

**FORMS OF SIGN AND FORMS OF BEING: THE PHANEROSCOPIC AND  
SYNECHISTIC ONTOLOGY OF C.S. PEIRCE**

**FORMAS DO SIGNO E FORMAS DO SER: A ONTOLOGIA FANEROSCÓPICA E  
SINEQUISTA DE C. S. PEIRCE**

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**Abstract:** With the introduction of phenomenology as High Philosophy, we see a turn in Peirce's thought, a renewal of the metaphysical themes that, already unfolded in the very first essays, he had abandoned for some years in favour of strictly formal logic reflections. In fact, through an observational glance on reality, finally translated in a theory of the universal forms of experience, philosophy can elaborate an ontological theory of a more refined character than that originally proposed in the anti-cartesian and pragmatist writings. The new categoriology developed in the breast of phaneroscopy seals an ontology of a semiotic kind, rooted in the pre-symbolic and pre-rational cognitive processes yet earlier than a "symbolics of being", we can see the development of an ontology from the semiosic premisses of knowledge. This is then liable to a pragmatic reading, that is, as a "pragmatics of being", in which praxis draws the ontological profiles of reality and so ratifies the encounter with the logos-sign. In the complex semiotic interlacement of interpretants and semiosic objects, pragmatism rises again as an ontology of praxis that, therefore, constitutes the achievement of a semiotic theory of being, supported by a metaphysics of the possible of aristotelian flavour, in which the real offers itself first of all in the semiosic premisses of cognitive activity, icons and indexes - ontological *continuum* as pure possibility of significance that leads to truth the entire chain of signs. Beyond every form of idealism, the concept of reality is no longer limited only to the operativity of Thirdness, but to all the three forms of experience enumerated by phaneroscopy. Reality appears, then, as the product of a categorial dialectics of triadic nature, of which the sign represents the higher point of growth. This dialectics, besides, lights up the mysterious relation - plain in the peircean writings - between pragmatism as a logical and methodological maxim and synechism. In fact synechism admits a convergence of sign and being, that we can recognize in the philosophical and strictly metaphysical gist of the logic of pragmatism.

**Keywords:** Synechistic Ontology. Metaphysics. Phaneroscopy. Pragmatics of Being. Reality.

*Resumo:* Após a introdução da fenomenologia como Alta Filosofia, vemos uma virada no pensamento de Peirce, uma renovação dos temas metafísicos já desenvolvidos logo nos primeiros ensaios, abandonados por ele por alguns anos, em favor de reflexões lógicas estritamente formais. Na verdade, através de um olhar observador da realidade, finalmente traduzida em uma teoria das formas universais da experiência, a filosofia pode elaborar uma teoria ontológica de natureza mais aprimorada do que aquela originalmente proposta nos escritos anti-cartesianos e pragmatistas. A nova categoriologia desenvolvida no seio da faneroscopia, ratifica uma ontologia de caráter semiótico enraizada nos processos cognitivos pré-simbólicos e pré-rationais: anteriormente a uma "simbólica do ser", podemos ver o desenvolvimento de uma ontologia a partir das premissas semióticas do conhecimento. Isto, então, está sujeito a uma leitura pragmática, ou seja, como uma "pragmática do ser", onde a práxis traça o perfil ontológico da realidade e, assim, ratifica o encontro com o signo-logos. No entrelaçamento semiótico complexo entre interpretantes e objetos semióticos, o pragmatismo ressurgiu como uma ontologia da práxis que, assim, constitui a conquista de uma teoria semiótica do ser, sustentada por uma metafísica de um possível de sabor aristotélico, onde o real primeiramente se oferece nas premissas semióticas da atividade cognitiva, ícones e índices – o *continuum* ontológico como possibilidade pura de significância que conduz toda a cadeia de signos à verdade. Além de cada forma de idealismo, o conceito de realidade não está mais limitado apenas à operatividade da Terceiridade, mas sim a todas as três formas de experiência enumeradas pela faneroscopia. A realidade, então, surge como o produto de uma dialética categorial de natureza triádica, da qual o signo representa o ponto superior do crescimento. Esta dialética, por outro lado, ilumina a relação misteriosa – evidente nos escritos Peirceanos – entre pragmatismo como máxima lógica e

*metodológica e sinequismo. Na realidade, o sinequismo admite uma convergência de signo e ser, que podemos reconhecer na essência filosófica e estritamente metafísica da lógica do pragmatismo.*

**Palavras-chaves:** Ontologia sinequista. Metafísica. Faneroscopia. Pragmática do Ser. Realidade.

[Tradução do inglês para o português: Luis Malta Louceiro]

