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Eco's Cognitive Semioticization of Qualia

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## 1. Eco's Pragmatic Turns

- 1 There are (at least) two “pragmatisms” in Umberto Eco's works about semiotics. The first is rather close to traditional “pragmatics” (Eco 1976: 102) – this perspective is in general close to the semiotic analysis of the use of language through its cultural and communicative functions. As Eco observes,

I have always defined semiotics as a logic of culture and I still stick to this definition. However, cultural processes change and I think that today semiotics should take into account new phenomena such as the Web as a maximal encyclopedia (with all the problems concerning how to filter information – which means defining the notion of interpretation again) and new kinds of communicative intercourse such as social networks and so on. Communication with virtual partners implies a reformulation of pragmatics. (Eco in Kull & Velmezova 2014: 539)

- 2 This perspective has its theoretical base mostly in Eco's theory of codes and his conception of sign-function as presented in his *Theory of Semiotics* (1976) and in his semiotic critique of the theory of speech acts and encyclopedic representation based on “pure” semantics in *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (1984). The most important perspective in these “early” texts is that semiotics is the interdisciplinary study of the logic of the system of the culture and its “lies,” e.g., propaganda and/or ideology (cf. Eco 1970). Eco's tendency, perhaps influenced in this way by Roman Jakobson's pioneering works synthesizing disparate paradigms of sign theory, was mostly to re-interpret, interconnect, and in some way overcome some topics from Peircean semiotics (e.g., the notion of interpretant) and “continental” schools of (post) structuralist semiology which are traditionally focused on the formal system of language and its possible extrapolation to the whole of given culture (cf. Eco 1976: 14-5; 21-8). In other words, his attempt was to build a “truly general” semiotics and (in *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language*) unite unfortunately often disparate fields of analytical philosophy and semiotics. One part of

this grand project was to pragmaticize structuralist semiology (and also various types of formalisms, cf. Eco 1999: 290) on the basis of a re-interpretation of Hjelmslev's glossematics (in *Theory of Semiotics*) which consequently led Eco to explore the possibility of analysis of "semiotic atoms," basic units of semiosis (cf. CP 5.484), in the fashion of reinterpreted Greimas' structural semantics. The frame, which promised to overcome these paradigms and also further develop Peirce's conception of abduction, was Eco's own theory of codes (in *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language*).

- 3 These topics did not completely disappear in *Kant and the Platypus* (1999) – Eco's persuasive examples<sup>1</sup> are mostly taken from the field of cultural pragmatics, Eco is still searching for "semiotic primitives" (Eco 1999: 144). Pragmatics is for him still prior to syntactics and semantics – but the emphasis in the field of general semiotics substantially shifted. Human cognition, which is not only understood from the social/cultural perspective predominant in Eco's "early and middle" works, is much more influenced by Peirce's concepts of mind, consciousness and cognition. In *Kant and the Platypus*, Eco proposes his version of semiotic cognitive realism – the main attempt of this text is to explore one of various parts of this synthetic and eclectic but original perspective. Eco's creative semiotic and pragmatic conception of qualia as "bricks of our cognition" is grounded in his reinterpretation of C. S. Peirce.

## 2. Semiotic Primes

- 4 Analysis of basic units of semiosis, elementary units of meaning, remain in Eco's later work. In *Kant and the Platypus*, these elementary primes are not only Hjelmslev's *figurae* (cf. Eco 1984: 21nn) or Greimasian semes, but have various forms depending on various discourses which "constitute" them. Primes can be considered in the dimension of epistemology (and its pragmatic/inferential modes of codes), cognition (as forms of primary iconicity and indexicality), or general ontology, which is the most basic form (as in the case of qualia). Therefore, Eco in *Kant and the Platypus*, is mostly interested in basic function of the dynamic object, which plays the role of something purely "first," and that object's two-fold character. On one side, this object (which is represented by various sets of immediate objects represented by given representamens and interpretants, cf. CP 2.274) is "really efficient but not immediately present [...]" (CP 8.343), and also it is the mode of the object that determines icon by "virtue of its own internal nature" and index by "virtue of being in a real relation to it" (CP 8. 355). This mode of objectivity involves the "thing" as such, or relatively (through a series of interpretants of immediate objects) knowable "thing-in-itself" and a guarantee of the possibility that semiosis can be infinite, but not completely "unlimited" (there is a possible "limitation" given by the dynamic object). Conversely, as Eco has proposed in his *pragmatic* (not so much *pragmaticistic*) re-interpretation of Peirce, the "[d]ynamical Object is what drives us to produce semiosis. We produce signs because there is something that demands to be said. To use an expression that is efficacious albeit not very philosophical, the Dynamical Object is Something-that-sets-to-kicking-us and says 'Talk!' to us – or 'Talk about me!' or again, 'Take me into consideration!'" (Eco 1999: 14).<sup>2</sup> Eco then postulates (due to this character of dynamic objects that forces its recipient to some semiotic action) two forms of "immediate representation" of dynamic objects – "semiotic primitives." These primes also retain a kind of double character: on one side they can be considered as having rather kind of dyadic character, being connected on the most basic level (action/

