

**I think, therefore I *would-be* (perhaps).
The Peircean semiotic subject against the *metaphysics of wickedness*, the *delusion of vanity* and *barbaric conception of personal identity****

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Abstract

Modern philosophy has tended to locate the self in the individual: bounded, self-transparent, and privately assured of its own existence. This article argues that Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic and pragmatist framework constitutes a theory of subjectivity that operates a systematic reversal of this assumption, without a complete denial of selfhood itself, but targeting it what Peirce himself called a “barbaric conception of personal identity”. The argument proceeds in two movements. The first is critical: Peirce dismantles the Cartesian cogito not by dismissing the “I” altogether, but by exposing the inferential, sign-mediated, and fallible character of self-knowledge. Intuition, introspection, and the self-evidence of the thinking subject are each rejected on epistemological grounds. The second movement is reconstructive: once individuality is no longer the foundation of selfhood, a different anthropological picture emerges. The real and true self, on Peirce's account, what constitutes the core of human being's purposes, is general rather than particular, relational rather than self-enclosed, and *continuous* in both space and time rather than reducible to any single actual occurrences. Against nihilistic readings of a no-self theory, and against strong individualist readings, this article defends a median position: the subject, not the individual, is the proper anthropological unit, but this “conditioned and conditional” and therefore fallible and instable subject is defined precisely by its “springs of actions” and participation in something that exceeds any one of its actual instantiations. In this way Peirce was able, way before the critical approaches of 20th century philosophy on subjectivity, to dismantle the “vulgarest delusion of vanity” of human-being selfhood.

Keywords: Charles S. Peirce, pragmatismo, soggettività simbolica, sinechismo, antropologia filosofica.

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La filosofia moderna ha teso a collocare il sé nell'individuo: delimitato, trasparente a se stesso e privatamente certo della propria esistenza. Questo articolo sostiene che il quadro semiotico e pragmatista di Charles Sanders Peirce costituisce una teoria della soggettività che realizza un complesso e sistematico rovesciamento di tale presupposto, senza tuttavia negare completamente la nozione di sé, ma prendendo di mira ciò che lo stesso Peirce chiamava una “concezione barbarica dell'identità personale”. L'argomentazione si sviluppa in due movimenti. Il primo è critico: Peirce smantella il cogito cartesiano non eliminando del tutto l'“io”, ma mettendo in luce il carattere inferenziale, mediato dai segni e fallibile della conoscenza di sé. Intuizione, introspezione e evidenza immediata del soggetto *pensante* sono ciascuna respinte su basi epistemologiche. Il secondo movimento è ricostruttivo: una volta che l'individualità non costituisce più il fondamento del sé, emerge un diverso quadro antropologico. Il sé *reale e autentico*, per Peirce, ciò che costituisce il nucleo dei fini e dei compiti propri dell'essere umano, è generale e non individuale, relazionale e non chiuso in sé stesso, e continuo sia nello spazio sia nel tempo piuttosto che riducibile a singole occorrenze attuali. Contro le letture nichiliste di una teoria del non-sé, e contro le interpretazioni fortemente individualiste, questo articolo difende una posizione intermedia: il soggetto, non l'individuo, è la corretta unità antropologica, ma questo soggetto “condizionato e condizionale”, e dunque fallibile e instabile, è definito precisamente dalle sue “springs of actions” e dalla sua partecipazione a qualcosa che eccede ciascuna delle sue effettive istanziazioni. In questo modo Peirce è stato in grado, ben prima degli approcci critici della filosofia del Novecento sulla soggettività, di smantellare la “più volgare illusione della vanità” della individualità umana.

Parole chiave: Charles S. Peirce, Pragmatism, Symbolical Personhood, Synechism, Philosophical Anthropology.

*Insolente promessa sciocca, vacua, solenne
Di bastare a sé.
(C.S.I., Irata)*

1. Introduction. The assault to a “barbaric notion” and the struggle with the “I”

This article advances a critical reconsideration, based on Charles S. Peirce's philosophy, of a certain conception of the self, central to the modern tradition, based on a strong definition of selfhood and individuality. In particular, it seeks to reframe it through a reversal of perspective, targeting what Peirce calls a «barbaric conception

of personal identity».¹ The literature on Peirce's theory of the self (and, more broadly, within classical pragmatism) is vast and complex, encompassing a range of notions such as subject, person, individual, and personal identity.² It is not possible here to address all these dimensions; though one of the aims of this article is instead to distinguish between some of these terms and to clarify some of their theoretical implications. In doing so, I align with interpretations that reject a nihilistic reading of Peirce's account. According to Stango,³ Peirce should not be counted among the philosophers who support a "no-subject" theory of the self. Stango proposes that this approach is also untenable from the perspective of individuality, which he analyzes in reference to self-reference. He opposes his view to that addressed by De Waal,⁴ which stresses the imperfect and *fallible* side of the individual self.⁵ Stango supports the clear anti-individualistic Peircean view, but he further suggests that this "negative" interpretation of the entire doctrine of the self is misleading.

¹ C.S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol. 2 (1893–1913), eds. by N. Houser, C. Kloesel, Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1998, p. 3 (hereinafter abbreviated as EP2 followed by page number).

