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A Pragmatist Perspective on the Debate on Realism

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# Semiotics and the Something

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“I think that the almost obsessive subject of my work has been that of how we come to know the world.”

(Eco 2004: 193)

## 1. Being and Reality

- 1 Since 2010 the philosophical arena has seen the rise of a new battle – maybe, the most ancient battle that philosophy has fought. It is the problem of the status of reality. More precisely, the aim of this battle has been to defend the Existence of Reality against those who have argued that “reality” is only a mode of speech and interpretation. As is known, many important philosophers, both Italian and foreign, have taken part in this battle, and obviously agreements, negotiations, or even unbridgeable differences have emerged. It is also known that it is Maurizio Ferraris who started the debate (first and foremost against himself, namely, against the interpreter of Nietzsche deeply rooted in the hermeneutic and Vattimian faith<sup>1</sup>), with various volumes and articles, and then with the pugnacious *Manifesto of New Realism*.<sup>2</sup> My intention in this paper is to enter this debate in order to raise a different sort of question, not whether reality exists or doesn't exist – a strongly commonsensical and therefore not deeply philosophical position – but what we do, what we want to obtain, when we use terms such as ‘real,’ ‘objective,’ ‘given.’ In pragmatist fashion, I would like to ask the same question that Peirce asked 150 years ago: what effects does our belief in reality produce? As Peirce wrote, when we deem something ‘real,’ we mean that that something can cause a certain belief capable of producing relevant practical effects.<sup>3</sup> Real things lead me to do certain actions and not others. Thus, the problem of realism must be addressed accordingly: what are the conceivably practical habits and behaviors that the belief in the existence of reality produces? The problem is then to distinguish true beliefs (that is, those beliefs that remove doubt and allow me to

act with confidence) from false beliefs (that is, purely fictional beliefs with no effective grasp on the world)<sup>4</sup>.

- 2 There is no need here to rehash the terms of this well-known debate. Rather, my main purpose here is to sketch Umberto Eco's position, which stands out as usual for its argumentative subtlety and composure. My aim is, then, to try to reconstruct the pragmatist matrix of Eco's thought and to show how realism could benefit from being put in dialogue with a different philosophical framework, namely, from being reinterpreted in light of the pragmatism of Peirce and of Eco's reception of that tradition. At the same time, I will highlight some elements that Eco has overlooked, due to his focus on Peirce's semiotics and not on his broader philosophical, phenomenological, and *pragmaticist* philosophy.
- 3 Ferraris aptly describes his 'new realism' in the following words: there are unamendable facts that deserve respect and deference.<sup>5</sup> These facts are not interpretable, they simply *are*. His polemical target is not idealism, but the postmodern constructionism whose noble and long genealogy goes from Kant to Goodman and Foucault through Nietzsche and pragmatism.<sup>6</sup> As Eco will rightly point out, the fuse arming the realist fire is the will to turn to ashes the Nietzschean statement, "There are no facts, only interpretations,"<sup>7</sup> a view that Ferraris himself explained and endorsed at one point.<sup>8</sup>
- 4 But let's focus on Eco. It is important to stress that Eco came to an original philosophical position already at the end of the 1990s in his *Kant and the Platypus*, a position neither obsequious to the hermeneutical theses prevalent at that time, nor naively realist. Eco proved to be not only the father of Italian semiotics but also a philosopher in his own right, one of the most lucid and original of our recent history. The first chapter, entitled "On Being," is a treatise on metaphysics, ontology, gnoseology, and also philosophical semiotics – or interpretative semiotics, as he preferred to say following the suggestions of some of his interpreters.<sup>9</sup> This treatise, which could be rightly read as a refined interpretation of Aristotle, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Peirce and the Medievals, curiously hasn't been read or quoted by professional philosophers, maybe because professional philosophers might be sometimes a somewhat self-referential caste slow at welcoming outsiders. Nevertheless, the first chapter is full of considerations capable of putting in their corner even the wariest of philosophers – above all, his friend Gianni Vattimo, who is gracefully demolished in these pages. I will try now to be up to the problems that were addressed there.
- 5 As Heidegger put at the beginning of *Being and Time*, being is the oldest philosophical problem and at the same time the most neglected. While things are different, they all *are*, as Aristotle already remarked. Thus, Aristotle continued, being is said in many ways. Leibniz would claim later, followed by Heidegger, that the most radical question philosophy has ever asked is "Why is there being rather than nothing?"
- 6 Eco begins from here and shows with keen lucidity and supreme reasonableness that actually this is not a radical question because, even if we wanted to assume that the verb being is involved in every proposition (but Sapir and Whorf have already casted some doubt on this, by proving that the languages of some 'primitive' peoples do not use the copula or terministic references<sup>10</sup>) it remains true that it cannot be dialectically opposed to anything else, to the nothing, because it designates 'what there is,' the untranscendable horizon that allows us to speak of anything, the 'that,' as James used to say, and not the 'what' that qualifies it with different attributions and qualifications. "Therefore, there is

