perspective brings to the task of understanding subjectivity is both a synechistic and a processual perspective. That is to say, it thrusts into the foreground of consideration continuity and process. The self is in a continual process of self-constitution. There is indeed something paradoxical here. Because how can a being that, in some sense, does not exist make itself into an existent or reality? Do we not have to presuppose the very existence of the self to make sense out

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8 "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Mark 8:36.

of the self?[9] Peirce says, "No." All we have to presuppose is the reality of signs – the reality and thus the efficacy of semiosis as a ramifying process. Selves grow out of semiosis. In the first instance, signs are not dependent for their existence on a pre-established self or mind; much rather, minds and selves are dependent for their existence or reality, on a complicated and evolving form of semiosis. Self-using agents exercising criticism and control over their thoughts and utterances appear somewhat late on the scene. They are the offspring of processes of semiosis of a more rudimentary or elementary character. Once they emerge, a dramatic turn has been taken in the course of semiotic evolution. Their emergence however is just that – a coming-into-being of what did not previously exist.

There are very simple forms of semiosis that do not require a self to be in place. Take the formation of a fossil: there is no mind responsible for this formation, there is no self that accounts for an object generating a replica of itself and, in turn, that replica being itself capable of generating myriad interpretants. The fossil is a sign that emerges from unintentional natural processes. Eventually, things evolve in the direction of consolidation, solidity, and complexity, such that there can emerge *loci* of self-control. But the activity of signs does not presuppose the existence of such agents. Rather it is part of the explanation of how self-conscious, self-critical, and self-controlling agents come into being.

In the early papers, in the Cognition Series,[10] Peirce argues that our self-knowledge, the knowledge of our individual, singular selves, *emerges* to explain error and ignorance. The infant possesses the capacity to think, to draw inferences, but not consciousness of itself. It discovers itself, as a being distinct from others. The self is a hypothesis put forth by the human organism moving beyond the stage of infancy in order to explain error and ignorance. The acknowledgment of errors is forced upon the very young child. How can it account for being erroneous or ignorant? An organism with little or no self-consciousness or self-awareness makes mistakes, and some of these mistakes are extremely painful. The human

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9 SMITH, John E. Is the self an ultimate category? (1966). *In: Philosophy, Religion, and the Coming World Civilization*, ed. Leroy Rounner (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff), pp. 135-50.

10 The "Cognition Series" consists of three papers published in 1868 and 1869 in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*: "Questions concerning certain faculties claimed for man" (vol. 2, n.2, p.103-114), "Some consequences of four incapacities" (vol. 2. n.3, p. 140-157), and "Grounds of validity of the laws of logic: Further consequences of four incapacities" (vol. 2, n.4, p. 193-208). Available at: peirce.org/writings.html. Nov. 30th 2020.

organism comes to understand that there are limits to its own under-
standing and gaps in its own knowledge.

How then do we explain to ourselves, as very small children, our
own errors and ignorance? In owing up to them, we begin to constitute
ourselves as subjects, as self-conscious singular and hence distinct be-
ings. By positing a *locus*, some site, wherein error and ignorance reside,
the organism begins to see itself as an "I", a first-person reality. The in-
ferred locus of error and ignorance is, in the first instance, the self, at least
from a Peircean perspective. This is only the first step, only the inaugu-
ral part of the story. But it is a very important part of any account of the
emergence of subjectivity. At the very conclusion of the second essay of
the cognition series, entitled "Some consequences of four incapacities",
Peirce quotes a line from Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure." Let us
just very carefully read this text because it offers us a bridge from the
self, conceived as a *locus* of error and ignorance, to the view of the self as
a center of power and purpose. Peirce holds two ideas: selves are *loci* of
errors and ignorance, on the one hand, and selves are centers of power
and purpose, on the other. Let us attend for the moment to the first of
these ideas. Here are Peirce's words, and I will read them before I read
Shakespeare's. "The individual man, since his separate existence is mani-
fested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his
fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation" (CP 5.317,
1868). Implicit in this pronouncement are three themes: other human
beings (or alterity), historicity, and community. The self, (1) insofar as
"he is anything apart from his fellows" or others, (2) insofar as anything
apart from "what he and they *are to be*" (emphasis added), and (3) what
he and they *together* are to be, "is only a negation". It is not merely other
human beings who are somehow linked in this passage. Subjectivity is
also connected to community and historicity. The concluding sentence of
this article, before the quotation from Shakespeare, is accordingly a very
elliptical, very abridged, very enigmatic, statement. The individual man
is said to be only a negation. This is however a *very* qualified claim. You
and I, apart from one another, you and I, apart from a "we", a very ex-
pansive, evolving, we. You and I apart from the history of what we might
become. You and I with those qualifications are mere negations. But you
and I in conjunction with each other and countless others, you and I in an
open-ended unfolding history are more than a mere negation.