² The debate within Peircean scholarship is extensive; here I recall only a selection of positions pertinent to the present discussion. For a general overview, see, among others: J.I. Bakker, *The "semiotic self": From Peirce and Mead to Wiley and Singer*, in «The American Sociologist», 42, n. 2, 2011, pp. 187–206; V. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity*, SUNY Press, Albany (NY) 1989; V. Colapietro, *Toward a pragmatic conception of practical identity*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 42, n. 2, 2006, pp. 173–205; A. De Tienne, *La persona come segno*, in R. Calcaterra (ed.), *Semiotica e fenomenologia del sé*, Aragno, Torino 2006, pp. 91–109; A. De Tienne, *Le signe en person chez Peirce, avec échos wittgensteiniens*, in «Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry», 32, n. 1-3, 2012, pp. 203–223; A. De Tienne, *Peirce on the Symbolical Foundation of Personhood*, in «Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture», 5, n. 4, 2021, pp. 79–100; Z.M. Gartenberg, *Intelligibility and subjectivity in Peirce: A reading of his "New List of Categories"*, in «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 50, n. 4, 2012, pp. 581–610; I. Kemp-Pritchard, *Peirce on individuation*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 14, n. 2, 1978, pp. 83–100; R. Lane, *Persons, Signs, Animals: A Peircean Account of Personhood*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 45, n. 1, 2009, pp. 1–26; G. Maddalena, *La Soggettività in Peirce e Dewey*, in R. Calcaterra (ed.), *Semiotica e fenomenologia del sé*, cit., pp. 111–122; R. Menary, «Our Glassy Essence»: *The Fallible Self in Pragmatist Thought*, in S. Gallagher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, pp. 609–632; E. Michael, *Peirce on Individuals*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 12, n. 4, 1976, pp. 321–329; T. Midtgarden, *Peirce on the Notion of Self and Personal Identity*, in «History of Philosophy Quarterly», 19, n. 1, 2002, pp. 109–124; P.A. Muoio, *Peirce on the Person*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 20, n. 2, 1984, pp. 169–181; H. Pape, *A Peircean theory of indexical signs and individuation*, in «Semiotica», 31, n. 3-4, 1980, pp. 215–243; G. Riley, *Peirce's Theory of Individuals*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 10, n. 3, 1974, pp. 135–165; M. Singer, *Signs of the self: An exploration in semiotic anthropology*, in «American Anthropologist», 82, n. 3, 1980, pp. 485–507; M. Stango, «T" who?: A new look at Peirce's theory of indexical self-reference», in «The Pluralist», 10, n. 2, 2015, pp. 220–246: 222; G.L. Stephens, *Peirce on psychological self-knowledge*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 16, n. 3, 1980, pp. 212–224; H.I. Uslucan, *Charles Sanders Peirce and the semiotic foundation of self and reason*, in «Mind, Culture, and Activity», 11, n. 2, 2004, pp. 96–108.

³ M. Stango, «T" who?: A new look at Peirce's theory of indexical self-reference», cit.

⁴ C. De Waal, *Science beyond the self: Remarks on Charles S. Peirce's social epistemology*, in «Cognition», 7, n. 1, 2006, pp. 149–163: 154.

⁵ Cfr. R. Menary, «Our Glassy Essence», cit.

What I address in this article is a different shift of perspective, maintaining a pragmatist and median position without resolving into a strong assertion (neither negative nor positive) on the meaning of subjectivity and self. It is precisely because the human being is seen not as an individual but as a subject of a relation that his theory of the self can be seen as a powerful reversal of modern anthropological assumption. In Peirce's words, the *real* self of the human being does not coincide with individuality; on the contrary, it is a medium by which human beings reach higher common purposes in life. The real self is a "general" structure, both "conditional" and "conditioned", that places the individual person as only one part of a more complex whole, while at the same time allowing each one of us to participate in something higher than the «vulgarest delusion of vanity»: the selfhood we tend to attribute to ourselves as though we were its owners.⁶ I will demonstrate that the "true self" has to be considered general,⁷ that it resides in some sense outside of our self-consciousness, being shared with those around us, and therefore cannot be resolved within our own bodies and thought, that it is part of a continuity in time that projects us into the future; and that it cannot be resolved in a single instant, let alone in an "actual individual".

To defend the coherence of the Peircean position, I briefly analyze from where he started to «assault» this barbaric notion, and then to rebuild his proposal.⁸ As widely recognized, it all starts with a struggle with a commonsensical cartesian view of the self and the *ego*.⁹ I maintain that in general pragmatist tradition, and in particular in Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic and pragmatist framework, the critique of the Cartesian self does not begin with a wholesale rejection of subjectivity, but with a more precise and surgical dismantling of its epistemological foundations: Peirce

⁶ EP2, p. 2.

⁷ In the sense of generality that pertains to Peirce scholastic realism (see J.F. Boler, *Charles Peirce and Scholastic Realism*, University of Washington Press, Seattle (WA) 1963).

⁸ As Lane pointed out, there are many irreducible dimensions to Peirce's proposal on personhood and the self; in particular, he identified the characterization of persons as negations pointing to early texts where personhood is defined through limitation and opposition; rather than through positive, intrinsic properties and a naturalistic account to be found in the late Peirce. I will focus for the purpose of my proposal specifically on his semiotic subject defined by symbolical personhood he develops in one of his first texts, to which they will follow further in-depth analysis in his later writings. Cfr. R. Lane, *Persons, Signs, Animals*, cit.

⁹ It is worth distinguishing here between the standardized Cartesian view targeted by Peirce (and many others) as the prototype of an isolated, substantial, and epistemically transparent ego and Descartes' actual, more nuanced reading of his theory of subjectivity. Recent Cartesian scholarship has deeply challenged this simplified reading, emphasizing the complexities of the mind-body union, the radical role of the passions, and the non-substantialist architecture of the early stages of the *Meditations* (See, for instance, J. Carriero, *Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes's Meditations*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009; V. Lähteenmäki, *Descartes on Subjects and Selves*, in P. Kitcher (ed.), *The Self: A History*, Oxford University Press, New York 2021, pp. 99–117; J.-L. Marion, *Cartesian Questions III: Descartes Beneath the Mask of Cartesianism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2025). In the economy of this paper, the terms Cartesian self and Cartesian subject are employed to denote the specific philosophical reception and conceptual model that Peirce and early pragmatists historically confronted, rather than an exhaustive textual exegesis of Descartes' corpus.

commences not a general struggle with the concept of the “I,” but with the dismissal of the cogito as one who is infallibly assured of their own essence. Peirce’s first move is methodological: he refuses the Cartesian starting point entirely, denying that philosophy should begin with self-evident truths «directly apprehended either as clear and distinct ideas or as ideas given in experience».¹⁰ In its place, he proposes a fallible and self-correcting method modelled on scientific inquiry, one that begins not from some indubitable intuited premise but from the beliefs and prejudices we already carry with us. This methodological shift has immediate consequences for the notion of the self.¹¹ The Cartesian *cogito* presupposes a subject who can step outside the flow of experience and apprehend its own existence with certainty; «a mental substance with the powers of introspections, intuition, and universal doubt, which is dispelled by clear and distinct ideas of its own existence, the unity of the I think».¹² For Singer, Peirce instead found a phenomenological self, of which the «knowledge of the internal world derived by hypothetical reasoning from our knowledge of external facts»,¹³ by means of multiple chain of signs rather than delivered by transparent self-presence. The consequences for the *cogito* specifically are far-reaching. As De Waal states, «when we refer to ourselves – the “I” in the famous “I think, therefore I am” – is not something we intuit directly and infallibly, but something that is acquired through the interaction with others».

