

What is the Object of the Proposition?

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Abstract: My aim in this paper is to explore Peirce's conception of the object of the proposition. After a brief discussion of the structure of propositions and of the transition to the broader conception of "dicsign" (or quasi-proposition), I connect the doctrine of dicsigns to the notion of "immediate object", which is not the object as *represented*, as textual evidence shows, but the object as *denoted*, that is, the quantitative way the object is given in a proposition. This shows not only that Peirce's theory of propositions is strictly related to his dichotomy of objects, but also that the object as represented is to be found at the level of the full-fledged proposition, thus calling for a deeper inquiry into Peirce's theory of propositions.

Keywords: Proposition; Dicsign; Immediate Object; Quantification.

In Peirce's semiotics, the two concepts of *sign* and *object* are intrinsically related to each other. Objects determine signs; signs represent objects. However, not all signs properly "represent" objects, as it will be shown, but only propositional signs properly do so. This is because propositional signs are composed of denotative and predicative parts, the former devoted to merely *indicate* the object, the latter to merely *express* a quality; from the coupling of these two parts emerges the representation. Therefore, the relation with the object is ensured by the denotative part of the proposition, which quantitatively individuates the referent/s of the sign, making of "quantity" a distinctive aspect of propositions, according to which they traditionally divide into particular, singular, and universal.

Such a tripartition is to be found also in Peirce's semiotics, since his earliest writings. However, around the year 1903, having begun his classificatory enterprise, Peirce seems to have some trouble in

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handling this distinction into his new taxonomic frame. The necessity to take into account the quantificational dimension of signs is evident in the draft of the *Syllabus* entitled *Nomenclature and Divisions of Triadic Relations* (R 540 = EP 2, sel. 21; *NDTR*, hereafter), where, after having given his tenfold taxonomy of signs, Peirce specifies some further distinctions that he is not able, at that time, to obtain by means of the semiotic parameters through which he obtains his main classification (cf. Bellucci, 2018: ch. 7). Thus, as an appendix of the taxonomy, he introduces a rough quantitative division of signs to be applied to the class of Dicent Symbols, that is, propositions (cf. EP 2: 299). As we shall see, in 1905, two years after *NDTR*, the tripartition appears again in the classificatory schemes that Peirce proposes and develops in his *Logic Notebook* (R 339, *LN*, hereafter), but not where one would expect to find it. Surprisingly, the quantitative tripartition of propositions is rather found under the category of the sign's Immediate Object (IO, hereafter), that Peirce repeatedly defines, since the letter of October 1904 to Lady Welby, as the «object as it is represented» (SS: 32). This definition has led interpreters to consider the IO, in turn, as the sign's "content" (cf. Bonfantini, 1980), its "meaning" (cf. Eco, 1979), the equivalent of Frege's *Sinn* (cf. Eco, 1976; Deledalle, 2000; Atkin, 2008) or the Stoics' *lektón* (cf. Short, 2007), and together with the Dynamic Object (DO, hereafter), the dichotomy of objects is taken to be the Peircean way to capture the division between representation and reality. This interpretative approach is so common that we may consider it the "standard interpretation" of the DO/IO dichotomy. Now, if this interpretation is correct, what is the connection between the IO and a quantitative division of propositions? Why does Peirce quantitatively divide signs according to how they represent their objects? These questions, as such, are ill-posed. The right question should be: what is the IO, in the first place? A close examination of Peirce's mature writings indicates that this notion is far from what standard interpreters think it to be, and that – more interestingly – it is strictly related to propositions.

In what follows, I am going to investigate the development of Peirce's notion of IO and its relation to propositions. Following Bellucci (2015), I propose that the IO corresponds to the quantitative way in which DOs are given in propositional signs. Such a claim is supported by textual evidence, to be shown in § 2, which

strongly suggests that the notion of IO has been conceived by Peirce as the classificatory instrument to give an account of the quantitative aspect of propositional signs. However, the IO emerges relatively late in Peirce's life, not before 1904, and should be considered in the light of the theory of propositions that Peirce held at that time, namely, the doctrine of "dicisigns". Therefore, it is necessary to briefly focus on the structure of propositions and on their evolution into dicisigns, first, and then to investigate the development of the IO. The two doctrines will shed light on each other, as we shall see.