Peirce is going after the separate self (the Cartesian subject), he is not denying the emergent reality of the synechistic self. Rather, he comes increasingly to affirm decisively its reality. It is our separate existence that he is denying. We are not separate beings, and to imagine we are is the very "metaphysics of wickedness". If we assume, or argue, or hold, we are separate beings, we are the victims of self-deceit and self-illusion, if not self-delusion.

We are continuous beings. My being is bound up with the being of others. Your being is bound up with the being of others. Being is, in large measure, a becoming. It is a becoming that is part of an ongoing, open-ended, communal history. Now that we have stressed just how qualified is Peirce's identification of the singular self as a mere negation, let us consider his invocation of the Bard. Peirce concludes by quoting "Measure for Measure," not one of Shakespeare's better-known plays. He actually leaves out a verse, but I will read the quotation as it appears in Shakespeare, not as it appears in Peirce's abridged quotation:

> [...] But man, proud man,
> Dress'd in a little brief authority,
> Most ignorant of what he's most assur'd,
> His glassy essence—[11]

The separate self is a "proud man, dressed in a little brief authority, most ignorant of what he's most assured, his glassy essence". It is no secret that Peirce was sympathetic to certain facets of both Buddhism and Christianity (see especially CP 1.673).[12] And one of them is the way in which both of these religious, or spiritual practices, were directed against the sin of pride, or an overinflated sense of self. What Peirce is arguing for is a recognition of our ignorance of our very selves. We tend to make far more of ourselves than the facts of our experience merit. One of the things that is absolutely remarkable, at least to me, and you see it throughout these early texts, then you see it stretched across his entire corpus, is that, in a very quiet undramatic way, Peirce is deeply appreciative of the phenomena of self-deception.[13]

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11 Available at: shakespeare.mit.edu/measure/full.html. Oct. 30th 2020.

12 This bears directly on our topic, since as Peirce interprets these traditions the aspiration is to "weld" distinct selves into ever more harmonious union.

13 "Men many times fancy they act from reason when, in point of fact, the reasons they attribute to themselves are," Peirce asserts, "nothing but excuses which unconscious instinct invents to satisfy the teasing "whys" of the *ego*. The extent of this delusion is such as to render philosophical rationalism a farce" (CP 1.631). See Vincent Colapietro, "Notes for a sketch of a Peircean theory of the unconscious," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, v. 31, n. 3 (Summer 1995), p. 482-506, and "Toward a pragmatist acknowledgement of the Freudian unconscious," *Cognitio*, v. 9, n. 2 (2008), p. 187-203.