reaction/immediate attention<sup>3</sup>) to primary indexicality (Eco 1999: 14-5); on the other side, in case of primary iconicity (Eco 1999: 100-12nn) they are rather monadic, simple, connected to firstness, and Eco considers them as starting points or *primum*, which is “at the origin of all subsequent inferential processes” (Eco 2014: 563) and therefore the starting point of every (more or less complex) interpretation. These primes are, in addition to qualia, basic forms of Eco’s theory of cognition, which form this perspective to be seemed as a basic and first level from which the interpretation grows. But as we will see, Eco’s scheme of semiotic/pragmatic interconnection between cognition and interpretation is not as that simple. For Eco, the basic semiotic (analyzable by meta-semiotic theory and therefore semiotics) units, are qualia, usually defined as properties of sensations and perceptual states<sup>4</sup> that give them their specific, qualitative or phenomenal character (Shoemaker 1991: 507; cf. Lewis 1929; CP 6.222).<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Semioticization of Qualia

- 5 In Eco’s view on the field, the problem of qualia is connected to the problem of Peirce’s notion of “ground” and “firstness,” and goes hand in hand with his postulation of semiotic primitives (therefore with Eco’s interpretation of dynamic object) and through these concepts we can explain perceptual (and also more complex – interpretative and inferential) processes. Qualia are “bricks” for the construction of Cognitive Types (Eco 1999: 155), which mediate between the concept and the manifold of the intuition” (Eco 1999: 130), and they are here to stabilize our perceptive acts.<sup>6</sup> What do these interconnections mean?<sup>7</sup>
- 6 A semiotic exploration of the idea that every phenomenal state of mind inheres some amount of qualia presents an epistemological problem. Qualia can have a double character: on one side, they can be mistaken for qualities as such, therefore being seen as somewhat similar to the Platonic idea of highest *genera* (and the idea that pure quality has some presupposed organization), on the other side, they should be considered as specific, roughly speaking “realized” or “embodied,” qualities in a specific phenomenal state, therefore as a kind of “secondness.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore Eco has asked: “Is this *primum* a *primum* in absolute terms or is it a *primum* for me, at that moment, and (to use a Peircean expression) is it such only in *some respect or capacity*?” (Eco 2014: 663; original emphasis).
- 7 On Peirce’s view, “[t]here is a distinctive quale to every combination of sensations so far as it is really synthesized” (CP 6.223). He said further that “in quale-consciousness there is but one quality, but one element. It is entirely simple” (CP 6.231). As Sandra B. Rosenthal observes,

[t]his [...] is not meant to imply that we build up perception from atomic qualia. What is immediately recognized as given, though expressed in language, is epistemologically prior to language. And, what is given as the percept is not a “collection” of atomic qualia, but rather a gestalt or relation of qualia. Our immediate recognition of the date of sense is not of atomic qualia. Rather, the recognized content is a unitary percept or “feeling tone” which, Peirce holds, has its own distinctive quale, a unitary quale or experienced content which is analyzed rather than synthesized in the process of recognition. (Rosenthal 1994: 100)

