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# Some Reflections on Peirce's View of the Self

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## Abstract

The paper aims to explore the tensions between different conceptual elements in Peirce's evolving account of rational self. While some of these – the putative origin in error, the emphasis on the external, as well as the linguistic or semiotic aspects of the self – conspire to license a *negative conception* of selfhood, understood essentially in terms of privation, other, equally important elements – such as the idea of self as the seat of character, capable of self-improvement and self-control – seem to suggest a need for a positive and substantive account. The present treatment of this tension largely follows the lines of argument sympathetic to Vincent Colapietro's reconstruction of Peirce's view, which seeks to re-establish a developmental continuity between Peirce's early semiotic conception of self and his later understanding of personhood as constituted by the unity of habits, capable of self-amendment and self-control in the light of an esthetic ideal of what is "admirable per se."

The essay, then, tends to be in substantial agreement with Colapietro's rejection of the anti-humanist post-structuralist approaches that push in the direction of the depersonification of the subject, primarily because such approaches tend to slight the notion of agency, which is essential for self-control, the embodied nature of this agency, and the role of the qualitative feeling (firstness) which attaches to the experience of human consciousness. Colapietro is also right to argue that neither the dialogical semiotic conception of self, nor Peirce's insistence that our knowledge of the internal is parasitic on our knowledge of the external, must force us to eliminate the notion of the acting subject from our conception of what it means to be a person.

On the other hand, it is also suggested that Peirce's recurrent treatment of the problem of selfhood in negative terms (both of logical negation and of moral disapproval) does not merely "appear" negative (as Colapietro proposes) but is, in fact, negative and reflects Peirce's preoccupation with evolutionary metaphysics (construed by him in a somewhat religious spirit). It is further argued that this genuinely negative attitude appears to inform, to a certain degree, Peirce well-known account of the origin of self-consciousness as a locus of error, seemingly retained without modification by Colapietro. The scenario of a child burning himself on a stove, through which the idea is introduced, presents the child as too contrite a sinner, capable of operating (counter-intuitively) with complex epistemological notions such as reality and ignorance. To the degree that the point is to emphasize the dependence of the formation of our conception of self on transactions in public space, such assumptions are unnecessary: we could make do with saying that the private is ultimately inferred from the public, or that we track our feelings and thoughts by using sentences that circulate in our community. To the degree that the point is to re-assert the negative conception of the self, the move itself may be undesirable.

Instead, this paper suggests that to make sense of the episode as Peirce describes it, we

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already need to presuppose on the child's part a certain understanding of the role that regularities play in the operation of the world, including *crucially* the operation of human agents. We must further presuppose that the child already has some appreciation of the predictive virtues of the idiom employed by his elders in anticipating and coordinating human behavior. It does, in fact, seem plausible that the child acquires the basic explanatory apparatus of reasons and motivations by listening to how adults explain each other's behavior, as well as by engaging in social role-play simulating the conduct of adults whose behavior is thus described. So, the child could be thought to first hypostasize a self for other people, the same way one may hypostasize a nature for an object, in which its notable properties can then inhere. What occurs, then, in the interaction described by Peirce is the realization that the child himself also has such a character, which is not entirely transparent to himself, but is to a considerable degree amenable to being modelled in the familiar public idiom. As a set of coordinated forces and habits of operation, identifiable and analyzable in a public vocabulary, the self appears, then, for the first time as character – i.e. an enduring configuration of dispositions, which, while remaining at the core of the self, to some degree also behaves like an external object, both in the sense that it is capable of exhibiting regular law-like behavior independent of one's volition, and in the sense that one can act on it, so as to modify it within certain limits in accordance with a reasonable sets of goals. This suggestion, while parting ways with Peirce's explicit treatment of the scenario, has the virtue (in my opinion) of being substantially in accord with the further developmental trajectory of his thought, as outlined in the first part of the paper.

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