One of the ironies is that his friend, William James – who was as famous, if not more famous, as a psychologist than he was as a philosopher – was a very staunch critic of anything having to do with the unconscious. In his great work, *The Principles of Psychology*,[14] James rejected Eduard von Hartmann's arguments for the unconscious. He thought these arguments were extremely weak and quite untenable. Peirce, by contrast, thinks that von Hartmann's arguments go through. Hartmann wrote a massive book in the 19th century,[15] translated under the title *The Philosophy of the Unconscious: Speculative Result According to the Induction Method of the Physical Science.* By the time Peirce read it, the book went through about ten or twelve printings; by the time James read it, as well. So, Peirce has a robust understanding of the unconscious, and he is at odds with his friend, the psychologist William James, regarding this. That quote from Shakespeare, "most ignorant of what we are most assured", means that self-knowledge is not given. It is an achievement, something we win, but we win it against tendencies towards self-deceit and self-distortion. There is something deep and multi-layered about the self. I think that one of the important emphases here is the extent to which Peirce anticipates very important terms in later thought. You see it played out, principally in continental Europe. You see it for the most part in French thought, with figures such as Jacques Lacan, although I think Jean Laplanche is superior in this regard. You also see it in German thought. You see it with some of the critical theorists who had an appreciation of Sigmund Freud's insights, while being acutely aware of his distortions and one-sided emphases.

Peirce is a thinker who conceives of the self and the mind as not identifiable with consciousness. The self is largely unconscious of itself. Whatever consciousness or self-knowledge it wins, it wins it unconsciously. I would like to bring in another figure, and I think it is a very important one, whom Joseph Ransdell was especially appreciative of, Socrates. When he encourages his fellow citizens in Athens to know themselves – know thyself –, Socrates does not send them off to engage in solitary meditation. To know oneself is a communal, dialogical undertaking. When Joseph Ransdell gave his presidential address to the Peirce Society, it was entitled "Peirce and the Socratic tradition".[16] The connection between Peirce and Socrates is the connection between the quest for self-knowledge and an ongoing, open-ended, self-critical dialogue.

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14 JAMES, William. *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. New York: Holt, 1890.

15 HARTMANN, Eduard von. *Philosophie des Unbewußten*. Leipzig: Wilhelm Friedrich, 1869.

16 RANSDELL, Joseph. Peirce and the Socratic tradition. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, v. 36, n. 3, p. 341-356, 2000.

Of course, you and I and everybody else are self-critical. But when we are, what we have done, to a great extent, is to internalize the voices of external critics. We have refined their modes of criticism, we have reshaped them. Perhaps we have taken some of those punitive and destructive forms of criticism and pushed them out. Much of our manner of being self-critical is having internalized the voice of external critics. While the Cartesian approach is inside-out – you begin inside consciousness and try to work yourself out –, the Peircean approaches is outside-in.

We begin in the world, and the world increasingly internalizes itself ever more deeply in our psyche (the world inhabits us at least as much as we inhabit it), so it is *outside-in*. We begin in the world and this inevitably means the world is from the beginning in us (e.g., the anxiety of the mother feeding her infant is what the child imbibes along with milk). Unlike the Cartesian, we do not seek the light of – allegedly – internal consciousness. Peirce emphatically asserts this in an early essays: "We seek the light of external fact".[17] He is talking about semiosis, public signs, communal or shared words.

Where *do* you begin? You (and I) begin with signs. They are the instruments of thought, not just means whereby we communicate with others. They are the means by which the self addresses itself and thus the means by which it thinks. This understanding goes back at least to Plato: thinking is the soul conversing with itself. But the soul learns to converse with itself because it converses with others. It began with a dialogical engagement, with concrete other human beings, other sign-using animals, and only then does it internalizes this process. For the Cartesian, it is inside-out, while for the Peircean it is outside-in. What has been driven inward almost always drives outward; centripetal movement calls forth a centrifugal counterpart and there is a ceaseless interplay between inward and outward drives.[18] The irrepressible drive toward outward expression always operates in conjunction with the internalization in the depths of the psyche of the outer pressing inward[19].

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17 In "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man", CP 5.251, 1868.