Rosenthal further illustrates this tension (between pure quasi-Platonic ideality and existence in phenomenal states) in conception of quale – for Peirce each quale is monadic in a specific (quasi-Leibnizian) notion – it is in itself what it is for itself, and does not refer to any other (CP 6.224). Qualia “in themselves” are “absolutely simple” and “absolutely

free” (Rosenthal 1994: 101). On the other side they are “here” to be kind of (“rhetic”) guaranty for further possible (inferential) “comparison”: in the *first of third* as qualisigns; in the *first of second of third* as “proto-propositions” – dicisigns; or in the *second of second of third* as material propositions etc. – because “comparing consciousness does pronounce them to be alike. They are alike to the comparing consciousness, though neither alike nor unlike in themselves.” (CP 6.224). As Rosenthal concludes, “[t]he repeatability of qualia, then, is itself a product of the synthesizing activity of consciousness acting upon unique qualia. [...] Such a characterization leads Peirce to speak of Firstness in terms of qualities of feeling.” (Rosenthal 1999: 100-1), deploying firstness in epistemological and ontological terms, compared to the strictly psychological or cognitive sense.

On the contrary, Eco’s analysis is guided rather by the cognitive dimension of qualia. It seems that for Eco the most important is the idea, that qualia as feelings have this capacity which forces us (the consciousness) to specific action, as he noted: “Peirce himself made clear, even after recognizing that my senses have been deceived, I cannot say that I have not experienced (let alone ‘that I have not known!’) a sensation of redness or excessive heat. Going back to the housewife with her sheet, she might say: ‘A short time ago, after having made my first over-hasty perceptual inference, I entertained the belief [(a cognitive fact)] that I had experienced a sensation of whiteness.’” (Eco 2014: 662). On the other hand, qualia are not the same as percepts, which have a structure and combine a number of sense qualities. The problem is that, for Eco, Peirce’s Ground can be seen as the “degenerated” or rather “quasi-structured” kind of firstness which (for Peirce) cannot be in principle “degenerated,” because “[f]irst is simple and devoid of structure. But every percept has a First which is the single impression created by the total ensemble of its elements. Moreover, if a single sense quality of a percept is prescinded from all the rest and is considered by itself, such a quality is a First.” (Murphey 1961: 395). Eco’s point of view is different: although qualia are monadic and “first and simple” but (similar to semiotic primitives) cause specific kind of actions (therefore they are in this sense not quit causally “impotent”), as he states: “Peirce is swinging between two notions: in one sense, as we have seen, the Ground is an idea, a skeleton plan, but if it is such, it is already an Immediate Object, a full realization of Thirdness; in another sense it is a Likeness that does not resemble anything. All it says to me is that the sensation I feel is in some way emanated by the Dynamical Object.” (Eco 1999: 103).

Eco’s pragmatic deterritorialization of Peirce’s categories starts with the reinterpretation of ground<sup>9</sup> mentioned above which in his view seems to be simply equal to the firstness, iconicity and qualia, and primarily to the dynamic object, that forces us to “say that something is there” and “[f]rom that moment interpretation may begin, but forward, not backward” (Eco 1999: 100). As he simply puts it, “I think that, when Peirce says the Ground is a quality, he means to say what philosophy still defines today as the phenomenon of qualia” (Eco 1999: 100). But for Peirce the ground is more an “analytical term” (the ground is “pure abstraction, reference to which constitutes a quality or general attribute,” CP 1.550),<sup>10</sup> which is in his later conception of semiotics is abandoned or “dissolved” in other aspects of semiosis (*Letter to Lady Welby*). In *Grammatica Speculativa* (CP 2.228), ground takes on a bifurcated character – (i) the ground of signification, which in this conception perhaps means that every sign-relation has to be based on specific reference to quality, which is represented by given quale (“what is,” cf. CP 1.55) of specific sign-relation, and (ii) a contra-intuitive “sort of idea“ which is to be:

[...] understood in a sort of Platonic sense, very familiar in everyday talk; I mean in that sense in which we say that one man catches another man’s idea, in which we

say that when a man recalls what he was thinking of at some previous time, he recalls the same idea, and in which when a man continues to think anything, say for a tenth of a second, in so far as the thought continues to agree with itself during that time, that is to have a like content, it is the same idea, and is not at each instant of the interval a new idea. (CP 2.227)