The leading idea of this paper is that there is a plain affinity, manifest in the peircean writings, between pragmatism, considered as a rule of logic and methodology, and synechism, the most general metaphysical hypothesis proposed by Peirce. In fact synechism admits a convergence of logic and ontology, on the ground of the *continuum* mind-nature, the same convergence that we can find at the basis of the pragmatic maxim and that constitutes its philosophical and strictly metaphysical gist. This idea appears as extremely valuable, because it helps us to read in a coherent way the theoretical production of Peirce - allowing a precise link from his first articles to his last essays - and because it guarantees an unitary background to understand his thought in the most possible solid way. Through this interpretation we can see how the mature ontological framework that Peirce builds represents only a logical refinement of the metaphysical premisses that we can find in the anti-cartesian and pragmatist essays.

In the anti-cartesian articles Peirce develops all the theoretical consequences of his table of categories of 1867, confirming what was implicit there, that there is no form of extra-sign cognition, but maintaining the ambiguity of that list in relation to the problem of externality. The *New List* presented a series of categories of semiotic nature and among those there was included the category of the *It*, the indeterminate substance of kantian memory. This is a strange category, because it has no cognitive origin, but it corresponds to the external "something" that imposes itself to us. That "something" is, properly speaking, the chaos of the senses that the semiotic categories have to synthesize through a process that ends only with the constitution of the judgement and the semiotic "creation" of being. How can we characterize this category? It is not possible to explain completely the function of the *It* if we remain placed in the field of the semiotic idealism of these writings, fully expressed in the idea of the non-reachableness of the object of knowledge, so that it is not possible to take an account of the object itself as what is external to the mind - as the chaos of the senses - and what appears at the end of every cognitive process as definite substance or Being.

The semiotic categories of the *New List* are not compatible with the refusal of the concept of *noumenon*. So, if the great distinction between Transcendental Analytics and Dialectics of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was pulled down in the manuscripts previous to the list of 1867, what persists there is the dichotomy, internal to the Analytics, of Aesthetics and Logic.

In a sketch manuscript of 1861, titled *Treatise on Metaphysics*, we find interesting notes on the possibility of the construction of a metaphysics as a science of the Primal Truths, traced in the close web of relations that constitutes the essence of thought, that is always *thought-of*. The secret of logic is therefore to find out not yet in the dichotomy consciousness-reality (sign-object), but rather in the infinite chain of concepts "within consciousness", in the bounds of consciousness (sign-interpretant sign).

- a. If the *noumenon* is thought of it is known. If it is not thought of, it has no relation to the consciousness. But it is represented as both totally unknown, yet the ground of knowledge.

b. "Thing as thought" contains mental elements, but the mind does not really affect the things that it knows. Hence the word object like *noumenon* is a mere logical form, incapable of comprehension. (W 1:61).

Reality is representation and it is assimilated to human reason by an identical formal ground (and the word "ground" in semiotics indicates the perspective, the hint of the sign on reality).

In 1885 with the brief essay *One, two, three: Fundamental Categories of Thought* and of Nature, new hypothesis about the categories are put forward. In this writing we perceive at work the phenomenological analysis of the given experience, before the introduction of the specific term "phenomenology". This discipline, as it is known, is fit for the founding of the general forms of being. But if the *continuum* of cognitive semiosis embraces the reality itself, we find out only one *continuum* of knowledge and being. There is no longer space for the transcendental dichotomy of phenomenon and *noumenon*, category and reality, Analytics and Dialectics. This is a true categorial hypostathization that is also the essence of the objective idealism.

The conclusions reached in this writing are surely supported by the great discovers that Peirce made in the field of the logical quantification and in the semiotical study of the concept of "object". The categorial searching is now brought to a very marked formalistic level, through the attempt of reaching the most general structure of the categorial relations.

...the whole organism of logic may be mentally evolved from the three conceptions of first, second, and third, or more precisely, An, Other, Medium. But if these three conceptions enter as we find they do as elements of all conceptions connected with reasoning, they must be virtually in the mind when reasoning first commences. In that sense, at least, they must be innate ideas; and consequently they must be capable of explanation, psychologically; - there must be in the consciousness three faculties corresponding to these three categories of logic. (W 5:245).

Three such fundamental elements of consciousness must be capable of a physiological explanation from three fundamental properties of the nervous system. I cannot easily believe that life is so special a phenomenon as to depend upon certain secondary contingencies in nature. Although a cell appears to be a very particular sort of arrangement; I cannot help guessing that it may contain all the fundamental elements of the uni[verse]. (W 5:247).