1. *From propositions to dicisigns*

Peirce's standard definition of the proposition, which Hilpinen (1992) identifies with that given in *Καὶνὰ στοιχεῖα* (R 517 = EP 2, sel. 22), says that it is «a sign which *separately*, or independently, indicates its object» (EP 2: 307, emphasis added). It is, then, by means of its relation to the object that a proposition can be distinguished from a term, which does not separately indicate its object, or an argument, which separately indicates both its object and its interpretant (cf. Bellucci, 2018). But what does it mean that a proposition separately indicates its object? Peirce clearly explains it in the 1903 draft *Logical Tracts. N°1. On Existential Graphs* (R 491 = WS, sel. 5), where he claims that «one cannot better define a proposition [...] than as a representation of which one part serves, directly or indirectly, as an index of its object, while the other part excites in the mind an image of that same object» (WS: 140). Thus, what is typical of propositions is that these signs have parts: one which indicates an object (subject part), the other that expresses a quality of it, or better, that evokes in the mind of the interpreter a general idea of the property signified (predicate part). What is the nature of such parts? Again, the answer is to be found in a 1903 draft entitled *On the Foundations of Mathematics* (R 7 = WS, sel. 6), where Peirce, enumerating some fundamental characters of propositions, writes that «a sign may be complex; and the parts of a sign, though they are signs, may not possess all the essential characters of a more complete sign» (WS: 131). Hence, those parts are also signs – they are terms –, even though in a different sense from that in which propositions are. To grasp such a difference is necessary

to notice that denotation, just as signification, is in no case synonymous with representation. To Peirce, representation is the result of the *coupling* of denotation *and* signification, and it is brought about by propositions, in force of their being composed of denotative and significant terms. Terms, for their part, are capable to perform only one logico-semiotic task at a time: they *either* denote *or* signify, not both. Therefore, only those signs equipped with a denotative and a significant side are capable of “representing”, properly speaking. We may call them *complete* signs, as opposed to *incomplete* ones. Unlike complete signs, incomplete signs are not composed of parts: according to the chemical metaphor dear to Peirce, they are atoms, from the combination of which molecules (propositions) emerge. An example will help. “This stove is black” is a complete sign that represents a given stove as black. The subject part denotes the object referred to by the proposition, while the predicate part signifies a quality of it. But “this stove” and “is black” taken in themselves do not represent anything: the one denotes, the other signifies, while the proposition resulting from their combination can do both things at once. And to do both things at once means to represent a fact, that is, to bring forth a depiction of a state of things – which may or may not correspond to reality, determining the proposition’s truth or falsity. The state of things depicted constitutes the information that the complete sign conveys to its interpreter, as the stove example suggests. Therefore, we may distinguish propositions from their components also according to their informative power, since the information conveyed by terms is always somewhat partial: information may be *derived* from them, but they do not directly *convey* it¹.

If someone tells you “is black”, you may be rather puzzled if no other pieces of information – like “this stove” – is added. But as soon as you couple the two terms, you obtain a proposition, which gives you, so to speak, “ready-made” information. In short: propositions *say something about something* (cf. Stjernfelt, 2014: 51), that is, they indicate an object and predicate some quality of it.

Now, in the 1903 draft of the *Syllabus* entitled *Sundry Logical*

¹ Stjernfelt highlighted that «the distinction between signs conveying information and signs from which information may be derived points to the possibility of deriving information from icons – crucial to diagrammatical reasoning» (2014: 55) and that when such information is derived, it is then structured in propositional form.

Conceptions (R 478 = EP 2, sel. 20) – written shortly after the *Logical Tracts* and the *Foundations of Mathematics* already mentioned – Peirce widens his concept of the proposition to cover the whole of those signs capable to deliver intelligible and complete information, no matter whether they are propositions *stricto sensu* or just proposition-like signs: anything which says something (predicate) about something (subject), anything which thus functions as a proposition, is now a “dicisign”. As pointed out by Stjernfelt (2014: 58), it is this purely functional definition that makes of the dicisign a wider category than that of proposition². These signs inherit all the features of the preceding conception of the proposition. As a matter of fact, Peirce defines them as «the kind of sign that *conveys* information, in contradistinction to a sign from which information may be derived» (EP 2: 275) and “deduces” (cf. Bellucci, 2018: 220) their structure through a long and complex analysis whose outcome is the demonstration of their twofold structure, composed of two signs corresponding to subject and predicate of standard propositions – here renamed “rhemes” or “rhemata”, to distinguish them from standard logic’s “terms” –, glued together by the syntax of the dicisign. Thus, in summary, dicisigns are compounds of an indexical and an iconic or symbolic rheme bonded together by the dicisign’s syntax, capable to bring forth the representation of a fact, namely, to depict a possible state of things. To recall the stove example, a dicisign may be also a picture of a black stove with a label saying “my stove”, since the former expresses a quality and the latter points out what object that quality is predicated of. But it may be also the picture alone, for the shape drawn by the lines indicates the object, while the black color embodies and expresses the quality of that object – and it can be so because it is not strictly necessary for dicisigns to be actually composed of two parts, but only to be interpreted, considered, regarded to be such (cf. EP 2: 276).