being because we can pose the question of being, and thus being comes before every question, and therefore before any answer and every definition.” (Eco 2000: 19). It is a term with “an *unlimited extension* and a *null intension*” (*ibid.*: 10; original emphasis). Spinoza, appropriately quoted by Eco a few pages later, wrote: Substance (which is the modern name for being) is *causa sui*, is infinite, incircumscribable, its essence implies its existence, it is self-explanatory, it is expression of all its modes etc. Eco translates in the following way: “being is its own fundamental principle.” (*Ibid.*: 20). *In it* we speak, even though we can never speak *about* it thematically, simply because we are expressions of it, internal modalities, pure affections, as Spinoza has taught once for all. Being (which, contrary to Heidegger’s conviction, doesn’t throw in the world, which does not reveal or hide, which is neither clearing or concealing, but is rather the “amniotic fluid” (*ibid.*: 18) in which life, every life, is made possible) can be identified with the beings (or entities). In Spinozian terms: the substance is nothing else than its modes, and it is possible to say “that it is a totality that includes not only what is physically around us but also what is below, or inside, or around or before or after, and founds it and/or justifies it” (*ibid.*: 11). This is a crucial passage, perfect for what I am trying to claim here: being surrounds and penetrates us, it is *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, foundational and founded at the same time, it is inscribed and circumscribed,<sup>11</sup> it is not more outside of us than inside of us, because every thing *is*, despite the differences (in a certain way, it is even if it is not). We should not think then, as Descartes did, that we are ‘spiritual’ substances in a world of ‘material’ substances; rather, we are the (only, indivisible, infinite) Substance, as Spinoza put it. Being doesn’t lie before us waiting to be known; it is rather the inexhaustible source of all possible intelligibility and attribution. We should be careful, then, as Eco in Ch. 1.3 reminds us, that the problem of being cannot be reduced to that of the external world; the latter is a topic constructed by metaphysical reason, the former concerns the primary evidence (iconic-perceptive for Eco) that something is given. If I am in the world, the world is not perceived immediately as external, present in front of me, in front of an ‘I’ understood as an interiority (think about the infant, who knows nothing about these distinctions); if I am *in the world*, I am *the world*, *tout court*. The I is not a spectator who looks at the world out there as from a window, Calvino wrote: “the I is world that looks at the world.”<sup>12</sup> “All this should immediately make clear that the problem of being cannot be reduced to the problem of the reality of the world. Whether what we call the outside World, or the Universe, is or is not, or whether it is the effect of a malign spirit, does not in any way affect the primary evidence that there is ‘something’ somewhere.” (Eco 2000: 18).

## 2. The Sign, the Immediate Object, and the Dynamical Object

- 7 My problem is the following: why should we call this pure That, this pure Being, a ‘Something’ (Eco 2000: 12)? Already in the choice of the word one highlights the *what* (some-thing) that inhabits it: the something expresses the alleged *what* of the ‘being,’ not the pure *that* of its *being there*. It is true that Eco explains that in order to speak of the being we have to bend it to our linguistic categories, that being becomes a philosophical problem the moment that we speak of it (thus the ecstatic evidence of the being is lived as a pure experience, but is inevitably said with the words of human discourse, in which the

original 'purity' is lost). Thus, that being is Something is highlighted in Ch. 1.1 through Leibniz's famous statement (in the form: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?').

- 8 What I would call the *kenosis*, the lowering, of being, continues in the same chapter through the identification of being with Peirce's Dynamical Object (the "real" object that is "causation" or "influence" (EP2: 409) of the signifying character of the sign) and, finally, with that Something that Eco ironically defines "Something-that-sets-to-kicking-us" (Eco 2000: 14), where the use of Heidegger's esoteric hyphenated writing style is supposed to win the philosophers' attention. The Something says "Talk!" to us – or "Talk about me!" or again, "Take me into consideration!" (*Ibid.*); it is, above all, a problem of perceptual evidence, and it is for this reason that the book is devoted in large part to the problem of perception and iconism. The Dynamical Object is thus what compels us to begin the process of semiosis, it is the Something that demands to be given a place in our language.
- 9 Why is this interpretation not fully satisfactory? What in it seems to make the beautiful insights of the outset somewhat weaker? I believe the answer is the following: here the Being, understood as Something, is understood after the form of a Thing, above all External – a thing that activates some indexes, some reactions, some 'primary attentions' – an external objectuality that produces, determines, accelerates the engine of the production of signs. In other words, we have already passed the phenomenological level in which we encounter what is given the way it is given: we are at the level of the Ego vs Non-Ego, as Peirce would say.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it is true that Peirce, in a certain phase of his life, considered the process of production of semiosis as generated by a real "object," external to the architecture of signs, according to the canonical model sketched by Massimo Bonfantini in his Introduction to *Semiotica* (Bonfantini 1980: xxxv). However, as I will try to show, the distinction between Immediate Object and Dynamical Object is internal to the play among the categories and was not modeled after the Kantian phenomenon-noumenon framework: for Peirce, reality as a whole, or being as incircumscribable and all-penetrating event, cannot be grasped, perceived, or given if not as a sign. A sign produced in relation to an object, to a Something, following Eco, but through the mediation of an Interpretant, which remains, in my view, the real engine of the unlimited semiosis. There is no doubt that Peirce writes explicitly that the sign is *determined* by an Object and *determines* an Interpretant (CP 8.343), which seems to suggest that there is a process according to which the sign is always produced by a *terminus a quo* that resides within the horizon of experience. Yet, it is also true that in *On a New List of Categories* (EP1: 1-10) the interpreting representation is the one that mediates and at the same time establishes the possibility of referring to mediated terms, so that without its intervention there would be no "unification" of the "manifold of Substance itself" (to follow the terminology of the *New List*), or no "significance" by putting "together the different subjects as the sign represents them as related" (CP 8.179). It is the triadic relation, activated by the interpreting sign, which makes visible a Dynamical and objectual pole. It is in the semiotic circle that the distances between sign and object become evident, while being always recomposed through the mediation of the interpretant.
- 10 By remaining faithful to the pragmatic maxim, we can say that the meaning of a sign lies in its appeal to an Interpretant, especially a Final Logical Interpretant, that is, a habit. The meaning of a sign resides in its conceivable effects, in its being directed to a *terminus ad quem*, which can be conceived, as we have seen, as a Dynamical Object, understood however as what is gained *at the end* of a potentially limitless semiotic process (CP 8.183),