Peirce definitively leaves the kantian premisses of the *New List*: the concept of "relation", derived from the formal logic studies, affects this theoretical change. We see how the analysis of the categories unties itself from the purely gnoseological field and is invested of a newly ontological value. The semiotical theory of knowledge seals a categoriology that concerns the universe itself, with which consciousness shares the same semiotic nature. The a priori forms reveal themselves no longer as original scheme of knowing or transcendental truths of mind, because here transcendentalism is given through the ontological universality of the forms. Thought and being, reconciled by the semiotical revolution of knowledge, rotate around the hinge of a same formal structure and an infinite mutual reflection. This writing, therefore, gives a real ontological meaning to the universal concepts that will become Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness in the future phenomenology as High Philosophy. In contact with the theories of quantification and with the problems connected to the relatives,

the original semiotics is subjected to a deep transformation: no longer confined in the limits of the symbol, it becomes a transcendental logic of the sign in all its forms, including those non-symbolic signs that the *New List* declared stranger to the laws of logic (CP 1.559).

Indexes and icons acquire then the role that is up to them inside a complete semiotic theory of thought. On indexes the link with reality is relied, what the original statement didn't explain in the right way (because it had no implements to guarantee this kind of explanation), while on icons the agreement of the logic of mind and language and that of universe is based. To icons, beside, the sense of truth and rightness is delivered. The pre-symbolic signs become semiotical tools through which the thought proceeds in the recognition of reality, leading language towards a full comprehension of objectuality. The logical refinement of the first theory of reality (proposed in the gnoseological writings of the '60s and the '70s) involves the premisses of knowledge, hardly refused in the beginning.

The mutual influence of the logical and semiotical research and the phenomenological inquiry about experience is clear: phenomenology in its observational aspect is an answer to the semiotical need of an agreement of the sign with externality, while in its categoriological aspect, so to speak, offers to the science of signs the necessary implements for a correct logical disposition. Semiotic idealism - what in the beginning could seem the only way to exceed the mistakes of transcendentalism - is definitively abandoned and the path of the metaphysical realism is opened. The intentional object is no longer the product of a logical paradox, as happened in *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Men* or in *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities*; now it is the result of a semiotical and categorial dialectics and no longer an ideal point put at the end of the representational-cognitive process.

In the mature semiotic theory of Peirce the semiotic process reveal an anchorage to reality, through the use of icons and indexes that, besides, impress a truthful and veracious orientation to the symbol. These signs approach the real object more strictly than symbols. The Dynamical Object - the external real object represented by the hint of the sign - is something different from the It, because it is always defined in a categorial sense: it is pure possibility of knowledge (Firstness), the existent that causes a brute reaction (Secondness) and the "real" object, as it is revealed in the final moment of interpretation, in the habit or practice (Thirdness).

The anti-cartesian essays inherit the theoretical planning of the *New List* and translate in a more general gnoseology the theory of categories there outlined: the coincidence of being and substance is never complete nor perfect, every sign involves another sign (an interpretant), propositions and judgements break the ontological *continuum*, the background of being that "surround" us, so to speak, without nevertheless exhausting it at all. Reality is, again, the indeterminate It, the *continuum* of being, and the determinate Substance, the object that the copula endows with individuality. What here and in the *New List* is defended is the idea of a semiotical construction of being from the confuse manifold of sensations. The paradoxes that derive from this weak form of cognitive idealism unfold their consequences in the manuscript *Questions on Reality*, previous to the publication of the anti-cartesian writings, with its distinction of individual and singular.

But here it is necessary to distinguish between an individual in the sense of that which has not generality and which here appears as a mere ideal boundary of cognition, and an individual in the far wider sense of that which can be only in one place at one time. It will be convenient to call the former a *singular* and the latter only an *individual*. To the former, I have denied all immediate reality. Now the nominalistic element of my theory is certainly an admission that nothing out of cognition and signification generally, has any

generality; and therefore this seems to imply that we are not affected by real external world. But this is not a correct consequence of the principles I have sought to establish. (W 2:180, italics mine).

The problem is that the symbol is a kind of sign that is unable to operate and to mean anything without the intervention of signs that possess a more direct contact with being. The purpose of symbols would be not only endless but also, and more properly, it would be useless if extra-linguistic modes of semiosis - that would take an account of the irruption of reality into thought - didn't exist. In CP 8.314 it is clearly said that a single sign can't express the Dynamical Object, but it can indicate it, that is to let the interpretant make a "collateral experience" of it.