That said, how do dicisigns relate to their objects? Plainly, through their indexical rheme. But not all dicisigns denote their objects in the same manner: some may denote a multitude of objects, others just one, and still, others may denote all the objects of a given universe of discourse. Therefore, how can we distinguish the quantitative aspects of dicisigns? That is to say, how can we apply

² In brief: while all propositions are dicisigns, not all dicisigns are propositions.

the propositional distinction into particular, singular, and universal, also to dicisigns? Peirce faced the problem, and he was aware of the necessity to find out a criterion according to which such a distinction can be applied to that class of signs – a criterion without which such an application would be arbitrary and unfounded. What Peirce needed was the determination of a level of analysis of the structure of signs capable to explain their differences in kinds of denotations. Here, the DO/IO dichotomy comes into play.

2. *Dynamic and immediate objects*

The first important appearance of the dichotomy of objects is in the letter to Welby of October 12, 1904, where Peirce distinguishes two ways to consider the object, namely, as it is in itself and as it is represented (cf. SS: 32). The former corresponds to the DO, while the latter to the IO. These two definitions recur also in the years following 1904, so that they can be considered typical. Therefore, henceforth, I will refer to them when I speak of “the definition” of one of the two objects. Anyway, since this first appearance it is already clear that the dichotomy of objects is a tool of classification that allows Peirce to identify different structural levels in the “physiology of signs” according to which these can be classed. The following passage from the letter clearly shows these new tools at work:

In respect to their relations to their dynamic objects, I divide signs into Icons, Indices, and Symbols (a division I gave in 1867). I define an Icon as a sign which is determined by its dynamic object by virtue of its own internal nature. [...] I define an Index as a sign determined by its dynamic object by virtue of being in a real relation to it. [...] I define a Symbol as a sign which is determined by its dynamic object only in the sense that it will be so interpreted. It thus depends either upon a convention, a habit, or a natural disposition of its interpretant, or of the field of its interpretant (that of which the interpretant is a determination). [...] In respect to its immediate object a sign may either be a sign of a quality, of an existent, or of a law. (SS: 33)

The DO is designed to give an account of the thing that “kicks off” the process of representation: as such, it is the reference point for the distinction of signs into <icon, index, symbol>, a trichotomy the criterion of which is *how* the sign is determined by its DO – which is accurately described in the passage. By contrast, Peirce is

very hasty in presenting the IO-related trichotomy, since the only thing that he says is the tautological truth that if the object as it is represented is – say – a quality, then the sign is a sign of a quality. Bellucci (2015) has pointed out that the first, subsequent passage in which we can find some hint that clarifies what the IO stands for in Peirce’s mind is the *LN* entry of June 1, 1905, where Peirce writes that he uses «the terms *immediate* and *direct*, not according to their etymologies but so that to say that *A* is *immediate* to *B* means that it is present in *B*» (R 339 DDR 243v). From this, Bellucci infers that since «to say that an object *O* is immediate to a sign *S* is to say that the object *O* is *present* in the sign *S* [then] “to be present in a sign” can mean nothing else than “to be part of a sign”» (Bellucci, 2018: 291)³. Be that as it may, it is with *LN* July 7, 1905, that things start becoming clearer:

In its relation to its Immediate Object it is Vagosign if it represents that Object as possible; it is Actisign if it represents that Object as existent; it is General if it represents that Object as law. In its relation to its Dynamical Object it is an Icon if it refers to that Object by virtue of its own Primarity; it is an Index if it refers to that Object by virtue of its own Secundarity to Object; it is a Symbol if it refers to that Object by virtue of its own Tertianity to Interpretant. (WS: 153-4)