Peirce’s rejection of the self-enclosed Cartesian subject represents in this sense a philosophical cornerstone: he substitutes an individual which «in virtue of being a rational agent» will correct «all his idiosyncrasies through an internal process of ratiocination» with the emergence of a fallible and conditioned “I” from inferential process, from the collision with external worlds and with dialogical exchange with the other.¹⁴ For Stango, Peirce undermines this idea of self-consciousness precisely through «a full-fledged inferential account of the operations of the mind».¹⁵ Therefore, before addressing what the self *is*, Peirce dismantles the assumption that we have *direct access* to it. This is why the cartesian self, based on intuition and the *cogito*, is dismantled, for Peirce denies that we possess any intuitive faculty of self-consciousness or the power of introspection into an internal world of self-evident truths. The “I” therefore is not a *datum*, but it emerges as a «locus of ignorance and error»,¹⁶ and this also explains the two moves that Peirce operates, that is the

¹⁰ R. Menary, “Our Glassy Essence”, cit., p. 610.

¹¹ «In a sense Peirce has no other option but to reject the self-enclosed Cartesian subject if he is to take seriously the idea that interaction is crucial to science, because it is *through interaction* that individuals correct one another» (C. De Waal, *Science beyond the self*, cit., p. 152).

¹² M. Singer, *Signs of the self*, cit., p. 489.

¹³ C.S. Peirce, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, Vol. 2, ed. by Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1982, p. 213 (hereinafter abbreviated as W2 followed by page number).

¹⁴ C. De Waal, *Science beyond the self*, cit., p. 152.

¹⁵ M. Stango, “I” *who?: A new look at Peirce’s theory of indexical self-reference*, cit., p. 221.

¹⁶ «He, thus, becomes aware of ignorance and it is necessary to suppose an ego in whom this ignorance can inhere» (W2, p. 168f.): I will analyze briefly this stance in the next section. Moreover, according to Colapietro,

ascertainment of subjectivity on external inferences (as I above mentioned) and the reversal between human beings and their thoughts. That the possibility of referring to a self is not a *datum*, but an inferential construct, is the explicit conclusion of his seminal 1868 essay *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man*, where he directly confronts the question of whether we possess an intuitive self-consciousness. His answer is negative, and the conclusion of his reasoning is precise: «there is no necessity of supposing an intuitive self-consciousness, since self-consciousness may easily be the result of inference».¹⁷

The implication, as Menary draws out, is that introspection holds no privileged epistemic status over outward perception. Just as we come to know the external world «through a series of inferences and interpretations, which are fallible», so too our knowledge of the self «has no higher status of certainty than our knowledge of other things we find in the world».¹⁸ The internal and the external are placed on the same inferential footing. De Tienne adds a clarification on the deeper structure of this argument: what Peirce exposes is the hidden premise of the Cartesian *cogito* itself, namely, the antecedent presupposed reality of the ego. In other words, Descartes's «I think, therefore I am» conceals a prior assumption: «I am, therefore I think that when I think, I am».¹⁹ So, for Descartes the *ego* is in some sense smuggled in and it is not true that it is derived deductively from the *cogito*. By making this premise visible, Peirce dissolves the self-evidence of the *cogito* from within. The only legitimate method of ascertaining subjectivity, as Maddalena puts it, is an inference that departs from external data, on the contrary, an absolutely self-enclosed subjectivity, detached from experience, simply does not arise.²⁰ This inferential grounding of subjectivity converges with the second move that defines Peirce's reconstruction, that is the reversal of the relationship between human beings and their thoughts. As Maddalena clearly states, Peirce begins his philosophical activity with the claim that it is the «I» that is possessed by thought, and not vice versa.²¹ De Tienne gives this reversal a precise formulation, defining the Peircean ego as *non cogitans sed ex interpretatione*: the ego is a product of interpretive activity rather than its originating source.²² De Tienne recalls also the passage where Peirce articulated the first argument that leads to the reversal between the «I» and the thought, in his first *Harvard Lecture* of 1865: «We find that every judgment is subject to a condition of consistency; its elements must be capable of being brought to a unity. This consistent unity since it belongs to all our judgments may be said to belong to us. Or rather since it belongs to the judgments of

the self *must be* something more than that, must be a center of purpose and power (see V. Colapietro, *Semiosis and Subjectivity: A Peircean Critique of Umberto Eco*, in «The Southern Journal of Philosophy», 25, n. 3, 1987, pp. 295–312: 307.). I will show why it is crucial to show this opposition for the conclusion of my theoretical proposal.

¹⁷ W2, p. 204.

¹⁸ R. Menary, «Our Glassy Essence», cit., p. 615.

¹⁹ A. De Tienne, *Peirce on the Symbolical Foundation of Personhood*, cit., p. 83n9.

²⁰ G. Maddalena, *La Soggettività in Peirce e Dewey*, cit., p. 111.

²¹ Ibid.

²² A. De Tienne, *Peirce on the Symbolical Foundation of Personhood*, cit., p. 83.

all mankind, we may be said to belong to it».²³ De Tienne shows with the example of the unity of the self-reference, which moves us to say not merely «I, but I think or I say»: the “I” that appears in such statements is not the psychological subject that precedes and causes the thought, but the logical effect of a consistent flow of representations.²⁴ Therefore, the unity we experience as personal identity is not something we possess and then express through judgment. On the contrary it is the result of this interpretative process of unity, and therefore the “I” belongs as a condition of the thinking process itself;²⁵ which is precisely what authorizes Peirce’s claim that all conscious human manifestations result from inference, and that “we ought to say that we are in thought and not that thoughts are in us».²⁶

For the moment I have shown that a model built on the self-transparency of consciousness must be overcome, and that it is equally fundamental to displace the individual ego as an origin, in order to demonstrate that it emerges from a process (as a negation, in a certain sense). But this leads us to understand that if we are aware of our *ego*, and if our *ego* is conceived in this way,²⁷ something far more substantial must be found elsewhere to support this view and to move beyond what Peirce called the “nominalistic»²⁸ assumptions that reduce the person to a singular human organism. Within this framework, while the first idea of the self in Peirce’s anti-Cartesian essays often appears to be one of negation, the ultimate polemical target of this critique is the “barbaric notion of personal identity», that is, it is the role assigned to selfhood that must be fundamentally rethought. To sustain Peirce’s position, it must be demonstrated why the conception of man as an individual, as a «box of flesh and blood», is inadequate, and consequently why the selfhood that a person tends to

²³ W1, p. 167.

²⁴ «Consciousness is used to denote the *I think*, the unity of thought; but the unity of thought is nothing but the unity of symbolization—consistency, in a word (the implication of *being*) and belongs to every word whatever» (W1, p.495).

²⁵ A. De Tienne, *Peirce on the Symbolical Foundation of Personhood*, cit., p. 86.