and not as something that is supposed to be in front of me waiting to be faithfully mirrored.<sup>14</sup> The object is the “cause” of the sign only insofar as it is found as the purport (CP 5.429, 5.412) of the same sign, which has the form of a pragmatic habit of response. We could say that the immediate object is *dynamized* at each semiotic-interpretative step, tracing a parabolic trajectory (from the cause to the purport and back) which keeps moving the interpretative horizon more and more beyond the limits already achieved.

- 11 My intention here is to play Eco against himself: in his early writings, the referent – in complete agreement with Peirce’s thought (which is different from de Saussure precisely on this point!) – was considered of little or no importance for semiotics, since a semiotics worthy of its name should have not occupied itself with problems such as the status of reality, external things, facts, or givens, considered as *extra interpretationem*. For things, facts, givens, were to be considered only as signs internal to the linguistic and semantic practices that denoted and connoted them now in a certain way, now in another. The first paragraph of the first chapter of *Le forme del contenuto* is entitled accordingly “L’equivoco del referente (*The Misunderstanding of the Referent*)” (Eco 1971) and warned against the confusion, caused in part by Frege’s analyses, between meaning and referent. If a semiotic science existed, it would have been to deal with the signs independently from their relations to objects (*ibid.*: 31).
- 12 We can certainly say that Eco’s thought, just like Peirce’s, has evolved from an early semiotic-hermeneutical and definitely conventionalist phase (I don’t want to call it idealistic, as Maldonado said in the debate on iconism, see Fabbrichesi (2017: 312-3); Eco would have been offended by this, but not Peirce, given that he spoke of idealrealism), to a more realistic phase. Nevertheless, the problem remains: either we consider being as a primum that cannot be articulated, which not only surrounds and fills with awe our outlook on the creation, but also inhabits it from inside and feeds its need to find a meaning, or we consider it as a force that resists our attention, that compels it in this or that direction, which says many ‘No’s’, and highlights its own difference from our interpretations (above all the wrong ones). In other words, either being is the whole, or it is that part of the being there that is before me while I examine it. But being, in a perspective such as Peirce’s, is not divided in distinct realities, it is never a difference: on the contrary it is diffused continuity, a synechistic substance that, like Spinoza’s, doesn’t imply dualisms between matter and mind, inside and outside, yes and no. The problem is not whether to admit the referent in semiotics; rather, the problem is to recognize the philosophical and metaphysical dimension of semiotics. As Paolucci reminds us, “the notion of habit founded in synechism transcends all distinction between the dynamic object and the immediate object, between mind and matter, between the semiotic order of ideas and the ontological order of things, thereby invalidating their differences in nature” (Paolucci 2017a: 262).<sup>15</sup> “Ordo et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo et connexio rerum” (Spinoza, *Ethica*, II, Prop. 7).
- 13 The ‘idem’ brings us back to iconicity, which plays a fundamental role in Eco’s book on Kant and in his entire production. We could say that being, seen from this perspective, is the place of a primary iconism, of a correspondence already perfectly realized, as we read in Eco (2000, Ch. 2.8.2). Every being reveals a “protosemiotic disposition” to encounter, even a sort of Medieval *adaequatio*, an aptitude to adapting not to what is external to it, but what is its own.<sup>16</sup> Perceptual processes and primary acknowledgment processes are rooted in this disposition to the encounter with the world – what Peirce defined as a form of tropism toward truth, or *lume naturale* – and are certainly related to the synechistic

philosophy of the late Peirce. I have dealt with the problem of iconism in my contribution to the Library volume (Fabbrichesi 2017). I refer to this work only because Eco responded to what I wrote there by noting that before 2017 “I had not connected my idea of primary iconism to that of negative realism, or at least it had not seemed as clear as it does to me now” (Eco 2017: 329).<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Negative Realism and Pragmatism