With regard to the DO nothing has changed since Peirce’s previous discussions of it; we may thus focus on the IO. Peirce says that according to how its IO represents the DO – namely, as possible, existent, or law – a sign can be either a vagosign, an actisign, or a general. Bellucci construes this trichotomy as a distinction of signs according to their “quantity” (cf. 2018: 292), even though it is not immediately clear where the dimension of quantity fits into, here, since possibility, existence, and law may be reformulated in different terms as possibility, actuality, and necessity, which suggests that the distinction in <vagosign, actisign, general> pertains to the aspect of modality – not that of quantity. However, the day after that note, on July 8, 1905, Peirce has some doubts about this way of framing the distinction in modal terms and writes:

³ It is important not to confuse the sign with the triadic relation: the former is one of the three *relata* of the latter. If we simply identify the two with one another, then to say that the IO is present in the sign adds nothing new, for the triadic relation already involves by definition the object as one of its *relata*.

VAGOSIGN PROPER GENERAL

This is elevating Modality too high. It should not be the question what the object is in itself but whether it is represented. The *Vagosign* should be a sign that represents its object as simply *such and such*. The *Proper* represents its object as *compelled* (or as an *event*) (or in some other way *Secundan*). The *General* represents its object as an *aspect* or as considered etc. (WS: 155)

At first sight, things are as murky as before. However, the new terminology (<*vagosign*, *proper*, *general*>) undoubtedly hints at the traditional distinction, in traditional logic, of particular, singular, and universal propositions, which is a quantitative distinction. Therefore, Bellucci's proposal may prove to be the right one to clarify the obscurity of the passage.

The *vagosign* is said to be that which represents its object as *such and such*, thus involving nonspecific reference, indefiniteness. Does this mean that it depicts its object as *something indefinite*, like in a sort of blurred shape? It could be, but it seems more likely that, quantitatively speaking, what Peirce means is that the *vagosign*, in referring to an object, does not refer to any specific object, but merely to "some" possible ones, without specifying anything further. The *proper* – which is a renamed version of the *actisign* –, instead, is said to represent its object as *compelled*, or as an *event*. The word "compelled" strikes particularly for its oddity: under the modal interpretation, we have the big problem of explaining why "being compelled" should be such an important character of objects as to be elected as one of the three formal kinds of modalities. By contrast, reading it quantitatively, it becomes truly informative, for in this case it could mean "delimited", "confined" to a certain, singular existent. The *compelled* object of the *proper* is a specified one and, thus, the *proper* sign deals with singularity. The term "proper" also suggests that what Peirce has in mind is the proper name, which is the typical subject of a singular proposition ("Socrates is white"). In the end, we have the *general* sign, which represents its object as an *aspect*. Even though what "aspect" means is not clear, taking stock of what we have said up to now we may easily conclude that, in all probability, it pertains to generality. Thus, as Bellucci argues, through the trichotomy of signs according to the IO Peirce can embody in his taxonomy the traditional distinction of particular, singular, and general signs, thus implying that «the immediate object is the level of analysis at which the

dimension of *quantification* is taken into account» (2018: 293).

So far, so good. But this concerns the trichotomy related to the IO; what the IO is in itself remains out of sight. The fog begins to dispel only a couple of months after the emergence of the <vago-sign, proper, general> trichotomy, when we assist to Peirce's first attempt to define a new, more articulated classification of signs since that given in *NDTR*. Here is the IO part of the classificatory scheme from the *LN* entry of October 8, 1905:

- B Divisions according to the Object
 - a. According to the Immediate Object (How represented)
 - Indefinite Sign
 - Singular Sign
 - Distributively General Sign (WS: 157)

This entry needs to be read in continuity with that of October 10, since the first is a scheme of which the second is the explanation. Let us consider the passage from October 10 that concerns the IO:

- B. Signs are divisible according to their Objects.
 - a. According to their Immediate Objects. The Immediate Object is that Object which the sign creates in representing it.
 1. There are signs each of which the Immediate Object is only a possible presentment of a Dynamic Object, a fragment of it, the rest being held in reserve, so that there is nothing in the Immediate Object to prevent contradictory attributes being separately possible of it. Thus "A certain man" may turn out to be rich. He may turn out another time poor. Such a sign may be termed an *indefinite sign*.
 2. There are signs each of which the Immediate Object holds nothing in reserve, by supplying which the utter can afterward limit it, nor allows any freedom of interpretation, the Immediate Object precisely denoting the Dynamic Object. Such a sign is called a *Singular Sign*, a term in the use of which a certain latitude must be allowed, however; or else there will be no occasion on which it can be applied.
 3. There are signs each of which the Immediate Object is represented as exchangeable for any existent within specified or understood limits. Such may be termed a *distributive sign*. (WS: 160)