²⁶ W2, p. 227n4. Lane’s reading is instructive in preventing a potential misunderstanding of this formula: «Peirce’s point is not that individual human beings do not think or that they do not have thoughts; were that his point, it would put this passage at odds with the project of much of “Some Consequences,” which is to argue that an individual person’s cognition consists of thought-signs. Rather, his point is that thought (cognition, representation) is something that one *does* over time, not something that a person *has* at any given instant» (R. Lane, *Persons, Signs, Animals*, cit., p.5). This leads to understanding a temporal dimension which I will extensively analyze in section 3.

²⁷ See V. Colapietro, *Peirce’s Approach to the Self*, cit., p. 120, n. 1. He correctly underlines a further reversal implied in Peirce’s account, between mind and ego: «Thus, all knowledge comes to us by observation, part of it forced upon us from without from Nature’s mind and part coming from the depths of that inward aspect of mind, which we egotistically call *ours*; though in truth it is we who float upon its surface and belong to it more than it belongs to us. Nor can we affirm that the inwardly seen mind is altogether independent of the outward mind which is its Creator» (C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, 8 vols., eds. by C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, A.W. Burks, The Belknap Press, Cambridge (MA) 1931–1958, 7.558 (hereinafter abbreviated as CP followed by volume and paragraph number).

²⁸ For an analysis about the Peirce’s nominalistic *threat*, see P.D. Forster, *Peirce and the Threat of Nominalism*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 28, n. 4, 1992, pp. 691–724.

attribute to itself is «the vulgarest delusion of vanity».²⁹ Singer contrasts this barbaric notion of personal identity with what Peirce defines an “outreaching identity».³⁰ The two objectives of this paper consist in tracing the theoretical premises of this outreaching identity and demonstrating why it constitutes a profound anthropological conception of the self. I will now turn to the analysis of Peirce’s first step in dismantling this barbaric notion: the claim that the human being is a symbol.

2. *The Pharmakon for “Our Glassy Essence”*

Why is man a symbol, and why must the doctrine presented above be rejected is the objective of this section. Peirce’s argument begins with the fact that human beings are not «most assured» of their own essence, on the contrary, it is precisely the thing of which we are «most ignorant».³¹ the stronger the subjective assurance, the weaker its epistemic warrant. From this *pars destruens*, the collapse of the individual’s conviction of a self-evident essence, the argument proceeds to explain why, and in what sense, the human being is a symbol, characterized by certain properties that are central to Peirce’s thought and consistent with the entire architecture of his theory. The observations Peirce made in his early years, in the XI *Lowell Lecture* of 1866, concern the reversal of the Cartesian assumption about subjectivity, as has been widely argued.³² He was to reiterate these ideas in similar terms, invoking again the famous line from Shakespeare, two years later, in *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities*. In 1866, he begins with what he himself defines as a “more practical question of metaphysics»: “what is man?» The commonsensical conception of his time, he observes, was the following:

Man is essentially a soul, that is, a thing occupying a mathematical point of space, not thought itself but the subject of inhesion of thought, without parts, and exerting a certain material force called volition. I presume that most people consider this belief as intuitive, or, at least, as planted in man’s nature and more or less distinctly held by all men, always and everywhere. Most ignorant of what he’s most assured, / His glassy essence.³³

As I will show presently, this doctrine is instead a very modern one, Peirce said, and he makes clear where the responsibility lies, again, with Descartes: «We derive the notion of the soul’s being single from Descartes».³⁴ Crucial for the present argument, in the *Lowell Lecture* Peirce is criticizing above all the idea of the individual soul grounded in volition, because volition is precisely what man, understood as a

²⁹ EP2, p. 2.

³⁰ M. Singer, *Signs of the self*, cit., p. 489.

³¹ Peirce’s quotation from Shakespeare *Measure for Measure* is the one of the most prominent in his work, demonstrating how much was crucial for him to demonstrate his opposing theory.

³² See, among others, P. Cárdenas, D. Tamayo, *Charles Sanders Peirce, an anti-cartesian revolution*, in «Esferas», 15, vol. 1, n. 32, 2025.

³³ W1, p. 491.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

symbol, is not part of; it belongs to the second category, from which the symbol is categorially distinct.³⁵ In the 1868 paper, moreover, Peirce adds the dimension already referred to above: the *ego* as locus of ignorance and error. Since the consciousness of the “I” emerges through ignorance and error, the human being *in toto*, when taken as an isolated individual, manifests itself only by negation:

The individual man, since his separate existence is manifested 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.

This is man, proud man, / Most ignorant of what he's most assured, / His glassy essence.³⁶

As repeatedly affirmed, the *ego* emerges from external inferences that testify to our ignorance and error, as the example from Peirce I now present makes plain. None of this implies that awareness of the self is something abstract or non-existent; there is no idealism in this passage.³⁷ The self emerges indeed in the concreteness of actuality. The example, again drawn from the so-called anti-Cartesian essays, is illustrative: a child who has heard that a stove is hot only realizes this when he touches it, and in that act becomes aware of his ignorance and consequently an *ego* is assumed in which that ignorance can inhere.³⁸ As De Tienne points out, an “I” emerges each time a thought materializes, each time a symbol is actualized, giving limits and expression to the eminently symbolic continuity of our personality and identity. It serves as a singular coherence, a concrete regularity.³⁹ What Peirce is asserting, however, as it is now evident, is something of a different order: that the individual alone is only a negation when taken apart from other individuals, and (that is the same in Peircean metaphysical stance) «the *core* which carries with it all the information which constitutes the development of the man» cannot be reduced to the features displayed by mere existence alone.⁴⁰ This point will be further developed as the conclusive argument. Recalling Stango's argument, it is legitimate to ask whether this negative theory leads to an entirely deflationary account of the self. While Stango and others work toward a revaluation of a certain idea of the individual⁴¹ and still others engage the many different conceptions of personhood developed by Peirce,⁴² I maintain that the devaluation of individuality is crucial: first, as an anthropological scaffolding of

³⁵ For an overview of the debate on individuals and categories, see: J.R. Di Leo, *Peirce's haecceitism*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 27, n. 1, 1991, pp. 79–109; P.A. Muoio, *Peirce on the Person*, cit.; H. Pape, *A Peircean theory of indexical signs and individuation*, cit.; G. Riley, *Peirce's Theory of Individuals*, cit.

³⁶ W2, pp. 241–242.

³⁷ Idealism is for Peirce the metaphysical system where only the first category is accepted as real (See EP2, pp. 179–180).

³⁸ W2, p. 168; W2, p. 202

³⁹ A. De Tienne, *La persona come segno*, cit., p. 99.

⁴⁰ W1, p. 499.