18 Cf. CP 5.402, n3: "As for the ultimate purpose of thought, which must be the purpose of everything, it is beyond human comprehension [...].This ideal, by modifying the rules of self-control modifies action, and so experience too – both the man's own and that of others, and this centrifugal movement thus rebounds in a new centripetal movement, and so on; and the whole is a bit of what has been going on, we may presume, for a time in comparison with which the sum of the geological ages is as the surface of an electron in comparison with that of a planet" (1906).

19 See COLAPIETRO, Vincent, "Self-Control, Self-Surrender, and Self-Constitution". In: *Charles S. Peirce in his Own Words: 100 Years of Semiotics, Communication and Cognition*, ed. T. Thellefsen & B. Sørensen (Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton), pp. 487-492.

w.n.: The sign – is it ours, or whose sign is it? Is it myself who has this sign? In 1972, Frederic Jameson wrote a book under the title *The Prison-House of Language*.[20] He did not address the question of the self, but he wrote – and this was the great topic of structuralism in general – that the language we use is not ours. If the signs we use are not ours, but the signs constitute our selves, where can we still expect the self to be found?

v.c.: There is clearly no self in most forms of structuralism, but let us go back to some of Peirce's familiar texts and then try to tease out one or more implications from them. Let us begin with a very famous one, where Peirce actually writes, in a footnote of 1868: we are more in thought than thought is in us.[21] If thought is semiosis, then we are entitled to translate that we are more in signs than signs are in us. Now, it seems to me that the prefix "co-" is absolutely critical, and it captures something very important. Inquirers turn out to be co-inquirers. I inquire with others, right? There is cooperation. I cooperate with others, to a degree rarely appreciated (such is the extent to which the self is puffed up on itself). The prefix "co-" in English, and in other languages as well, is absolutely crucial. The relevance of this is that there is something properly designated "co-ownership".

There are actually two points that I most want to make in this connection. In response to your question, the first point is just that there *is* co-ownership. You and I can own something together, and then we have to work out what this arrangement practically, concretely, means. We both own the same book, and we cannot necessarily read it at the same time. So, we work out the details. There is simply no problem, conceptual problem, with co-ownership. That seems to me to be very important. The other point I want to stress is that there are limits to the propriety and the adequacy of the language of property.

There is an implicit degradation in some of our relationships when we use possessives, such as "mine", or "my", even the expressions "a dog owner", "this is my dog". We commonsensically know what a person means when he or she says, but can you own a dog? Yes and no. There is a sense in which even a dog is a being for itself, such that it cannot be mine, in the same way in which a nonliving piece of property is mine. I, as much, if not more, belong to my language as my language belongs to

20 Jameson, Frederic. *The Prison-House of Language*: a critical account of structuralism and Russian formalism. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.

21 CP 5.314, fn, 1893: "Just as we say that a body is in motion, and not that motion is in a body we ought to say that we are in thought and not that thoughts are in us."

me. I cannot use and dispose of language in any way I want. Peirce is very clear: only those people who reverence (he actually uses the word reverence and he means it fully), only those people who have a reverence for language are in a position to reform language.[22]

Language is not something I can just use in any way whatsoever. Language is rather something to be approached with the degree of deference and even reverence. It is not a mere tool, it is something that is constitutive. Another famous quotation "language is the sum total of myself" (CP 5.314, 1893). There are limits, perhaps far more severe limits, to the propriety of using the language of property. We use it readily and unreflectively, and in doing so we might be degrading any number of the relations we are talking about. I clearly do not possess language in any simple straightforward sense. My language is always more than mine. Whatever claim I can make on it, it can make at least an equally strong claim on me, and that is part of the function of poets and literary artists in general, which is to remind us in vivid, memorable ways, just how sacred and important language is (also how elusive it is, how much it owns us rather than we owning it). Language is no prison-house. Its constraints are more enabling than confining. Of greater importance, language is truly a mode of access, a flexible, infinite, variable mode of access to anything and everything. A world beyond the world of more local prejudices and familiar habits of linguistic utterance is a world we come to suspect exists by virtue of our possession of language. Rather than imprisoning us, then, language offers possibilities for self-transcendence, including linguistic self-transcendence, unavailable apart from its possession.