- 8 Eco explores both these sides of the ground or, in his view, character of quale: on one side, there is something that has qualitative character of the firstness that is the possibility of correlation and relation of future form of signification and, on the other side, it has this every-day communicative character. This character is truly (!) “platonic”: if we want to “catch” (not necessary yet “understand” – that is why we can speak about “primary indexicalism”) another man/woman idea, we have to have some kind of proto-knowledge (ability to perceive and synthesize) of what he/she is talking about in the sense of emotional interpretants – there is a “tone” of his/her voice (and therefore “primary iconism”), which takes my attention instead of, e.g., bird singing (“primary indexicalism”), which later generates more complex forms of inferences, and therefore communication. We can see here clear analogy to Eco’s conception of Cognitive Type (and mere possibility for referential competence and felicitous reference, cf. Eco 1999: 155).
- 9 The importance of qualia for Eco is that they highlight the fact that in primary (absolutely simple) intuition there is no “starting point,” but – in the same way of firstness – there is a general predicate of many different objects, which, given its “purity” and “simplicity” cannot be in principle criticized, i.e., for Eco, qualia are “not rational, yet capable of rationalization” (cf. CP 5.119). Eco analyzes qualia in this manner – as mediators between perceptual (and other following) judgment and “tone of cognition”: he defines them as being resistant to all possible criticism. Peirce “is telling us not that the sensation of red is ‘infallible’ but that, once it has been, even if we then realize that we were wrong, it is still beyond doubt that it has been [...]” (Eco 1999: 102). Eco follows the aforementioned Peircean concept of “comparing consciousness” based on relational possibility which qualia can “rise”; a housewife sees:
- [a] freshly washed sheet as extremely white but then, after comparing it with another, admits that the second is whiter than the first. [...] Peirce would have told us that the housewife initially perceived the whiteness of the first sheet (pure “tone” of awareness); then, once she had moved on to the recognition of the object (Secondness) and had begun a comparison full of inferences (Thirdness), discovering that whiteness is manifested by degrees, she could state that the second sheet is whiter than the first, but at the same time she could not cancel the preceding impression, which as a pure quality has been [...]. (Eco 1999: 102)
- 10 Eco sees the problem in comparison and gradation,
- [h]ow is it that a pure quality (Firstness), which should be the immediate and unrelated point of departure of all subsequent perceptions, can function as a predicate, and therefore already has been named, if semiosis is established only in Thirdness? And how is it, all knowledge being inference, that we have a point of departure that cannot be inferential, since it manifests itself immediately without even having been discussed or denied? (*Ibid.*)
- 11 Eco’s pragmatic answer is that, “we must liberate [...] the concept of likeness from the concept of comparison” (1999: 103), which Eco demonstrates with the example of icon (as a sign determined by dynamic object by the virtue of its own internal nature), which is a phenomenon “that founds all possible judgments of likeness, but it cannot be founded on likeness itself” and therefore is not a mental image (Eco 1999: 103).