- 14 Let’s follow now this important direction on the path of realism, what Eco has called “negative realism.” If we go back to *Kant and the Platypus*, we find a central section in Ch. 1 entitled “Semiotics and the Something.” Contrary to the trenchant statements of *Le forme del contenuto*, the referent now seems to acquire a fundamental role also for semiotics. What is that something that compels us to produce signs? What is the *terminus a quo* that forces us to enter the world as linguistic and symbolic animals? While semiotics deals primarily with the *terminus ad quem* that we cast in all the possible encyclopedic modes of our speech, it cannot nevertheless overlook, as Eco reminds us, the inquiry into that something that awakens our attention by imposing itself as a novelty and an exception to our consolidated systems of reference. However, again, didn’t we say that being cannot be articulated, that it has unlimited extension and no intension, and that it can be identified with “what is below, or inside, or around or before or after, and founds it and/or justifies it” (Eco 2000: 11)?
- 15 Maybe it does not make much sense to distinguish something *a quo* and something *ad quem* outside the semiotic chain, or to separate the strike that sparks the semiotic process from the construct of its signifying referent. In fact, these aspects are distinct, but only at the phenomenological and not at the ontological level.<sup>18</sup> The process of semiosis is an unlimited process, which has no beginning (*a quo*) nor end (*ad quem*), and in which every interpretant becomes in turn a new sign within a new semiotic chain that moves the reference-object always a little further on – “this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into action between pairs” (CP 5.484). Maybe when we speak of the Something that kicks us we are putting ourselves at a different level from that of the pure Being (which for Peirce is pure Firstness), or of pure Semiosis (Thirdness); maybe here we are dealing with Secondness (the Non Ego opposed to the Ego, cf. 5.57). Only in this light, I submit, what follows acquires a more complete sense and remains more faithful to Peirce’s thought, so many times invoked by Eco.
- 16 Always in the same chapter we read: “A Dynamical Object drives us to produce a *representamen*, in a quasi-mind this produces an Immediate Object, which in turn is translatable into a potentially infinite series of interpretants and sometimes, through the habit formed in the course of the interpretative process, we come back to the Dynamical Object, and *we make something* of it.” (Eco 2000: 13; my emphasis). This idea is elaborated in connection with negative, or “minimal,” realism, as Eco writes in his late works and eventually in the intellectual autobiography contained in the Library posthumous volume: “I also think that my notion of a minimal realism can be translated in terms of the philosophy of Peirce. As I have already said, for Peirce every one of our inquiries, as well as our perceptual explorations of the surrounding world, is elicited by a dynamical object. We do not know it if not through immediate objects, which are signs and their interpretants, and the series of interpretants never stops, producing a process of unlimited semiosis. However, by producing these interpretants we grow a *habit*, that is to

say, an ability to act upon surrounding reality, and the proof that a given series of interpretants works is given by the fact that through our habit we can modify reality. If we do not succeed in this enterprise, the very possibility of a failure means that there is something controlling and limiting our interpretations.” (Eco 2017: 54; original emphasis). Even more clearly, Eco writes: “The process of unlimited semiosis stops when we produce a *habit*, that allows us to come to grips with the reality (the Dynamical Object).”<sup>19</sup> (Eco 2017: 46). The second emphasis is mine (but the first is Eco’s!); the main problem is that of prehension between thought and reality, as Whitehead used to say.

- 17 So, it is *with respect to pragmatism especially* that we find a promising line of research for better explaining Eco’s theory of negative realism.

## 4. Being and Doing

- 18 I try to formulate the issue in the following way, by emphasizing the quotations that I have just read: Being is not a substantial Something; it is neither static nor “external.” Being coincides with *doing*,<sup>20</sup> as Eco just told us in his quotation from *Kant and the Platypus* (*ibid.*: 13). The transaction with the world does not produce a belief in ‘things,’ obtained through propositional representations; rather, it enables certain possible actions in a certain context of experience. Peirce already explained this in a crystal-clear passage on the logic of propositions: “The peculiarity of this definition [of the word lithium] is that it tells you what the word lithium denotes by prescribing what you have to *do* in order to gain a perceptual acquaintance with the object of the word.” (CP 2.330). It turns out, then, that the habit is the only ‘real’ (Dynamical!) thing with which we have to deal. “The definition of belief [by Bain] is that upon which a man is prepared to act” (EP2: 399), wrote Peirce, by adding that pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary to that definition. Belief and action, thought and fact have a very tight connection, characterized by continuity and simultaneous identity: practice is thus the *primum*, the form of life within which we speak, act, and gain certainties. Objects and subjects, contexts of knowledge and languages are given only within these practices. The Interpretant is for Peirce the pragmatic habit of response that through its use guarantees the comprehension of a meaning, or the truth and reality of what we know.
- 19 Note that I am not claiming that real objects do not exist; rather, I am saying that they appear in my perceptual field and awaken my attention only in reference to their possible (and conceivable) use. I want to repeat here the famous example of the psychologist Lurija, quoted by Ong in a famous book.<sup>21</sup> The Soviet scientist asked a farmer about the distinction between log, ax, and saw. The farmer, after struggling to understand the question, responded that they were actually one and the same thing because they were involved and used in a single action: “The saw will saw the log and hatcher will chop it.” Objects are never given apart from the practices in which they are involved.<sup>22</sup> Eco reminds us of this point when he repeats Richard Rorty’s example of the screwdriver, also contained in his intellectual autobiography. Richard Rorty, in a public talk at Cambridge University, denied that the use made of a screwdriver to tighten screws is imposed by the object itself since we can also use it to open a package. Eco objected that “a screwdriver can also serve to open a package but it is inadvisable to use it for rummaging about your ear [...] There is something in the conformation both of my body and of the screwdriver [again the *adaequatio* as foundation of primary iconism!] that prevents me from interpreting the latter at my whim.” (Eco 2017: 48). Shortly after, he claims that even the

most radical of Nietzscheans will never deny the physical presence of a table before me, even though he will add maybe that it becomes object of knowledge and speech only if it is interpreted as desk, as object of autoptic dissection, as ensemble of atoms, and so on. He also notes: “I agree but my objection is that this table cannot be interpreted as a vehicle that can be used to travel from Manhattan to Poughkeepsie.” (Eco 2017: 48-9).