W.N.: Of course, the metaphor of the prison-house of language is also un-Peircean when it serves to sustain the claim that our language restricts us to expressing only those thoughts for which it puts its vocabulary at our disposal but prevents us from expressing ideas for which it has no words. Peirce would deny that and say that whatever we think in thought-signs can also be expressed in external signs since thought-signs are not essentially different from the signs that we use in dialogues with others.

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22 "I for one entertain a deep feeling of reverence for the traditions of the English language. It has not the amazing psychical and especially emotional wealth of German. It has not half as many words for tools and manipulations as French; nor has it the delightful social finesse of French. But in all that concerns logic and reasoning, it has a spirit of accuracy which is due to the fact that the language spoken in State Street and other market places preserves to an extraordinary degree the sharp distinctions of the scholastic lore of the middle ages; and where those distinctions are not available, our vernacular language still preserves the spirit of them." CP 7.494, c.1898.

But let me ask a last question. You have shown that Peirce, in contrast to William James, was a critic of the idea of the self as an individual, above all, distinct from the other. "Individualism and falsity are one and the same", Peirce wrote in 1893, adding that "it is not 'my' experience, but 'our' experience that has to be thought".[23] However, the individual as well as her or his freedom is an absolutely central notion in the Constitution of the United States. Now, when Peirce denounces individualism as falsity, does he adopt and un-American position?

v.c.: No, actually I do not agree. I think there is a deep strain of communitarianism that is covered over, indeed, buried by the slogans of individualism. The very Constitution, to which you refer, begins with "We the people", and what Peirce is trying to do is establish the reality of the "we". Think here of the conclusion of his review of Fraser's edition of Berkeley's writings.[24] He is on this point very Hegelian: there is no "we" without "I" and there is no "I" without "we". The "we" is more than merely an accidental collection of disparate selves. A sense of solidarity with others partly constitutes the self's sense of *itself*.

So, yes, on the surface Peirce seems clearly to cut against the American grain. He seems clearly to be at odds with such radical individualist as James. But the truth of the matter is James was much more of a relationalist than some of his individualistic rhetoric would have would allow us to see, or to see easily. Then there is "We the people" along with various other instances of human solidarity (e.g., "we scientists …" or "we who have devoted ourselves to gather in the name of a God who has revealed himself as self-sacrificial love…"). There are thus these all-important human endeavors; they are essentially, not incidentally, not contingently, but essentially *communal* undertakings, such as science. The knower is not the individual, inquiring in isolation from others. It is not the self, separate from others. The subject of knowing is the community of inquirers over an indefinite span of human history. What is true of the scientific community is true of the community of worship. Religion is the community of those devoted to ensuring individual rights.

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23 CP 5.402, fn.

24 The conclusion is: "The question whether the genus homo has any existence except as individuals, is the question whether there is anything of any more dignity, worth, and importance than individual happiness, individual aspirations, and individual life. Whether men really have anything in common, so that the community is to be considered as an end in itself, and if so, what the relative value of the two factors is, is the most fundamental practical question in regard to every public institution the constitution of which we have it in our power to influence" (CP 8.38, 1871). See next footnote.

Private property is itself a social institution, an intricate fabric of communal or shared practices. It is unquestionably communal, indeed, a complex set of communal practices and not anything individuals in isolation from one another can actually insure. And without those public protections and widely shared understanding, private property would not exist. So, although it is easy to see why one might think so, Peirce is actually not un-American. He is trying to get at something deep in the American character that has struggled to articulate itself, and has failed up to the present time. It is precisely the reality of various forms of "we", the religious we, the community of worship, the scientific we, the community of inquirers, the political we. Those individuals are bound together by their commitment to ensuring, individual freedom, and there is nothing paradoxical or contradictory in it. There are any other number of other communities, the familial we, the cluster of friends...