## 4. Mind as Composition of Three Universes of Experience with the Accent on Its Pragmatic Dimension

- 12 Eco's understanding of qualia is novel because of its two-fold character; in the first place they are considered to be firstness-based aspects of mentality, and in the second place they are gaining some kind of communicative character. In the complex understanding of consciousness Eco proposes in *Kant and the Platypus*, qualia play an important and irreplaceable role as fundamental bases of cognitive types. If we sum up Eco's cognitive re-interpretation of Peirce's categories, the phenomenal state is first composed of general potentiality (cf. CP 6.187), which has "the innocence of firstness," but it is Eco's still partially "cultural" (cf. Eco 1999: 5) point of view which allows him to avoid Peircean absolute idealism of the "thinking universe" (cf. Stjernfelt 2007: 43) or the "magic idealism à la Novalis" (Eco 2014: 671) restricted by the "nature" of given "Umwelt" or the set-up of cognitive types of concrete phenomenal state. The "Umwelt" is the mixture of social and natural – as Eco has shown in marvelous examples Marco Polo's inductive observation of the unicorn/rhinoceros, or Montezuma's complex investigation of a horse – in the former, Marco had to make the token of a type more complex, but it did not lead to the revolution of paradigmatic vocabulary in contemporary zoology; in the latter, the example of gradated interpretation went from points of experience to Molar Content. This dimension of general potentiality of cognition is restrictive in this specific sense – historically, socially and ontologically. Trivially put – conquistadors did not arrive by Boeing, they were Christians, i.e., had a specific worldview (as did the Aztecs), and most importantly, their horses were not flying. They could possibly breathe fire (there are signs – of primary indexicality – of panting and neighing), but could not fly. In other words, the sphere of ontology returns to old Platonic/Aristotelian postulations of the possible incompatibility of the proposition and reality ("Theaetetus also cannot fly"), but Eco's view avoids these problems with the help of his mixture of semiotic cognitive realism and pragmatic/cultural point of view (based on re-interpretation of Peirce and Kant), which enables him also to avoid traditional philosophical problems connected to idealistic or empirical perspectives. The semiotic perspective here is simple – the inferential process (and therefore the connection of language and reality) differs due to the dimension of interpretation, or interpretive discourse – of cognition, nucleus and molarity. On the other hand, these discourses are not constructed only socially by the semiologic system, but by a quasi-foundation in "embodied" qualities of perceptual semiosis, which is "not when something stands for something else but when from something, by an inferential process, we come to pronounce a perceptual judgment on that same something and not on anything else" (Eco 1999: 126). This general potentiality has some aspects of Peircean firstness, but does not overlap with it – a basic presupposition for another complex dimension of mental states (inferential processes), by advancing to Peircean firstness, this hypothetical potentiality can be articulated more specifically.
- 13 The second dimension from which mental states are composed of is therefore factuality, which is closer to Peirce's secondness, because it represents the dynamism, rhythm and inevitable temporality of cognitive process. Perceptual semiotic mind is not a "static state," but due to the first dimension it is always a series of options, a field where qualia

are still inherent to produce meaning (cf. Eco 1999: 274) which has to be based on this “brute force” of “existence or constant struggle” of objects, which are “kicking” our attention and demand more or less complex responses. Therefore, there is no privileged stream of consciousness, no Cartesian theatre. There are only realized options and qualitative “environment,” which may or may not be acknowledged in concrete situations.

- 14 There is also a third dimension which is molar articulation, i.e. words: this sheet is not only “extremely white,” but this washing machine is better, and this detergent has better chemical structure – we can see here clearly one of many aspects of “Ecoistic” pragmatism – some of “bricks” of cognitive types can be the base (“blending” punctual cognitive acts with semantics and pragmatics) for future complex rules or laws. In this post-Peircean perspective, Eco suggests his semiotic/cognitive/pragmatic model of consciousness which consists of qualities (which are necessary but not literally “essential”), facts/existence, and propositions and arguments about these situations/facts/premises/propositions. Eco has presented a provocative teleological and temporal model of semiotic mind.

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## NOTES

1. Kantian schematism and Peirce's semiotics are often challenged by Eco's "punctual" and colorful examples. The "example" and "punctum of the example" (e.g. of Platypus) itself are one of many topics of Eco's narration in *Kant and the Platypus* (cf. Eco 1999: 7).
2. Cf. Paolucci (2017: 48): "For Peirce, the emergence of firstnesses through their reciprocal opposition (secondness), is an event (CP 6.200), that is, a singularity, a point in which something happens." As Eco has emphasized (Eco 2014: 662): "[F]or Peirce the three categories are not cognitions but formal structures that found the possibility of all cognition (in this sense Peirce was a Kantian), or they are not kinds of experience but pure forms that make up experience. Therefore, if a sensation of redness is an example of Firstness or, in one of the examples I provided at the time, the burning I feel when I touch a hot coffeepot, this Firstness in itself is still nothing from the point of view of my cognitions (a 'mere maybe'), and I recognize it as a burn from the coffeepot only if it is immediately placed in relation to Secondness and Thirdness."
3. Cf. Eco (1999: 145): "When we feel on the arm or the hand the presence of a foreign body, no matter how small, occasionally without even looking (and sometimes the interval between perceptual hypothesis and motor response is infinitesimal), either we use the other hand to squash something, or we prime the index finger with the thumb to flick something away. Usually we squash when we have assumed (even before having decided, because our safety depends on the speed of our reflexes) that the presence is a mosquito or some other bothersome insect, and we flick the body away when we assume it is vegetable or mineral waste. If it is decided that we must 'kill,' it is because a feature of animality in the foreign body has been noticed. It is a primary recognition, preconceptual (in any case prescientific), having to do with perception and not with categorial knowledge (if anything, it orients categorial knowledge, it offers itself as a basis for interpretation at higher cognitive levels)." (Cf. Eco 2014: 663).
4. "[A]sensation of redness, a burning feeling, the whiteness of a sheet." (Eco 2014: 662).
5. "It is frequently argued that the phenomenological or qualitative features of our sensations will never be satisfactorily reduced by a purely materialistic neuroscience. They constitute, it is often said, a permanent barrier to the reductive aspirations of physicalism." (Churchland 1984: 773).
6. In *Kant and the Platypus* Eco distinguished Cognitive Types, which are built from qualia – when I touch the hot coffee pot and burn my hand, it is very probable that I will withdraw my hand from it in the future (or if Claudio will kick me – "with no reason" in the knee, I will be aware of him next time) – my behavior will be in this sense "typical," constructed from experienced, "punctual" qualia. Eco's point is that this "typicality" (which is articulated and public, therefore it is a kind of set of interpretants and/or habits) cannot be experienced or "followed," if there is