⁴¹ See, for example, M. Stango, “I” *who?: A new look at Peirce's theory of indexical self-reference*, cit., and G. Riley, *Peirce's Theory of Individuals*, cit.

⁴² E.g. R. Lane, *Persons, Signs, Animals*, cit.

his general theory of categories and semiotics, and second, because this negative aspect serves to illuminate the deeper structure of what genuinely interests Peirce regarding the human being: the subject of semiosis, the individual within a community, the whole person in its “feelings, intentions, thoughts»,⁴³ with the psychophysiological aspects firmly in the background. The subject of an action is an individual, as logically the subject of a proposition is an index,⁴⁴ but if this exhausts the account, it would once again indicate an inadequate understanding of the human being’s true self. I claim that Peirce is committed to a deeper project, and that he pursues it from the very beginning of his philosophical career, precisely when he claims that man is a symbol.

Returning to the argument interrupted above: Peirce contends that the doctrine of the «single soul» is a modern one and internally contradictory too. Ancient thinkers and many scholastics conceived of the human being as composed of multiple souls. The modern Cartesian position considers thought as constitutive of the human being, whereas in Peirce’s own time consciousness is treated as one component within it; and yet Descartes denies that the will exerts causal force upon matter, contrary to common belief of the 19th century. The prevailing position thus emerges as an incoherent amalgam of borrowed doctrines, detached from their original premises, unsupported by facts, and internally contradictory.⁴⁵ Having argued against the contradictory views that seek to describe the human being “externally», Peirce turns to the question of what man is when considered from within: «To what real kind does the thinking, feeling, and willing being belong? We know that externally considered man belongs to the animal kingdom, to the branch of vertebrates, and the class of mammals; but what we seek is his place when considered internally; disregarding his muscles, glands, and nerves and considering only his *feelings, efforts, and conceptions*».⁴⁶ It is from this internal standpoint that Peirce proposes that man is a symbol. Having already demonstrated that every state of consciousness is an inference, and that life is but a sequence of inferences or a train of thought, he concludes: «At any instant then man is a thought, and as thought is a species of symbol, the general answer to the question what is man? is that he is a symbol».⁴⁷ He then proceeds to an extended and complex explanation of why man and words are the same, insofar as both are symbols. What is relevant for the present argument is the understanding of which defining characteristics of words (symbols *par excellence*) make it possible to understand the “essence» of the symbolical personhood, the human being as symbol.

Many years later, reflecting on the anti-Cartesian essays, Peirce would affirm: “Long ago, in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (Vol. II, p. 156), I pointed out that a person is nothing but a symbol involving a general idea; but my views were,

⁴³ W1, p. 491.

⁴⁴ M.R. Brioschi, *La forma della relazione Logica, metafisica ed etica in Charles S. Peirce*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli (CZ) 2024, pp. 69–73.

⁴⁵ W1, p. 491.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

then, too nominalistic to enable me to see that every general idea has the unified living feeling of a person».⁴⁸ In that period, the analogy between man and symbol seemed even too nominalistic to Peirce himself, who had not yet grasped that any general idea carries the same significance as the life of a person. Indeed, we may go so far as to say that «different men, so far as they can have any ideas in common, are the same symbol».⁴⁹ What, then, does it mean that “man is a symbol”? It means, above all, that human beings are defined by the same features that define symbols, which are signs:

- (1) based on habits;⁵⁰
- (2) general;⁵¹
- (3) capable of growth, that is, of acquiring *information* and increasing in meaning.⁵²

Deductively, the human being is a creature of habit, general in nature, and capable of learning/acquiring *information*. Features (2) and (3) will be analyzed extensively in this and next section; feature (1) has been already extensively addressed in previous work.⁵³ The analogy between human beings and words is articulated first in terms of the «acquisition of meaning and information», in a passage that is deeply semiotic in the encyclopedic, Echian sense:⁵⁴ for us environmental perception enables the acquisition of meaning, and words themselves can be said to learn: terms such as “electricity» or “planet» accumulated information over time, meaning much more compared to the days of “Franklin and Hipparchus» just as human beings do. Although words derive their meaning from human use, thought itself is inseparable from external signs; thus, humans and words “reciprocally educate each other; each increase of a man’s information is at the same time the increase of a word’s information and vice versa. So that there is no difference even here».⁵⁵ *Generality* will be examined in greater detail in the following section. However, regarding the analogy, it is evident that the human being is general in the same way that a symbol is general: it can be instantiated multiple times without ever being reducible to any single one of

⁴⁸ C.S. Peirce, *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, Vol. 8, ed. by Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1982, p. 182 (hereinafter abbreviated as W8 followed by page number).

⁴⁹ EP2, p. 324.

⁵⁰ R. Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst (MA) 1967, R 797 (hereinafter abbreviated as R followed by manuscript number); CP 4.464.

⁵¹ R 491; F. Bellucci, *Peirce’s Speculative Grammar: Logic as Semiotics*, Routledge, New York 2017; W. Nöth, *The Criterion of Habit in Peirce’s Definitions of the Symbol*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 46, n. 1, 2010, p. 82.

⁵² W1, p. 496.

⁵³ S. Bernardi della Rosa, *Peirce on Habits. Developing a Pragmatist Ontology*, Lexington Books, Lanham 2025.

⁵⁴ U. Eco, *La Filosofia di Umberto Eco. Con la sua Autobiografia intellettuale*, ed. by A.M. Lorusso, trans. by A.M. Lorusso, S. Bernardi della Rosa, La Nave di Teseo, Milano 2021. I am grateful to Francesco Bellucci for drawing my attention to this point.

⁵⁵ W1, p. 496.

those instances (though the physiological description of the human being cannot – obviously). It is not possible to analyze here the full meaning of the term “general” in Peircean philosophy, one of the most important concepts in his semiotics, metaphysics, and the core of his scholastic realism.⁵⁶, but it suffices to note that the “Peircean ‘general’ is a blanket term which covers properties, laws of nature, patterns, habits, thoughts and more, insofar as they are projectible in the way that predicates are». ⁵⁷ A symbol, as a general sign, cannot be reduced to individual instances but always refers to future occurrences, just as the human being refers to its future actions, feelings, and thoughts. The very *ratio* of a symbol consists in governing future occasions; individual instances and individual acts represent a form that gives that process a “singular coherence,” just as the “I” does within the general continuity of our personhood, but in no way can the single occurrences of a symbol, or the individual “I’s”, restore the man-symbol’s generality and continuity. It is evident that the anti-individualist (e.g. anti-nominalist) perspective lies at the theoretical core of the analogy: “It would be false to say that man makes use of words, any more than words employ man. A word may be written down over and over again, and every inscription of it is necessarily the same in sense; while man is in one place and in one time – that is, has identity. But it is not the man himself but his conceptions, which are representations; and these have no more individuality in their representative character than words have». ⁵⁸ This is, I recognize, a metaphysical position, but one with significant consequences in other domains, as I will clarify below. ⁵⁹ What I am developing here, and what I believe Peirce was pursuing, is an ontological stance in the precise sense: an answer to the question “what is a human-being?”, addressing the primary characteristics of “being” as predicate/*species* of that particular subject/*genus*, “human.” Besides, Peirce himself clearly states that it is indeed a metaphysical issue: if oneself embraces the doctrine of continuity, that is synechism, ⁶⁰ one «must abjure