To repeat, the conclusion of Peirce's review of the critical edition of George Berkeley by Alexander Fraser[25] is precisely there. He says, the question of nominalism versus realism is at bottom. From the perspective of nominalism, the question is whether community is just a contingent cluster of ultimately disconnected beings since only individuals are real. The perspective of realism is this: despite the irreducible differences among individuals – and they are irreducible, and they are important –, nonetheless, despite being irreducible, important, countless differences among individuals, there is the possibility of the "we". We can constitute ourselves as a community, we can institute practices stretching across time, and we can even conceive forbearers who would not necessarily think of themselves as protagonists, as an integral part of the scientific community.

w.n.: Thank you. Here is the first question from the audience. Lucia Santaella asks, "What is the bridge between error and a powerful self, and what is its secret?"

v.c.: We come to a knowledge of ourselves in the first instance as a *locus* of error and ignorance, but we do not stop there. What we appreciate in the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty is that he stressed the notion of "I can", "I am able to do something". So, as embodied beings, we are not simply passive, or receptive, or reactive. The baby sees the flame and reaches for it, sees the ball and tries to reach it. Im-

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25 Peirce, Charles S. Review of The Works of George Berkeley, d.d., formerly Bishop of Cloyne: including many of his writings hitherto unpublished (edited by Alexander Campbell Fraser). *North American Review* v. 113 (Oct 1871), p. 449-472. cp 8.7-38. See also the previous footnote.

plicit in the actions of the active, energetic, imaginative, embodied self is this imperative "I can do that", and it drives the child to crawl, to walk, to talk... We are continually engaged in these processes of self-overcoming. This is a gesture towards our later dialogue, on "How can we change habits", right? We develop the capability to walk, to talk, to gesture. We come to see ourselves as something more than a *locus* of error and ignorance. We come to see ourselves as a center of power and purpose. I have the ability to use language that makes my desire known to the other. I have the ability to crawl across the floor, and get the object that is enticing me, to put in my mouth or grab with my hands. It is not merely that I am the center of power, the center of a growing set of competencies, intersecting, mutually reinforcing competencies and capabilities. I begin to appreciate that I can envision purposes, I can project goals. It is not merely that I can do this and my goals can take on a vast character; I can devote myself to the community of inquiry and make a very small contribution to it. My contribution is to a community that will long outlast me. I will die before I am in the position to see what, if anything, was my contribution to that community. My life attained significance in so far as I participate in any number of open-ended or evolving communities, such as a scientific community, such as an artistic community, such as a familial unit.

The bridge, then, is the way in which the transformation of habits allows me to see myself as something more than a *locus* of error and ignorance, and hence allows me to come to envision myself positively, not privatively or negatively, and to envision myself as a center of purpose and power. But the purposes that are really important are shared purposes, are communal aims. Your purpose, as a linguist, is to understand language in light of a whole history of inquiry, and you are joining countless other inquirers, who are attempting to do the very same thing. You have your own unique idiosyncratic purposes. I have my own unique idiosyncratic purposes, but the purposes – according to Peirce, at least – that really matter are our shared communal purposes. We say, "Our scientific brethren", as though we were brothers and sisters. There is a degree of intimacy in the scientific community, and even people who are in some objective sense strangers or foreigners are nonetheless kin; they are akin to me. The scientist has a deep sense of kinship, whenever that person meets somebody with an experimental cast of mind.