Here again, according to their IOs, signs may be indefinite, singular, or distributive (that is, general). But the interesting part of this passage consists of Peirce's characterization of the IO. He says it is the object that the sign *creates* in representing it. This term – "creates" – may be interpreted in the sense that the sign, in repre-

senting the DO, brings forth a sort of depiction of it – as standard interpreters would probably say. This depiction, however, would be the *final* product of the sign, and thus it cannot be *a part* of it (as the IO). Even more importantly, if the IO were the object as represented, it would be impossible to explain why according to their IOs signs divide into only three classes of a clearly quantificational nature. What is it, then, the IO?

We know that the term “immediate” means “part of” for Peirce, implying that the IO is part of the sign, and we know that according to the IO – whatever it may be – signs divide quantitatively into vague, singular, and general. How to explain such a scenario? The IO must be inside the sign and must deal with its denotative aspect. Now, the only kinds of signs that are capable to contain other signs as parts are propositional signs, that is, dicisigns, and it happens that dicisigns have a part devoted to denoting their referent/s. In light of these facts, I agree with Bellucci’s (2015) proposal to construe the IO as the way the denotative part of a dicisign quantitatively indicates its object. In other words: the way the dicisign’s index performs its task of denotation – vaguely, if the sign indicates *some* objects, singularly, if it indicates *that* object, and generally, if it indicates *all* the objects in some universe of discourse – is the IO.

This claim may sound like blasphemy to the vast majority of scholars, who may object that the “object as represented” cannot mean anything but “the depiction of the object made by the sign” – like Frege’s *Sinn* is the way the *Bedeutung* (analogous to Peirce’s DO) is presented in the sign⁴. This is explicitly the opinion of Albert Atkin, who, drawing on Joseph Ransdell’s reading of the IO as «the funded result of all interpretation prior to the interpretation of the given sign» (1977: 169), assumes the IO to be «the object as it is suggested by previous interpretation, that is, as some partial picture of the dynamic object at some interim stage of inquiry» (Atkin,

4 To Frege (1892), the *Sinn* includes, or contains, the “mode of presentation” of the object referred to by the sign, that is, it contains the way in which the object is represented to be, while the *Bedeutung* is that which the sign refers to, namely, the object. His examples are clear enough: the same geometrical point can be either represented as “the point of intersection of *a* and *b*” or as “the point of intersection of *b* and *c*”; the way the object is presented, or “depicted”, are different, whereas the object *in se* remains just the same – and that goes also for the “morning star” and the “evening star”.

2008: 73). Consequently, Atkin claims that «these notions of partial illumination, or partial presentation, and candidacy for explaining cognitive significance clearly invite comparison with Frege's *Sinn*, or concept of sense» (*ibid.*). Gérard Deledalle also explicitly adopts the Fregean viewpoint, as he states that the sign «has for Frege as for Peirce, two objects: a dynamical or referential object (*Bedeutung*) and an immediate object or sense (*Sinn*)» (2000: 139); though implicitly, Christopher Hookway (1985) and Kelly Parker (1998) move along similar lines too. T. L. Short, even though from a slightly different angle, substantially adopts the standard perspective: he draws a parallel with Stoic logic claiming that «the immediate object is the Stoics' *lekton*, Dion as represented, while the dynamic object is the real Dion, Dion as he exists independently of being represented» (2007: 191).

Reasonably, standard interpreters would claim that the quantificational interpretation of the IO is incompatible with Peirce's typical definition of it, namely, the object as it is represented by the sign – and they would be absolutely right! Facts, however, speak for themselves: Peirce shows us – over and over again, for two years – that the IO is linked to quantification, not to representation, even if he himself explicitly says the opposite – over and over again, for two years – when he gives the IO's definition. The two things do not match with each other: to which Peirce should we believe? It does not make sense to cast serious doubts over Peirce's employment of the IO as a means for the analysis of the structure of signs so as to classify them according to their quantity: his employment of the IO as a taxonomic instrument has a large textual basis, only partially reconstructed above. It makes a bit more sense to cast some doubt over the *manner* Peirce defines the IO; he might not have chosen the best words, and this might have misled our understanding of this notion.