We must distinguish between the Immediate Object, - i.e. the Object as represented in the sign, - and the Real (no, because perhaps the Object is altogether fictive, I must choose a different term, therefore), say rather the Dynamical Object, which, from the nature of things, the Sign cannot express, which it can only indicate and leave the interpreter to find out by collateral experience. (CP 8.314).

The deepening of the peircean semiotics goes in the direction of the analysis of semiosis *latu sensu*, by the conviction of extra-linguistic forms of signs that derive from the cosmological meditation, what had drift the philosopher to conclude that the universe itself is a great *representamen*. Now, language operate in a general sense, lacking in reaching the *hecceitas* or individuality; singularity is a matter of Secondness, the only category that can take an account of the factuality of existence. But through the properties of icons, that are Firstnesses of Thirdness, and indexes, that are Secondnesses of Thirdness, language can express individuality.

So the profession of idealism that the author made in 1868 - «all realities are nominal, significative, cognitive» (W 2:181) - let space for a renewal dialectics among the categories: the object is independent from the sign only as factive secondness, yet in the evanescence of its happening it would be a pure nothing without the entry in the sphere of generality or thirdness. A great step forward in the evolution of the peircean ontology is made by the articles of the *Popular Science Monthly* (1877-78). Their fundamental contribution is the introduction of the notion of "habit", that will represent a constant in the thought of Peirce, and will be newly proposed in a cosmological sense many years later. Through the habit - that will be called the final logical interpretant - the mutual participation of ideal and real is carried out: in this peculiar kind of interpretant the ideal "makes" itself real, the *logos* makes itself *pragma* or being. There is no separation between logic and ontology in the concept of habit: the interpretant is logical yet, but at the same time it is final, that is it translate the sign in action, decreeing the ontological status of the real towards which that sign is directed. The logical interpretant becomes habit of action, marked by the certainty of the practical action. This endows the reasoning about the role of praxis with a new and fresh ontological value: the habit "meets" the object in a different way from the mere and simple theoretical and speculative relation to it, and for this reason confers to the object a completely new mode of being, that doesn't correspond to the pure ontical being anymore. The final interpretant lays itself on the speculative or logical one. It is final and logical, precisely. The habit brings the object to being and it doesn't limit itself to the pure theoretical knowledge of it, so as the interpretant at the end of the research process brings all the reality to being, the sum of all the interpretations translated in the embodied habit, terminal point of the semiosis chain. It brings

the reality to being, that is to say it shapes ontologically the real inside the habit of action. The habit has nothing to do with mere empirical action, but it is rather a kind of moulding to reality, a con-constitution of man and cosmos, of mind and nature - as synechism explains -, of consciousness and object: «The mind of man is adapted to the reality of being» (CP 4.157). It is the phenomenology that introduces a new meaning for the central concept of pragmatism, transposing it to the cosmological level, where it takes a more general sense. The habit is recognizable as a form of thirdness, conditionality and generality. Peirce's anti-mentalism compels him to find this mode of generality in the universe itself, so that the laws of nature have to be considered as habits. The progression of cognitive acts in the form of habit protracts until a precise limit, realizing itself naturally in the final habit, the complete actualization (Secondness) of the ontological potentiality of *continuum* (Firstness) through the mediation of the law become practice (Thirdness). «Reality consists in regularity», it is proclaimed in CP 5.121, so that we can think of reality as a form of thirdness.

Reality consists in regularity. Real regularity is active law. Active law is efficient reasonableness, or in other words is truly reasonable reasonableness. Reasonable reasonableness is Thirdness as Thirdness. (CP 5.121).

Nevertheless we also find propositions like this:

In the idea of reality, Secondness is predominant; for the real is that which insists upon forcing its way to recognition as something *other* than the mind's creation. (Remember that before the French word, *second*, was adopted into our language, other was merely the ordinal numeral corresponding to *two*.) The real is active; we acknowledge it, in calling it the *actual*. (This word is due to Aristotle's use of *energeia*, action, to mean existence, as opposed to a mere germinal state). (CP 1.325).

A way to escape these kind of paradoxes is given by the famous *Harvard Lectures*, the apex of the peircean reflection about the pragmatic maxim, the formulation of which is here reconsidered in the light of the system of sciences elaborated in 1902 and whose theoretical consistency is examined. Besides, this cycle of lectures abridges the author's mature semiotical theory of knowledge, increasing its horizons and resting it on a semiosical and phenomenological view of the sensible perception: there is no longer an indeterminate substance - indeterminate because, in a certain sense, heterogeneous to the functions of the sign - at the origin of our sensible processes, but a *primum* of semiotical nature called percept. The percept has not linguistic nature or, that is the same, it is not object of a rational control (CP 2.144). As irriducible singularity it is included in the second category and keeps an iconic connection with the judgement that constitutes its linguistic and rational expression. «The percept is the reality» (CP 5.568) but is not general, and its aspect of firstness is given by its being a "positive suchness" (CP 7.630), in which it is condensed all the interpretative potentiality of the sign-symbol.