no starting point based on “feeling” or “tone” – even if this “feeling” was an illusion etc. These cognitive types produce “meaning”, or in better words (because are not necessary connected to mental experience): Nuclear Contents (NC), i.e. more complex habits. As Eco has noted, NC “suppl [y] criteria or instructions for the identification of one of the tokens of the type (or rather, as they say, for the identification of the referent). I use ‘identification’ instead of ‘recognition’ because I should like to reserve the latter term for cognitive phenomena strictly dependent on a previous perceptual experience, and the former term for the capacity to identify perceptually something about which we still have no experience. I identified an alligator, the first time I saw one on the banks of the Mississippi, on the basis of the instructions that had been supplied to me previously through words and images. That is, the NC of the word alligator had been communicated to me.” (Eco 1999: 393). Third of this scheme is Molar Content, which represents most complex “cerebral” habits – as e.g. in the case of scientific/encyclopedic knowledge and its (meta)categorization (e.g. alligator as the the object of zoology), cf. Eco (1999: 142nn).

7. Firstly, it is important to say that in *Kant and the Platypus* Eco brightly avoided dramatic discussion of philosophers of mind about qualia and “qualophilia.” His analogy of Peircean consideration of the connection of “ground,” “quality” and “judgment” is quite distant from the discussions between as D. Dennet, C. McGinn, T. Nagel, P. Churchland etc.; at least Eco used very different (more old “fashioned” – Peircean and Kantian) vocabulary and his “solution of qualia” is also very distant from empirical point of view of “empirical” neurophilosophy (presented by contemporary philosophers as e.g. J. Prinz).

8. Therefore the interpretation of this problem as “firstness is a quality, secondness is quale and thirdness is qualisign“ (as proposed by Chumley & Harkness 2013: 5) is at least very simplistic.

9. Cf. Eco (1999: 62; original emphasis): “In the Ground the object is seen *in a certain respect*, the attention isolates one feature. In purely logical terms, it is evident that if I predicate the blackness of ink, I do not predicate its liquidity. But if we were to cleave to the logical value of the Ground, we would not get very far. At most we would find ourselves once more among examples that seem to confuse our ideas rather than clarify them, prisoners of compulsive Peircean triadism. Moreover, the choice of the term *Ground* is not one of the happiest: it suggests a background against which something is set, while Peirce’s view was that it was probably a something set against a background that was still indistinct.”

10. Cf. (CP 1550): “Reference to a ground cannot be prescinded from being, but being can be prescinded from it.”

## ABSTRACTS

The paper deals with the problem of qualia in the context of Umberto Eco’s semiotics. I propose that Eco started to focus specifically on the problem of qualia mostly in his later period when he turned from the idea of almost universal theory of semiotics (e.g., in *Theory of Semiotics*) to cognitive realism (in *Kant and the Platypus*) with the help of more precise reinterpretation of Peirce’s concepts. Eco’s view of the problem of qualia is closely connected to his understanding of cognitive processes of understanding leading from cognitive type to molar content – understanding qualia as “semiosis primes,” which are the fundamental base of the possibility of all signification, therefore as a base of cognitive types. On the other hand, qualia are considered to be a base of cognitive types; thus we should regard them as having every-day communicative

character. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to explore this specific two-fold understanding of qualia in the context of Eco's and Peirce's semiotic.

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