To be more precise, what the quantificational interpretation of the IO is incompatible with is not so much Peirce's definition of the IO, but a *naïve interpretation* of such a definition. If we take too seriously the definition, we soon end up in a very paradoxical situation. Being the only kind of signs capable to fully represent objects, dicisigns *are* representations of their objects, that is, the object as represented *coincides* with the dicisign. This makes of the distinction between sign and IO – if this latter is considered as the

object as represented – a useless distinction, for the object as represented is the full-fledged sign. To put it simply: if the IO of “This stove is black” is that the stove is represented as being black, any distinction between the sign and the IO disappears. Moreover, if it were the object as represented, the IO could not have been a part of the sign, but necessarily its result – or better, again, the sign itself. It is clear, therefore, that the IO cannot be naively interpreted as the object as represented, for such a view would make of it a sort of third entity between the DO and the sign, which cannot exist according to Peirce’s triadic structure of the sign relation (DO–sign–interpretant). Last but not least, the IO must have something to do with the manner in which propositional signs divide quantitatively. Therefore, it cannot be the “object as represented” also because, if it were such, there would be no way to explain the quantitative division of signs that it determines. Furthermore, there would be no reason at all to distinguish signs according to how their objects are represented, for the variability of representation is so wide and unpredictable that to assume a division based on this criterion would be frankly impossible and useless at the same time.

Giving up to the Fregean way, the standard interpretation may walk another path, namely, the Saussurean one. Bonfantini (1980) tries this way, suggesting that the IO is the Saussurean “content” of the sign, of which the sign itself is the “expression”. However, this clearly cannot be the case, for this conception of the sign’s structure is absolutely alien to and incompatible with Peirce’s one. Bonfantini’s interpretation cannot be adopted if we aim to clarify and thoroughly interpret Peirce’s ideas about the object of the sign after 1904.

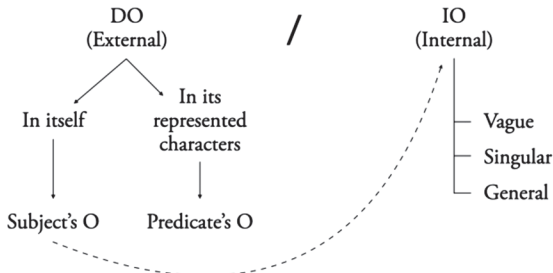
How, then, should we construe the definition of the IO? What does it mean “as represented” in that definition? I believe that, in such a context, Peirce used “representation” to mean “denotation”. In other words: he technicalized the term without signaling such a technicalization. Thus, we may gloss “the object as represented” with “the object as denoted”, which matches perfectly with the quantitative tripartition of signs that the IO brings about.

3. Immediate objects and dicisigns

A confirmation of this interpretation comes from the *LN* entry of October 30, 1905, where Peirce explicitly addresses the question of the object of the proposition:

The object of a sign is Internal or Immediate Object, External or Quasi-Real Object. But the latter is divisible into the External Object as it is in itself and the External Object in those respects in which it is represented. The External Object as it is *in itself* is denoted by the *subject* of a proposition. The External Object in its represented characters is the indefinite object of the predicate. (WS: 163-164)

The IO is said to be “internal”, and as we know it is the denotative part of a dicisign, while the counterpart (which should be the DO) is called “external” object – ostensibly, “external” is here meant with reference to the sign. This latter further subdivides according to (a) how it is in itself and (b) how it is in its represented characters⁵: the former is indicated by the subject of the proposition, while the latter is the indefinite object of its predicate. There is a clear overlapping of the IO with the DO considered in itself, for the external-dynamic object in itself is indicated by the dicisign’s denotative side, namely, the IO, which happens to be exactly the subject part of a propositional sign.



⁵ The internal/external distinction resembles very closely the DO/IO distinction. However, the two are clearly not the same. In point of fact, there is a hierarchy between them. The latter (DO/IO) is the higher one since it is a distinction of how the object of the sign can be considered, namely, as the sign’s determinant or as the sign’s “referent”. The former (internal/external) is a distinction between two different ways in which *the DO* may be considered, thus depending upon the DO/IO dichotomy.