- 20 This is where the topic of negative realism becomes crucial. “Getting back to Rorty’s screwdriver, my objection did not deny that it can permit manifold interpretations [...]. A screwdriver *responds* positively (so to speak) to many of my possible interpretations but in certain cases it says ‘no.’ This sort of refusal opposed by the objects of our world is the basis of my prudent idea of negative realism.” (Eco 2017: 51; emphasis mine). I have underlined the pragmatic word “respond”: the screwdriver has to respond to my solicitations and my conduct has to be practical and effective *in relation to my purport*. As I said earlier, my practice with that tool has to be translated into a habit, capable of optimizing and changing my transaction with the world. Eco’s realism is clearly a pragmatic form of realism.
- 21 I go back now for a moment to *Kant and the Platypus*, where the incipient theses of negative realism appeared in the claim that there are some lines of resistance of being, a claim that is amply rehashed, confirmed, and developed in the final autobiography (Eco 2017: ch. xv). Eco’s position on this point is well known: being has a hard core, understood not as an inner kernel that at some point, after much digging, we will manage to unveil, but as a fault line, as possibility of flow, as in the grain of wood or marble. It is a disposition to be read or framed in a certain way, a *mening*, as Hjelmlev says, rather than a meaning; a sense, for sure, but more understood as a direction that cannot be overlooked when we try to understand the Something. Eco reminds us that Hjelmlev accepted the word ‘purport’ as the English translation of his *mening*. This is not surprising for us, given the fundamental role that the idea of purport plays in Peirce’s pragmatist thought: the pragmatic maxim was in fact meant to exactly clarify a sign’s rational purport.<sup>23</sup> The lines of resistance are lines of propensity, as Eco adds in a work quoted by Paolucci.<sup>24</sup> Maybe being, Eco remarks, does not have one sense, but many; maybe it does not imply compulsory directions, but certainly certain directions remain dead ends (Eco 2000: 53). Being says very clear No!s. A screwdriver resists being used as a Q-tip. A table refuses to roll on the highway to Milano. “Let us try rather to identify some *lines of resistance*, perhaps mobile, vagabond, that cause the discourse to seize up [...] That being places limits on the discourse through which we establish ourselves in its horizon is not the negation of hermeneutic activity: instead it is the condition for it.” (Eco 2000: 50; original emphasis).
- 22 Here, being is not the incircumscribable “that,” but it is something like a hindrance for thought and language, a schism – Peirce used to speak of a “Non-Ego, the strange intruder, in his abrupt entrance” (CP 5.53), which suddenly stretches apart from the Ego, which is simply the expected idea suddenly broken off, something that appears in place of the expected object. However, as I mentioned earlier, Eco is always very subtle and is aware of this change of direction. Did I say earlier that being always presents itself positively and that the nothing is the effect of language, while now I state that being opposes clear No!s to our thought and conduct? Not quite: a closed door is a No! for those who want to force it, but it can also be a Yes for those who want to keep some privacy or protect from an intruder. “To us who capriciously would like to live on, death appears as

a limit, but for the organism it arrives when things go exactly as they must.” (Eco 2000: 56).

- 23 Being never tells us no, except in our metaphor. “Simply, faced with a demanding question on our part, it does not give the answer we would have wished.” (*Ibid.*) It is always a problem of *expectation* and *surprise* (Brioschi 2015), of practices that are more or less confirmed by experience, of regularity or discontinuity in interpretation. It is worth noting that in his writings on synechism Peirce warns us that it is always based on a discontinuity that we can grasp the underlying continuity (cf. CP 6.168).

## 5. Reality as what Awaits in the Future

- 24 We are now pushed back to the problem of practice. Reality as *objectivity* does not exist in itself independently from the framework based on which, for instance, ‘real’ is a good and productive idea – this is so more for the scientist than for the shaman. Peirce himself reminds us that the term and concept of being (*ens*) is the result of a strenuous metaphysical work over the centuries. Real “is a conception which we must first have had when we discovered that there was an unreal, an illusion; that is, when we first corrected ourselves” (EP1: 52). And he adds: it is that “ens” that will conform to the object of research in the long run, the truth of public inquiry, which doesn’t belong to the private idiosyncrasy. “The real, then, is that which, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you.” (*Ibid.*). Not independent, however, from thought “in general,” from “public” truth, or from the truth of the community that makes a certain belief true.
- 25 Don’t we have here, however, a twofold theory of the real, namely, real understood as what will be confirmed as *terminus ad quem* and real as what says no to our incorrect interpretations (or *terminus a quo*)? We have already reached a similar impasse when discussing Eco’s account of the classification of objects in Peirce’s semiotics. Now, in conclusion, we have the opportunity to clarify these seeming contradictions by appealing to Peirce’s phaneroscopy and by stressing again that the fault line is such only from a phenomenological, not ontological, point of view.
- 26 The study of the phaneron, or phenomenon of experience (which is not the same thing as the study of ‘reality,’ as any philosopher knows and as Peirce underlines; it is the immediate evidence we experience every day of our life<sup>25</sup>) leads us to find in it three aspects that, although different, are absolutely indistinct. Let’s take the example of an earthquake that bursts into my life unexpectedly, an example of hard, unamendable, brute reality, not an interpretation! It happens as pure sensation; it is a quality without relations, pure experience, neither subjective nor objective, an original and emerging Firstness (I am thrown around and I can’t even ask what is going on); however, it also happens as shock, constraint, Secondness (here’s the intrusion of brute reality: I am bleeding, I hurt) and as laborious cognitive mediation (I understand what is going on: it is that cataclysmic event usually called ‘earthquake.’ They have told me about it multiple times, but now I’m living it on my skin, poor me!). It is then a problem of ‘prehension’ of what happens in terms of complex categories, in which First is not prior from the chronological point of view, but from the point of view of the structure of experience – experience in its immediate and spontaneous dimension. Here Peirce presents to us a semiotics built upon phenomenology, not a realist/empiricist ontology. For this reason, when I refer to the existence of “real facts” (it was a real earthquake!), I am already