The bridge is the transformation of habits and competencies in the direction of a vision of ourselves as a center of purpose and power. The secret or the key then is the way in which self-consciousness, self-criticism,

and self-control evolve out of our communal practices. That is the secret to appreciating how the self can begin by being a mere negation and over time become increasingly a center of power and purpose. That is, at least, how I see the arc of Peirce's reflections on the self. I would unhesitantly endorse his position.

w.n.: Thank you very much. The next question comes from Fernando Andacht, Montevideo: "Vincent, how do you link this 'co-' prefix with the notion of '*commens*', this common mind or cominterpretant through which communication as an ideal takes place?

v.c.: That is wonderful, thank you Fernando. And thank you Lucia Santaella for the previous question, equally wonderful.

Obviously, there are radical and irreducible differences between you and me, between you and every other being. But if we stay at the level of secondness, if all we see is self and the other, in which the other is always radically unbridgeable, as other. We cannot make sense out of the most fundamental fact of human existence. That fundamental fact is communication. With all of its distortions and all of its misunderstandings, we, somehow, to some extent, in some ways, manage to communicate with one another. It is no unimportant or meaningless expression to speak directly to Fernando's question, it is no idle, unimportant, or meaningless expression to say that you and I, on some questions, are of one mind. We have a shared understanding that can be as deep and pervasive as to legitimate the expression that we have a common mind. There is nothing necessarily mysterious or esoteric about it. It just means that your habits of attunement to the habits of the world and my habits of attunement to the habits of the world are, for many practical purposes, virtually identical.

For all of our individual irreducible differences, there is the reality of community, and the reality of the community extends to *commens* – to shared understanding to a degree that warrants the expression "a common mind". On this point, it always has to be qualified, right? We are not of one mind in everything and anything, but there are things about which we are one mind.

w.n.: The next question is from Alexandre Quaresma, Rio de Janeiro: "Do dogs, cats, and monkeys have mind and language for Peirce?"

v.c.: Yes, yes, and yes. Minds are sets of more or less integrated and alterable dispositions that enable an organism both to respond to its environment and alter that environment. Part of being mindful is the plasticity of the organism. Different organisms are plastic in different ways.

They are malleable, they are transformable, modifiable in different ways, and to different degrees. Descartes was clearly wrong when he said that only humans possessed minds. He was wrong for equating mind with consciousness, and he was wrong for attributing mind only to humans and thinking that animals are mere machines. There is a degree of estrangement from nature to refuse to attribute mind to a dog or a cat which seems to me to be profound. Only a being really estranged from the natural world could say such a thing like that.

It seems to me that the question of whether dogs and cats have language depends on how you define the word "language". If you mean lexical syntactical language, approximate to the natural languages of Portuguese or English, I would say no. But I would rephrase the question as "Are we the only symbol using animal?" Language is a set of symbols, but there are symbols other than words. The bee that does the dance indicating thereby the direction and the distance of honey is communicating with other members of its hive, thus other members of its species. The peacock that is displaying itself, the rituals of display that are observable in animals, especially around mating. These are all symbols, which are all dispositions to act in certain ways that carry meaning. The fact that they are rooted in disposition, rather than grow out of experience, is of no ultimate consequence. Are animals, other than humans, symbol using agents? I think emphatically yes, and Peirce emphatically, unhesitantly, thought that this was the case. So, we might be, in a very narrow sense, the only language using animal, but we are certainly not the only symbol using animal.

w.n.: This question is from Soraya Ferreira in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais: "How can we think the idea of synechism if we consider the dynamics of digital social networks?"

v.c.: I think that is a very good question. If we, necessarily, at this point in our history, start from continuity, we are, to some extent, already always connected in intimate and deep ways with others. These continuities, these connections, are constitutive of our very being. We are not beings enclosed within ourselves. We have what Peirce calls outreaching identity.[26] Our identities reach out to the other. In fact, they are always bound up with the identities of others.

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26 "Each man has an identity which far transcends the mere animal; — an essence, a meaning subtle as it may be. He cannot know his own essential significance; of his eye it is eyebeam. But that he truly has this outreaching identity — such as a word has — is the true and exact expression of the fact of sympathy, fellow feeling — together with all unselfish interests — and all that makes us feel that he has an absolute worth" (CP 7.591, c.1867). See also: COLAPIETRO, Vincent. Peirce's pragmatist portrait of deliberative rationality. *Cognitio*, v. 18, n. 1, p. 13-32, 2017.