Thus, two utterly different kinds of elements go to compose any percept. In the first place, there are the qualities of feeling or sensation, each of which is something positive and *sui generis*, being such as it is quite regardless of how or what anything else is. On account of this self-sufficiency, it is convenient to call these the elements of "Firstness". In the percept, these elements of Firstness are perceived to be connected in definite

ways. [...] In respect to each of these connections, one part of the percept appears as it does *relatively to a second part*. Hence, it is convenient to call them elements of "Secondness". (CP 7.625).

Given a percept, this percept does not describe itself; for description involves analysis, while the percept is whole and undivided. But once having a percept, I may contemplate it, and say to myself, 'That appears to be a yellow chair'; and our usual language is that we "perceive" it to be a yellow chair, although this is not a percept, but a judgment about a present percept. (CP 7.626).

There is no longer any fracture between being and substance because being, in the theoretical framework introduced by phenomenology, is in the first place pure possibility (of knowledge), then it is given as brute facticity and, at last, as necessity or conditionality, the form of being of the sign-representation and of law; equally, substance is so triadically defined: pure possibility, singular *hecceity* (being in *actu*) and determinate substance at the end of the cognitive act. The categorial tripartition regards equally the Being and the It of the *New List*.

Through considerations of this tenor Peirce takes to fulfilment the dismantling of the *Pure Reason*: the kantian transcendentalism of the pure forms is substituted by the ontological universality of the most general forms of experience, so the overcoming of the dichotomy Analytics-Dialectics is completed. But phaneroscopy legitimates besides the annulment of the distinction Aesthetics-Logic. The forms of sensibility are the same forms that regulate reason. In the percept the reality becomes sign, the in-potence being is interpreted as being in *actu*, while the sign *in actu* opens itself to the potential sign or interpretant, inside a dialectical game or "pragmatics of being", in which the theoretical construction of being is only part of a more wide pragmatological one. Sign becomes being or seals its being in answering to the sollecitations of experience. Reality in-forms the sign in its con-formity to it. For the pre-rational signs the substance is indeterminate only because it is poned out of the logical control.

In the fifth *Harvard Lecture* and in the manuscript *Kainà Stoicheia*, all that it has been said until now is clearly expressed by Peirce: «The being of a sign is merely being represented. Now really being and being represented are very different» (EP 2:303). Reality *ipso facto* corresponds to the second category: «Whatever reacts is *ipso facto* real. But an object of representation is not *ipso facto* real» (CP 5.96). But in its singularity an *ipso facto* real object is a pure nothing. The system of signs seals its ontological status: there is the reality of representations and signs, whose ontological value is the result of the long run of semiosis, and there is the immediate reality of what presses itself on mind from the external.

The whole course of life within which the experiential compulsions appear is a purely psychological development. For the gist of the opinion is that the flow of time consists in a continual assimilation into "our" inwardness, the Past, of a non-ego that is nothing that the ego that is to be - the Future. The Past acts upon the Future intelligibly, logically. But those blind compulsions are glimpses of an unknown object. Now, the unknown, according to this theory, is nothing but what is bound, as our hope is, to emerge in the future. From that point of view, it is seen that they can but be brute and blind, and, further, that in the course of time they must be seen to rationalize themselves and fall into place as the cognition develops. (8.103).

The potentiality endless chain of this peculiar universal and cosmological relation is ended by the pragmatic action of sign become habit. The habit is a conditional disposition to act according to the dictates of experience; it zeros the difference between sign and being: the sign becomes "ab-solutus", out of every further interpretation. For the final logical interpretant the immediate object - ground or meaning - and the dynamical object - being, or reality as product of the universal dialectics of concepts - coincide. This makes us suppose why Peirce has never combined any type of object to the third kind of interpretant. The judgment is the seat of being - as it was said in the *New List* - and out of the semantical functionality of symbols being would remain unexplored and unefficient potentiality, purely evanescence in the *hic et nunc* of its (perceptual) happening. Nevertheless the judgment doesn't exhaust the being, because being and being represented find a mutual iconic genealogy, as two moments of an ontological *continuum* that imply both of them.

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