⁵⁶ C. Legg, *Predication and the Problem of Universals*, in «Philosophical Papers», 30, n. 2, 2001, pp. 117–143; R.M.P.-T. Mayorga, *From Realism to “Realicism”: The Metaphysics of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Lexington Books, Lanham (MD) 2007; P. Reyes Cárdenas, *Duns Scotus and Peirce on the Importance of Universals and Scientific Realism*, in «Escritos», 26, n. 56, 2018, pp. 83–106; F. Stjernfelt, *Dicisigns and Habits: Implicit Propositions and Habit-Taking in Peirce’s Pragmatism*, in M. Anderson, D.E. West (eds.), *Consensus on Peirce’s Concept of Habit*, Springer, Dordrecht 2016, pp. 241–262.

⁵⁷ C. Legg, *Predication and the Problem of Universals*, cit., pp. 129–130.

⁵⁸ W1, p. 323.

⁵⁹ As Peirce himself introduces the argument in the article just outlined: «No man is so enthralled by metaphysics as the totally uneducated; no man is so free from its dominion as the metaphysician himself. Since, then, everyone must have conceptions of things in general, it is most important that they should be carefully constructed» (*Ibid.*, p. 490).

⁶⁰ The issue of continuity between mind and the world is at the core of Peircean philosophy (Cfr. V.G. Potter, P.B. Shields, *Peirce’s Definitions of Continuity*, in «Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 13, n. 1, 1977, pp. 20–34), and it can be said of pragmatist approach in general (see R.M. Calcaterra, *Varieties of Synechism: Peirce and James on Mind-World Continuity*, in «The Journal of Speculative Philosophy», 24, n. 5, 2011, pp. 412–424).

this metaphysics of wickedness” expressed by the assertion “I am altogether myself, and not at all you». ⁶¹

To summarize: there are numerous passages in which Peirce consistently challenges the conventional notion of individual identity and selfhood. ⁶² His principal critique is directed at the idea of our *glassy essence*, a self independently defined by volition and the vanity of the *ego*, which is in the end an illusory phenomenon: «Our deepest sentiment pronounces the verdict of our own insignificance. Psychological analysis shows that there is nothing which distinguishes my personal identity except my faults and my limitations — or if you please, my blind will, which it is my highest endeavor to annihilate». ⁶³ That a self-proclaimed logician should write with such poetic force when exposing the illusory aspect of individual existence is itself revealing (see the final paragraph of this paper); it demonstrates that the critique of this conception of individuality is foundational to his philosophical architecture. Paraphrasing Peirce, it is the “essential” part of the person that I wish to foreground, and to demonstrate that it is what truly matters for him, as it remains crucial for any contemporary reflection on subjectivity. That essential part is not, of course, “the whole soul of a man», but represents the «core which carries with it all the information which constitutes the development of the man, his total feelings, intentions, thoughts». ⁶⁴ The human being is a symbol, therefore, because it is general and acquires meaning, and it does so through the peculiar continuity of space and time to which I now turn.

3. *The Spatiotemporal Continuity of Personhood*

Time and space are the two Cartesian (finally invoked in non-polemical sense) axes along which “the core which carries with it all the information which constitutes the development of the man, his total feelings, intentions, thoughts» unfolds, and along which it becomes clear why this specific idea of subjectivity cannot be confined, as individuality would have it, to any precise and isolated spatiotemporal spot. Let us analyze them in order to illuminate the continuity of symbolical and informational personhood. ⁶⁵ In the same article where Peirce abjures the «metaphysics of wickedness», *Immortality in the Light of Synechism* (1893), few lines later he explains how to dismantle the two expressions about selfhood and personal identity that I quote in the title of this paper. The objectives of this final section are to explain why, for him, «the selfhood you like to attribute to yourself is, for the most part, the vilest delusion of vanity», ⁶⁶ and how we may, and must, broaden “the barbaric conception

⁶¹ EP2, p. 2

⁶² See, among others, CP 1.673 (1898); CP 7.571 (1892); CP 4.68 (1893); EP2, p. 338.

⁶³ CP 1.673.

⁶⁴ W1, p. 499.

⁶⁵ As Detienne states: «personhood is this aspect according to which an organism behaves as a symbol» (A. De Tienne, *Peirce on the Symbolical Person, with Wittgensteinian Insights*, in «Recherches Sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry», 32, 2009, pp. 203–223: 21–22).

⁶⁶ EP2, p. 2.

of personal identity» outlined above.⁶⁷ Spatiotemporal continuity of symbolical personhood is Peirce's answer to these issues.⁶⁸ Let us therefore return to the argument developed in the XI *Lowell Lecture* and examine the conclusions Peirce draws from it. I will quote the passage in full and analyze it throughout this section:

In what does the identity of man consist and where is the seat of the soul? It seems to me that these questions usually receive a very narrow answer. Why, we used to read that the soul resides in a little organ of the brain no bigger than a pin's head. Most anthropologists now more rationally say that the soul is either spread over the whole body or is all in all and all in every part. But are we shut up in a box of flesh and blood? When I communicate my thoughts and my sentiments to a friend with whom I am in full sympathy, so that my feelings pass into him and I am conscious of what he feels, do I not live in his brain as well as in my own – most literally? True, my animal life is not there; but my soul, my feeling, thought, attention are. If this be not so, a man is not a word, it is true, but is something much poorer. There is a miserable material and barbarian notion according to which a man cannot be in two places at once; as though he were a thing! A word may be in several places at once, because its essence is spiritual; and I believe that a man is no whit inferior to the word in this respect. 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.⁶⁹

In a very narrow and simplistic sense, we are by necessity individual beings, because we react, we have extension, and all the other properties that Peirce attributes to the category of existence (that pertains to secondness). When Peirce argues that we are not mere things, that we are like words whose essence is spiritual and can be in several places at once, he is not denying any of the substantial properties of matter, but simply that our real self or true nature cannot be reduced to the actual manifestations of our *existent* individuality. Peirce here is shifting the focus from our individual being to what he defines as a symbolical notion of personal identity, and only this really distinguishes us as human beings. Both Singer and Colapietro offer an interpretation that renders Peirce's approach coherent with his semiotics. For Peirce, the locus, identity, and continuity of the self was not to be found in the individual organism, whether in the pineal gland or in the organism as a whole. It was, rather, an "outreaching identity" that connects the feelings, thoughts, and actions of one individual through time and with those of others through the processes of semiotic communication. The self is thus both a product and an agent of semiotic communication, and therefore social and public.⁷⁰ As Colapietro states (stressing the equation between mind and person), Peirce insists that the nature of a person cannot be more limited than that of a word, and this occurs whenever one assumes the narrow view of personal identity that consequently affirms that the human mind has

⁶⁷ EP2, p. 3

⁶⁸ Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, cit., p. 78.