working at a different level, the level in which I reflect upon the experience I have had and give a name to it. I have undergone the shock against the events, against the Non-Ego, as Peirce says; let's call it simply "existence," an affair of blind force, a Dynamical reaction (cf. CP 1.329). But the encounter with "reality" has a different nature: it has an interpretative, segnic, relational nature.<sup>26</sup>

- 27 Thus, Peirce distinguishes being as Secondness from being as Thirdness (besides pure and unrelated Firstness). Existence is the brute fact that resists (CP 1.431), it is the acting and being acted upon by something that is forced upon us: this is the meaning of the word "real," Peirce writes in *What is a Sign?* (EP 2: 4-5).<sup>27</sup> But the real is not only what exists in the mode of brute opposition, which tells us blunt No's where we would like to be welcomed, where we have to reconfigure our conceptual orders to sustain the interruption of the "strange intruder" that generates surprise and bewilderment. Real is also "the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate" (EP1: 139), "the normal product of mental action and not [the] incognizable cause of it" (EP1: 91), it is the cause of belief with all its sensible effects (EP1: 137); in one expression – these are all quotations from Peirce's 1868-1878 writings on his cognitive and pragmatist semiotics – reality "is an event indefinitely future" (EP1: 64). We could say that Peirce distinguishes brute *existence hic et nunc* from the *persistence* of the habits – but both these experiences live together, are *insistent*, in one and the same *phaneron* or crystal of apparent visibility.<sup>28</sup>
- 28 We find in these reflections the play between Immediate and Dynamical Object that accompanies the semiotic considerations of the late Peirce: if the Dynamical Object is the real object as purely existent, as the cause of the semiotic process, the Immediate Object is the real object as determined through precise semiotic forms. Nevertheless, *there is no way to grasp the former apart from the mediation of the latter*. Reversely, as Eco observes, the latter can be constituted by semiotic interpretations so crystalized to become substantial "inveterate habits" (CP 6.613). In this sense, it appears as something 'given' and dynamically elusive. This *datum* may well be a result (of another interpretation) but will, in any case, be a present *extra-interpretationem* event. "Precisely because one supports a theory of interpretation, it is necessary to admit that something is *given* to be interpreted." (Eco 2007: 463; original emphasis). In a synechistic perspective, then, there is a circularity between interpretations and givens; in a phenomenological perspective it is possible to distinguish events (not facts) of different nature, which however remain different aspects of the *same* whole of experience.
- 29 Let me now move to the last step of my argument. In trying to find a precise definition of the term 'real' Peirce uses a terminology that we could explain in the following way: reality is a *habit of expectation*, capable of being dynamically organized and of placing one's meaning into the indefinite future. This means that the real is what life has forced me to recognize, but also what my habits of expectation lead me *to hope will happen* in the long run. In a 1904 letter to James (CP 8.284, see also 8.330), Peirce remarks that according to "pragmatic idealism" (namely, the true idealism), "reality consists in the future" (*ibid.*). I define this process, he says, "mellonization," from the Greek *mellon*: the being about to do, to be, or to suffer. "I mean that operation of logic by which what is conceived as having been is conceived as repeated or extended indefinitely into what always will be (or what will some day be...)" (*ibid.*). "Therefore to say that it is *the world of thought that it is real* is, when properly understood, to assert emphatically the *reality of the public world of*

*the indefinite future* as against our past opinions of what it was to be.” (CP 8.284; my emphasis).