Now, what her excellent question brings into focus, however, is that synechism has to be linked with growth. Whatever connections there are, at any particular historical moment, can be ruptured, can be enhanced, can be multiplied, and that is why I am picking up on for use of the word "dynamic". We might talk about "dynamic synechism", and I hope to be able to make two points: one is that thirdness does not preclude secondness, in fact, all forms of thirdness entail and encompass secondness. The emphasis is upon rupture and disruption. That is importantly true, insightfully true, of some post-structuralist thought, and I think of Michel Foucault here, principally. That is an important emphasis, and we should not lose sight of it. So, the growth in continuity means growth in the possibilities of rupture and disruption, it does not mean that we are necessarily, easily, automatically evolving in the direction of ever greater deeper harmony. It does not mean that at all. The growth of thirdness might carry with it the growth of the possibility of ever deeper conflicts. The more the social network binds the world into tighter networks of communication, the easier it is for various segments of the world to be in conflict. Conflicts that would have been unimaginable apart from these social networks. The growth of thirdness carries with it the growth of the possibility, not the inevitability, the possibility of rupture, disruption, chaos, conflict, and various other forms of secondness. I think that is a very important point to stress. And then, to go back to the other point, I think the stress has to fall on dynamic continuity in which it is open-ended. The business is always unfinished, the task is always incomplete. Whatever connections there are, whatever discoveries have been made, there is more to discover and there are more connections yet to be made, even if the growth of connections carries with it an increase in the possibility of division.

w.n.: There is another question from Montevideo: Mariela Michel, "Can the idea of social distancing be a limitation to the development of the semiosis of the self?"

v.c.: Thank you, I wish you were here to answer your own question, because I imagine that Mariela has deeper insights into this than I do. I think the answer is yes, in part. Social distancing might also generate possibilities for intimacy. I think also that it is relatively easy to see the ways in which there is really negative fallout from practices of social distancing. To take an analogy, there are all kinds of advantages to the immediate ways in which we can communicate with one another today, given the technology. I imagine that there were also advantages, deep important

advantages for traditional old-fashioned letter writing, where you had to wait. The impossibility of getting a quick response carried its own advantage. There were tremendous disadvantages, but there are tremendous advantages likewise.

I think that social distancing might, quite paradoxically, carry possibilities of human intimacy that we never suspected. I do think it is dangerous. It might have a deadening effect on empathy. I do think it might inculcate certain habits of insensitivity. I do not doubt the dangers, but I do not want our concern with the dangers to blind us to the possibilities of enhancements. Somebody might lose their sight, and that would be a tragic loss. But in losing their sight, they actually gain access to more acute sensitivity, via their other senses. Something analogous might happen here. Social distancing might hold possibilities for forms of human intimacy we do not suspect.

w.n.: Thank you. I would like to remind all of you that we have two more dialogues in this series of Reflections with Professor Colapietro, one on the challenging issue of "How can we change habits?", the other on "Why can sentiments be logical?", which will make a connection to our previous dialogue on Cognitive Semiotics.[27] But for today, we are most grateful to Professor Vincent Colapietro for having dedicated his time and his insightful ideas on this very topical topic.

v.c.: Let me return to your expression of gratitude, and let me also issue an invitation. If further questions come to you, please forward them to me. The life of the mind is, first and foremost, the honest confrontation with deep difficult questions, and we need each other to hold each other honest. We are not honest thinkers unless we are challenged by others to be more truthful with ourselves, and more thoughtful about what we hold. So, I welcome this opportunity, I enjoyed it. The questions were spectacular, and I look forward to our future dialogue.

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27 See footnote 1.