⁶⁹ W1, p. 498.

⁷⁰ M. Singer, *Signs of the self*, cit., p. 489.

a more impoverished “mode of being than that of a word”.⁷¹ Besides, at any instant the mind is the embodiment of a generality that may be replicated in the future, and the boundary between two minds becomes blurred when two individuals communicate in «full sympathy». For Colapietro, therefore, not insularity but “interpenetrability” governs the relations between minds and individuals.⁷² For Peirce, *sympathy*, «the feeling one with another», is the proper account of a «dialogical mind», and this entails the rejection of subjectivism.⁷³ Moreover, according to Peirce’s principle of continuity, it becomes evident that in social reality the boundaries between one person and another are more blurred and interconnected, since “every point directly partakes of the being of every other”, and for this reason individualism must be ontologically rejected. Peirce argues that a person is not complete in isolation, where she would be only a negation, being fundamentally a potential member of society, and that one person’s experience is insignificant if it stands alone. He offers the example of perception: if someone perceives something that others cannot, it is considered a hallucination. Only collective experience gives to a community of individuals «indefinite possibilities». Neither individual actions nor individual pleasures can be considered ends in themselves, the only genuine end being what “we are all putting our shoulders to the wheel for – an end that none of us can catch more than a glimpse at – that which the generations are working out. But we can see that the development of embodied ideas is what it will consist in”.⁷⁴ According to Roberts, the emphasis on community serves once again to defend Peirce’s principle of continuity and his *scholastic realism* against the nominalist doctrine of individualism,⁷⁵ and by the same principle, this metaphysical defense must consequently extend its influence to the very life of human beings.⁷⁶

This coherent argumentation is enclosed within Peirce’s categorial scheme too. As Muio argues, thanks to this encompassing theory (developed from Peirce’s early work through his late writings) Peirce is not claiming that *individuals* are mere negations, but rather that *if* the identity of individuals has to be found in the features of the second category, the category of reaction, existence, actuality, human beings

⁷¹ V. Colapietro, *Peirce’s Approach to the Self*, cit., p. 102.

⁷² In Peirce’s view, in interpersonal communication a person recognizes other’s personality in the same way she is conscious of her own (CP 6.160), reversing thus what is usually considered to be a private and largely inaccessible dimension, the law of «absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism» as with an opposite view James has defined it (see W. James, *Principles of Psychology*, Henry Holt, New York 1890, p. 221; cfr. M. Bella, *Ontology after Philosophical Psychology. The Continuity of Consciousness in William James’s Philosophy of Mind*, Lexington Books, Lanham (MD) 2019, p. 37ss.).

⁷³ «Because of the dialogic nature of thought we are social even when we are alone. Mapping personhood to self-enclosed atomic individuals, as the Cartesian tradition tried to do, is misconceived» (C. De Waal, *Science beyond the self*, cit., p. 158).

⁷⁴ CP 5.402FnP2.

⁷⁵ The view that reality consists only of distinct, independent spatiotemporal individuals.

⁷⁶ See D.D. Roberts, *On Peirce’s Realism*, in «Transaction of the Charles S. Peirce Society», 6, n. 2, 1970, pp. 67–83: 71–72. This also suggests an ontological-historical dimension with anthropological implications: Peirce anticipates later views emphasizing cultural factors over individual genius in explaining collective achievements (cfr. M. Singer, *Signs of the self*, cit., p. 495; and CP 6.306–317).

would be deprived of the potentiality and generality (and therefore the features connected to the first and third categories); they would be mere negations, being defined solely by opposition, by what it is *not*.⁷⁷ It is now evident why Peirce insists on the *devaluation* of selfhood, which is not a denial of the *self*, but a critique of any account that strips it of its *meaningful* part (which only thirdness can account for) and why he calls for a *broadening* of the notion of personal identity. I will briefly analyze also the complementary temporal axis of this perspective, since I already discussed in different places why the proclivity toward the future (expressed by prediction and anticipation) is the essential element of personality, of what can be framed as a “future conditional self”.⁷⁸ As Colapietro stated, the human being as a symbol must be directed toward the future, for its same ontological structure: «if the self is a sign and if it is cut off from its future developments, it has been denied the possibility of actualizing its essence». ⁷⁹ Almost 30 years after the analogy between human being and symbol, in *The Law of Mind* (1892), Peirce clarifies the generality of personality and its teleological dimension:

This personality, like any general idea, is not a thing to be apprehended in an instant. It has to be lived in time; nor can any finite time embrace it in all its fullness. Yet in each infinitesimal interval it is present and living, though specially colored by the immediate feelings of that moment. Personality, so far as it is apprehended in a moment, is immediate self-consciousness. But the word coördination implies somewhat more than this; it implies a teleological harmony in ideas, and in the case of personality this teleology is more than a mere purposive pursuit of a predeterminate end; it is a developmental teleology. This is personal character. A general idea, living and conscious now, is already determinative of acts in the future to an extent to which it is not now conscious. This reference to the future is an essential element of personality. Were the ends of a person already explicit, there would be no room for development, for growth, for life; and consequently, there would be no personality. The mere carrying out of predetermined purposes is mechanical.⁸⁰

Recalling the previous argument, symbols and the human being as a symbol require future development and express their meaning in the conditional future. Indeed, the value of a symbol consists in enabling us to predict future occurrences of the same symbol. And this is why, as in the previous quote, Peirce thus affirms the personal character of a human being, its personality (being general) «is already determinative of acts in the future to an extent to which it is not now conscious». As previously stated the existence of our actual manifestations of our personality is not denied, but such manifestations are enabled and acquire meaning only through the generality of the personality: only what is “not a thing to be apprehended in an instant», but what «It has to be lived in time» might give meaning to human experience, and this only constitute the foundations of what we can call a *character*.