But what does it mean that the DO in its represented characters is the indefinite object of the predicate? Following William Ockham's theory of *suppositio*, Peirce thinks that both the dicisign's parts refer to the same object, that is, they both «supposit for the same thing» (Hilpinen, 1992: 475). However, the predicate does not have a clearly defined object as the subject does, for it is a rhematic sign that merely embodies a quality of a *possible* object. But then, why does Peirce say that a predicate has an indefinite object?

The answer may be found in one of the drafts of *The Basis of Pragmaticism* (R 284 = WS, sel. 10), where he remarks that every proposition «is essentially an assertion» (WS: 210) and that an assertion, even the simplest, is always composed of two signs of which «the former is intended to create something like a picture in the mind of the interpreter, the latter to point to what he is to think of that picture as being a picture of» (*ibid.*). Obviously, the “former” is the predicate, the “latter” the subject. Now, it is important to recall that predicates are rhemes with blank spaces to be filled (like “__ is black”), but «it is necessary to remember that our blanks embody a concept. What is that concept? It is evidently a subject occupying the place occupied by a proper name in the completed proposition and differing from that only in being entirely indefinite. It denotes an indefinite individual» (*ivi*: 209). So, the predicate is a rheme that embodies a quality – say, blackness – to be attributed to a possible subject; thus, we have the rheme “__ is black”. But it is also true that, since the rheme is an unsaturated element, its structure must envisage the presence of another concept, namely, that of the subject. Therefore, “__ is black” turns into “This stove is black” – the sign is completed, since there are now two concepts, that of the object referred to by the sign (the stove) and that of the quality predicated of it (blackness). In envisaging the presence for the concept of the object, the predicative rheme may be said to have an object of its own or, more properly, the possibility of an object. But the possibility of an object does not specify anything of it, it only implies that *some* possible object *may be* the object of that predicate. Thus, as Peirce exemplifies, “__ bartered __ to __ for __” is the same as “*Somebody* bartered *something* to *somebody* for *something*”. This means that “*some possible object* is black” also has, in a certain sense, its own (indefinite) object; therefore, the external object (DO) is “represented” in both of the dicisign's sides, although

in different ways – denotation and signification – by the IO and the predicative rheme.

4. *What is the object of the dicisign?*

I would like to conclude by saying that dicisigns have three different objects, in three different senses and according to three different viewpoints. The first and properly speaking the only object is the object denoted by the subject of the dicisign: it is the object *tout court*, that which determines the dicisign and thus the dicisign refers to it, indicating it through its denotative rheme. Being referred to by the indexical part of the dicisign, the object is quantitatively given in it, and this quantificational aspect *is* the IO of the dicisign, as we have seen, according to which there can be vague, singular, and general signs.

The second object is the “indefinite” object of the predicate of the dicisign, which is whatever has the quality that the predicate representatively embodies. Anything black can be the object of the predicative rheme “__ is black”, but when the predicate is involved in a propositional sign, its indefinite object is determined by the denotative performance made by the other side of the proposition.

In order to glue together the two sides of the dicisign, we need to take its syntax into account. This latter is responsible for the creation of a full-fledged representation. Such representation involves the object/s indicated by the dicisign’s denotative rheme and the quality embodied by the predicative rheme, which are put together by the syntax. Being put together, object and quality are the parts from the unity of which the picture of a possible state of things emerges.

The “object” (in the first sense) of signs such as “This stove is black”, or a picture of a black stove, is *a stove*, not *a black stove*. A black stove is the possible state of things that these signs represent. But in order to represent a state of things, the proposition must (1) involve a quality besides the object, (2) be able to put them together, and (3) represent itself as related to the object represented. The syntax of the dicisign deserves a more detailed study, but I think we may claim that it has a third object of its own, which is the *fact* that the two sides of the dicisign refer to the same object – as Peirce suggests in claiming that a dicisign necessarily represents itself as an

index of the fact that it is linked to its object (cf. EP 2: 276).

In conclusion, Peirce's theory of the proposition is strictly related to his distinction of the DO/IO, the latter accounting for the quantificational aspect of propositions, the former being the theoretical background against which the dichotomy emerges. In light of the above, a profound reconsideration of our understanding of Peirce's semiotics, and in particular of his "semiotics of the proposition", is urgently needed. If representation is the prerogative of propositional signs, how pivotal can they be in Peirce's theory of signs? What is the shape of the mereology implicit in such a theory? And what could be the impact of Peirce's large conception of the proposition, in nowadays logic?

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