- 30 Those who are familiar with pragmatism will recognize here the same terms of the pragmatic maxim, or rather of pragmaticism: what is the meaning of a belief? It is to produce “a tendency – the *habit* – actually to behave in a similar way under similar circumstances in the future” (CP 5.487; original emphasis).<sup>29</sup> I also like to think about it (always relying upon the possible meaning of the word *expectation*) as a habit of hope: the hope that the community of Interpreters will continue to reasonably interpret the given event as ‘real’ above any assignable limit. In this sense, and only in this sense – my comment has nothing polemical against Ferraris’s *Manifesto*, but wants rather to integrate it – we owe “respect” to this class of ‘facts’ because they ‘charitably’ offer themselves to our interpretation and because we can nourish the faith that our interpretation can be true (cf. CP 2.655).
- 31 Peirce would agree with Eco entirely on the ideas of surprise and resistance as bases for our experience of being. However, Peirce would invite Eco to refrain from separating the real as Secondness from the real as Thirdness, the real as surprise (CP 5.51ff) from the real as expectation (CP 5.53-57).<sup>30</sup> They are two different qualities of experience, which lead to the formation of habits, namely, two different but interconnected ways of being affected; nevertheless, both *are* and the process of knowing is constituted in the constant transit from one to the other (together with Firstness, cf. CP 5.91). Experience is a continuity *in actu* while our thought is used to working with Cartesian categories: Cartesian thought works as the ax and separates, distinguishes, univocally defines reality and thought, external and internal, sign and object. The weakness of the debate on realism lies in its assumption. We should not refer to the ‘external reality’ as to a *fundamentum inconcussum*, but rather to our daily experience. As Peirce explains, in this light, *acts*, and not *facts* (opposed to interpretations), would appear as real; not the facts, but the habits, the practices connoting the power to act of every being in the universe, as Spinoza would put it.<sup>31</sup> The Something is complex and categorially diversified; to lose one of its qualities is to lose the totality of the phenomenon of experience.
- 32 As the farmer observed by Lurija reminds us, log, saw, and ax (or, in Eco’s terms, being, something, and sign) are not different events: they are the same event, offered in its different experiential tones. Therefore, we shouldn’t trust the rigid distinction that our language projects on ‘real’ things, distinguishing the bearer of the name from its actions; rather, we should conceive of our commerce with the world through the lenses of the unity of our practices and of the context of acknowledgement in which their ‘reality’ is shaped and structured, ready to start the journey toward the future of infinite semiosis.

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## NOTES

1. Cf. the substantial study *Storia dell'Ermeneutica* (1988) and his important edition (with P. Kobau) of F. Nietzsche, *La volontà di potenza* (2005).
2. Cf. Ferraris 2014.
3. C.S. Peirce, *How to Make Our Ideas Clear*, in EP1: 136-8.
4. See, for a pragmatist interpretation of the theme of realism, Calcaterra 2015 and Maddalena 2017.
5. Cf. Ferraris 2014, Ch. 1 and Ferraris 2011.
6. As Ferraris makes clear in the *Manifesto* (2014: 4-15), his polemical targets are the postmodern ironization, the desublimation, or emphasis on the desire and the drives of the body, and above all the de-objectification leading to the skeptical and relativistic doubt toward any project of ontological foundation. Some consequences are the identification of being and knowledge, namely, the confusion between ontology and epistemology, and the rejection of the non-negotiability of that aspect of reality 'out there' that seems to stubbornly constrain our action.
7. Cf. Nietzsche 2005, aphorism 481. On this see Eco (2017: 46).
8. Ferraris edited an edition of *The Will to Power*, from which Nietzsche's statement is taken (cf. n.1).
9. Paolucci 2017b has amply underlined this aspect.
10. Cf. Whorf 1964.
11. The reference is to Nicholas of Cusa's polygon, so dear to Eco. Cf. *La soglia e l'infinito* (Eco 2007: 484).
12. Cf. Calvino (1983: 116).
13. Cf. CP 1.332. The fact that Peirce speaks of two types of object has to do with the determination of Secondness, in Peircean phaneroscopic terms. Immediate Object is "the Object as represented in the sign," the idea (CP 8.314), what we know about the sign through "collateral experience" (*ibid.*); the Dynamical Object is instead defined as the Real Object. With respect to the

latter, Peirce clarifies that “perhaps the object is altogether fictive, I must choose a different term”; as a consequence, Peirce will refer to it as “something which, from the nature of things, the Sign *cannot* express, which it can only *indicate* and leave the interpreter to find out by collateral experience” (*ibid.*; original emphasis), or, following the definition of ‘real’ present in the 1878 writings, “the Object in such relations as unlimited and final study would show it to be” (8.183).

14. Maybe the problem can be framed as Eco does (2017: 48; original emphasis): “I do not believe that even the most fundamentalist followers of weak thought really think that there are no facts at all since to make an interpretation one must have something to interpret, and if the series of interpretations has no final terminus *ad quem* it must have at least a terminus *a quo* – a starting point that, however matters stand, we can call a *fact*.”

15. In this sense, Eco distances himself from Peirce, as the authors explains a few lines above: “This is the original Peircean Kantianism of Umberto Eco: interpretations and signs show the world in a certain respect but the world continues to oppose its form to the semiotic form of determination, imposing limits on that which can be said on a semiotic level (negative realism).” (*Ibid.*: 260). I thank Claudio Paolucci for bringing to my attention this point in a private conversation.

16. This is in line with Peirce, for whom iconicity predisposes to the encounter and to the adequation what emerges from the same ground (cf. CP 2.278). That is to say, it is not the case that there is a field of various events and then the appearance of a likeness between two of them. What is given primarily is the relation, the internal relation, namely, the iconic relation; it is the ground that allows an *other* (a correlate, an object) to emerge, which in particular respect, order or quality shows itself to be the *same* (a sign for likeness). As a pure possibility of reference, iconicity is given as a relation that is neither comparative (namely, Secondness) nor interpretational (Thirdness); it does not specify concrete objects but paves the way for their individuation and constitution. It is not the sign that resembles the object ‘out there’; it is the object that announces itself and becomes meaningful in the relations allowed by sign substitution.