⁷⁷ P.A. Muoio, *Peirce on the Person*, cit., p. 181.

⁷⁸ S. Bernardi della Rosa, *Peirce on Habits. Developing a Pragmatist Ontology*, Lexington Books, Lanham (MD) 2025; Id., *The Habitual Power of Prediction Machines*, in «Topoi», 2025.

⁷⁹ V. Colapietro, *Peirce's Approach to the Self*, cit., p. 77.

⁸⁰ W8, p. 155

Again, Peirce exemplifies clearly the analogy of the meaning of *being general* for a human being: «The very being of the General, of Reason, consists in its governing individual events». Therefore, its essence is that it is always in an incomplete state, eager for further determination to complete it. «It always must be in a state of incipency, of growth». This is the *character* of the human being, in this its personality consists, “in the ideas that he will conceive and in the efforts that he will make, and which only develops as the occasions actually arise”.⁸¹ De Tienne clarifies this proclivity toward the future with the notion of program.⁸² According to him, given that every symbol is essentially preoccupied with its own development into new interpretant symbols, every symbol is directed toward the future, not the indicative future, but the conditional future. Since every symbol is fundamentally oriented toward the generation of further interpretants, it is intrinsically future-directed, though not toward an indicative future, but rather toward a conditional one. In this sense, a symbol functions as a kind of program: a general and indeterminate schema of what may occur under specified conditions, conditions that the symbol itself is tasked with articulating. By its very nature, such a program anticipates outcomes only at the level of generality, without specifying either the precise sequence of intermediate events that would lead to those outcomes or the concrete particularities of their realization. It is in this precise respect that a person, too, may be understood as a symbol, “a program turned toward the conditional future”.⁸³ To conclude, Peirce undermines the role of individuality which is located in a precise and isolated spatiotemporal spot, through the idea of a conditional, forward-looking subject, and placing the meaning of our personality within a general dimension, in which Peirce’s community-organism supersedes all the single selves into which it cannot be resolved.⁸⁴ Therefore, time and space are the two Cartesian axes along which this subjectivity unfolds, and this unfolding makes it, like a symbol, turned towards circumstances in the future, and not framed within precise spatial boundaries.

4. Conclusion. Hints for a philosophical anthropology of the subject

The theory that sees human beings as a means of incorporating possibility and generality dismisses any claim to a strong, stable individual or undivided and solid personality, but on the other hand it gains a focus on the proper function assigned to our species: «What is man’s proper function if it be not to embody general ideas in art-creations, in utilities, and above all in theoretical cognition?».⁸⁵ According to Colapietro, the subject is thus, among other things, “a medium through which forces

⁸¹ CP 1.615

⁸² A. De Tienne, *Peirce on the Symbolical Person, with Wittgensteinian Insights*, cit., pp. 24–26.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ M.G. Hamner, *American Pragmatism: A Religious Genealogy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003, p. 119.

⁸⁵ EP2, p. 443.

and persons other than the subject speak».⁸⁶ In this sense, mediation is one of the main features of the symbolical human being.⁸⁷ Colapietro also quotes an interesting passage from Silverman's *The Subject of Semiotics*, in which she differentiates again the terms "individual" and "subject", tracing a historical divergence with regard to the centrality of consciousness and unconsciousness: subjectivity gives a more central place to the unconscious and to cultural overdetermination. The subject is mainly different from the individual in its being fallible, conditioned (and conditional), and radically instable. Colapietro continues: the ways we think, feel, and act are largely governed by the circumstances in which we live; indeed, there are laws which determine how material and cultural circumstances influence human existence, but these laws are not mechanical or predetermined.⁸⁸ Quoting Ortega y Gasset defining the human being's essence as "a drama", he stresses the fallibility and instability of our lives. Laws and circumstances do not represent nihilistic anthropological view, rather they constitute the ontological condition in which we live, the condition of our state of inception and growth, toward the future and others. Toward the future, because Peirce clearly affirms that when he speaks "of a man's Real Self, or True Nature", he means the «Very Springs of Action in him, which means how he would act».⁸⁹ How the human being would act in specific circumstances in the future will reconstitute the purpose and meaning of its own existence. Toward others, too. Because Peirce pointed out that our personal existence is nothing without others, with a poetical vein that is deeper than any possible logical demonstration:

In the end: There are those who believe in their own existence, because its opposite is inconceivable; yet the most balsamic of all the sweets of sweet philosophy is the lesson that personal existence is an illusion and a practical joke. Those that have loved themselves and not their neighbors will find themselves April fools when the great April opens the truth that neither selves nor neighbors were anything more than vicinities; while the love they would not entertain was the essence of every scent.⁹⁰

Privileging the subject instead of the individual, that is, symbolic personhood, means acknowledging that our stability and rational power are not the core of "our soul", which is instead largely influenceable by external circumstances and by the very symbols by which we are surrounded (conceptions, beliefs, tools, narratives). Being a symbol amidst symbols implies that none of us is immune to the often-negative power of these highly complex symbolic structures we build.⁹¹ No individual alone has this "claimed faculty", and indeed the main purpose of our *developed species* should be to build environments more apt to our fallible subjectivities, often opaque to ourselves,

⁸⁶ Colapietro, *Semiosis and Subjectivity*, cit. p. 304.

⁸⁷ See also S. Bernardi della Rosa, *Peirce on Habits*, cit., Ch. 4.

⁸⁸ V. Colapietro, *Semiosis and Subjectivity*, cit., p. 306.

⁸⁹ R 649, p. 26.

⁹⁰ CP 4.68.

⁹¹ Digital environments based on algorithmic prediction being one of the latest and most pervasive examples, see S. Bernardi della Rosa, *The Habitual Power of Prediction Machines*, cit.

anything but “glassy»: in one word, symbolic. In the last sentence of his paper, Singer refers to an illuminating quote from Cassirer’s *An Essay on Man*, in which he claims that “Reason is a very inadequate term with which to comprehend the forms of man’s cultural life in all their richness and variety». The human being should be defined not as *animal rationale* but as *animal symbolicum*, in order to understand its specific difference.⁹² Peirce would agree, and this is one of the cases in which I claim his philosophy was prescient in identifying, in advance, problems that later became focal. Moreover, following Cassirer’s suggestion, this shift towards a symbolical human subjectivity may open a path to better comprehend the *symbolic wars* we are witnessing in our contemporary society and culture, a line of inquiry that I intend to pursue in further research.

⁹² M. Singer, *Signs of the self*, cit., p. 500.