17. Eco concluded in his usual caustic tone: “And so Fabbrichesi’s essay has made an original contribution to my understanding of my own ideas.” I would like to point out here that my contribution to the Library volume, in which iconism and negative realism are in fact not connected, was written between 2010 and 2011, when Eco’s position on the matter had not been fully clarified yet. Eco will spell out his position in a series of following papers: “Di un realismo negativo” (2012), and “Su un realismo negativo” (2013).

18. Or at the phaneroscopic level, as Peirce says, namely, at the level of the phaneron, the phenomenon of experience cf. CP 1.284, 304.

19. Eco continues: “At this moment we realize that our interpretations were good and we have reached some truth even though such a certainty is mitigated by the awareness that every discovery of a truth is subject to the principle of fallibilism. Such an underlying notion of truth is at the basis of my idea, as I have already said, that while it is not possible to say when an interpretation is correct or is the only possible, it is always possible to say when it is untenable.” (*Ibid.*)

20. It is worth noting that this is Spinoza’s position (the substance is *potentia agendi*, *Ethica* I, prop. 34), emphasized in Gilles Deleuze’s reading (*Spinoza et le problème de l’expression*, 1968), and also Nietzsche’s position (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1998, Ch. I, 13): “There is no ‘being’ behind the doing, acting, becoming. ‘The doer’ is merely invented after the fact – the act is everything.”

21. The text by Walter Ong to which I refer is *Orality and Literacy* (1982). I rely here on the version often quoted by Carlo Sini, for instance in *Ethics of Writing* (2009: 18).

22. This interpretation is put forth by Carlo Sini in several works, for instance Sini (2009, part II).

23. In opposition to James, who stressed the empiricist, non-realist (in the Medieval sense) side of the maxim, Peirce wrote: “It must be admitted in the first place that if pragmatism really made Doing the Be-all and the End-all of life, that would be its death. For to say that we live for the mere sake of action, as action, regardless of the thought it carries out, would be to say that there is no such thing as a rational purport.” (CP 5.429; see also 3.402, 428, 238, 453, 460).
24. Paolucci (2017a: 259 and n41). *La propension de choses* is the title of an interesting volume written by the French sinologist François Jullien (1992), devoted to the subject of efficacy and action in China, absolutely comparable in my view to the pragmatist tradition.
25. “By phaneron I mean the collective total of all that is in any way or any sense present to the mind, quite regardless of whether it corresponds to any real thing or not.” (CP 1.284).
26. “Reality means a kind of non-dependence upon thought, and so it is a cognitionary character, while *existence* means reaction with the environment, and so it is a dynamic character.” (CP 5.503; original emphasis).
27. “The sense of acting and being acted upon, [...] is our sense of the reality of things.” (*Ibid.*).
28. Cf. the etymology of the word *phaneron*: what is evident in its brightness.
29. See also CP 5.538: “Let’s use the word habit [...] in which it denotes such a specialization, original or acquired [...] that he or it will behave, or always tend to behave, in a way describable in general terms upon every occasion that may present itself of a generally describable character.” See also the definition of pragmatism in *Issues of Pragmatism* (EP2: 346): “The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol.”
30. See on this Brioschi (2015: 86-9). The volume containing the essay by Brioschi (*Su Peirce*. Edited by Bonfantini, Zingale, and Fabbrichesi) is the last text that Eco decided to publish in his series “Il campo semiotico.” All the editors, including myself, were very grateful to Eco for this. Moreover, the presentation of the book was one of Eco’s last public interventions. It is even more important – in light of the reading developed in the present paper – to notice that in that occasion Eco expressed much appreciation for Brioschi’s essay and for her interpretation of Peirce’s realism. On these topics, see also Stango 2015 and Paolucci 2015.
31. We should not forget that the pragmatic maxim wants to suggest a new way to define and ascertain the meanings of concepts: not according to the Socratic “What is it?,” but according to the (Spinozian) point of view “What can be done with it in order to obtain knowledge of it?” The earlier example of lithium is crucial here (CP 2.330).

## ABSTRACTS

My intention in this paper is to contribute the debate on “realism” in order to raise a different sort of question: not whether ‘reality’ exists or does not exist, but rather what effects does the belief in this or that reality produce (as Peirce put it 150 years ago). I will turn to Eco’s later thought, and to his support for a form of ‘negative’ realism, and try to demonstrate how his appeal to Peirce’s distinction between Immediate and Dynamical Object is affected by a common-sense interpretation of what ‘real’ amounts to. Peirce in fact distinguished between the “existence” of facts and their “reality.” The former implies a dynamic of blind force, a dynamical reaction. Yet, “reality consists in the future” (CP 8.284), in the public recognition of what it

always will be, or we hope will be, in the long run (Peirce uses the word “mellonization”). In Eco’s work, though, the Being or the Real, seen as pure Something, is understood after the form of a Thing, above all External, which simply says many ‘No’s.

Peirce’s pragmatism leads us further on, concentrating on the concept of habit that is also detectable in Eco’s analysis. We could say that Peirce distinguishes brute *existence hic et nunc* from the *persistence* of habits. *Acts and dispositions to act*, and not *facts* (as opposed to interpretations) appear as real; and it is in this respect that I think we can find a promising line of research for better explaining Eco’s theory of realism.

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