

Article

An Apology for a Dynamic Ontology: Peirce's Analysis of Futurity in a Nietzschean Perspective

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Abstract: Ontology is a part of metaphysics; it concerns what there is. Is it possible to consider being and reality not in a traditional metaphysical way—that is, not as a ground, an origin, a cause, but as a movement, a flux, a dynamogenic principle? I will set out from a seminal aphorism by Nietzsche, occurring in *Human, all too Human* (§2): “A lack of the historical sense is the hereditary fault of all philosophers. But everything has evolved; there are no eternal facts, as there are likewise no absolute truths. Therefore, historical philosophising is henceforth necessary, and with it the virtue of diffidence”. I will then move on to explore Peirce’s late thought, starting from a passage in a letter to W. James, where the author supports a “futurist” interpretation of reality—as he had in the juvenile writings—and speaks of “the reality of the public world of the indefinite future as against our past opinions of what it was to be.” This can be defined as a process of “mellonization,” that operation of logic by which what “is conceived as having been is conceived as extended indefinitely into what always will be”. Similarly, in the Preface to *Human, all too Human* Nietzsche writes: “Our destiny rules over us, even when we are not yet aware of it; it is the future that makes laws for our today”. I will try to read some Peirce’s statements in a Nietzschean perspective within the context of the plan to develop a dynamic and historical ontology; and I will try to read the “enigma” of Nietzsche’s Eternal recurrence from a Peircean perspective.

Keywords: Peirce; pragmatism; abduction; futurity; mellonization; Nietzsche; eternal recurrence



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1. Introduction

Ontology is a part of metaphysics; it concerns what there is. Is it possible to consider being and reality not in a traditional metaphysical way—that is, not as a ground, an origin, a cause, but as a movement, a flux, a dynamogenic principle? How can our historical considerations help us in this regard? How does our notion of time change if we assume this point of view? Last but not least, can such a change of perspective produce an ethical transformation in the subject?

I believe that Friedrich Nietzsche has explored these topics more thoroughly than any other thinker. Here, I would like to show that one of his contemporaries, C. S. Peirce—whose life was as unhappy and whose fame was as uncertain as that of his overseas peer—thought along similar lines, especially with regard to certain issues pertaining to temporality, such as the relationship between past and future. Certainly, he did so according to different methods, aims, and assumptions; but what I am interested in highlighting is not so much the historical-philological similarity between the two philosophers’ theories (for it would be difficult to argue that any such similarity exists), but the great attempt they both made to “think otherwise” with regard to past “real” events and the course of history.¹ Following Peirce’s observation that “we ought to say that we are in thoughts and not that thoughts are in us” [2] (1:42n), I will draw on some of Nietzsche’s insights to elucidate my argument. As the title of the article suggests, I will, therefore, read Peirce from a Nietzschean perspective, without undertaking any detailed historical-philological comparison of the two thinkers. Nietzsche’s thoughts will serve as a framework for my interpretation of the American author’s texts, insofar as they will help me to reorient his philosophical hypotheses. I

believe that combining the two philosophers' reflections allows us to interpret the being-time-truth nexus in an anti-metaphysical sense² and to rethink the past-present-future succession in such a way as to overcome the yoke of linear time. Nietzsche, then, will not be referred to for his place in the history of philosophy, but rather as a "place of thought" to be scoured in search of insights that might help me investigate what I regard as important topics for my theoretical proposal.³

In his 1878 work *Human, all too Human* [5], Friedrich Nietzsche sums up his appreciation of the "historical sense" with great precision, connecting it to a general attack against the myth of objectivism and eternity:⁴

All philosophers have the common fault that they start from man in his present state and hope to attain their end by an analysis of him. Unconsciously they look upon "man" as an *aeterna veritas*, as a thing unchangeable in all commotion, as a sure standard of things. But everything that the philosopher says about man is really nothing more than testimony about the man of a very limited space of time. A lack of the historical sense is the hereditary fault of all philosophers [. . .] But everything has evolved; there are no eternal facts, as there are likewise no absolute truths. Therefore, historical philosophising is henceforth necessary, and with it the virtue of diffidence. [5] (§2)

No doubt, Hegel and 19th-century historicism had already established that every 'real' event must be traced back to the course of history (an internally rational process according to Hegel), within which every human manifestation can find meaning and explanation. In a broad philosophical sense—and gradually losing all teleological implications (let us think of the enormous influence of evolutionism)—the affirmation that everything is becoming and processuality gained ground at the end of the 19th century with clear anti-metaphysical intentions. But with Nietzsche, this assumption acquired a more concrete shape and swept away—like a hammer blow—everything on which historians and philosophers had based their certainties.

Nietzsche is not (only) saying that our interpretations change with every leap in time, nor that history teaches us to take an ever-sharper look at what is happening, by bearing in mind the relativity associated with the ever-changing customs and habits that accompany historical events (hence, as Foucault noted, "we cannot speak of just anything in any circumstances whatever" [7] (p. 52). Nietzsche is saying something more: he is not a historical relativist, but a perspectivist. He insists that "precisely the facts" are not there (only interpretations)—facts considered as substantial entities that stand eternally there, ready to be discovered and investigated, albeit 'relatively' to the periods and modes of history. If the establishment of a substantial ground of being (or of a man as "a substantial being") is itself linked to the emergence of a particular interpretation as a historical event, we cannot appeal to any stable and certain truth, and everything is in flux. The very notion of origin becomes problematic, and history changes into genealogy. As Foucault clearly explains: "History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin" [6] (p. 145).

So while it is true that the above-quoted Nietzschean statement—"historical philosophising is henceforth necessary, and with it the virtue of diffidence"—gradually became acceptable at the turn of the century, according to Nietzsche (and his follower Foucault), history is to be deployed against the history of historical scientists in a genealogical direction.

2. "No Son of Adam Has Ever Fully Manifested What There Was in Him": A Dynamic and Pragmatic Ontology

In an 1897 fragment, published with numerous excisions by the editors of the *Collected Papers* under the title of "Fallibilism, Continuity, and Evolution", Peirce addresses the issues of the certainty of knowledge and the truth of our epistemic assertions, reaching conclusions not unlike those envisioned by Nietzsche. Peirce sets out from a rigorous logical and statistical survey:

All positive reasoning is of the nature of judging the proportion of something in a whole collection by the proportion found in a sample [. . .] Accordingly, there are three things to which we can never hope to attain by reasoning, namely, absolute certainty, absolute exactitude, absolute universality. [8] (1.141)

[. . .] How you do know that *a priori* a certain truth is certain, exceptionless, and exact? You cannot know it by reasoning. For that would be subject to uncertainty and inexactitude. Then, it must amount to this that you know it *a priori*; that is, you take *a priori* judgments at their own valuation, without criticism or credentials. That is barring the gate of inquiry. [8] (1.144)

Hence the theory that from Peirce onwards has been called “fallibilism”: “The doctrine that our knowledge is never absolute but always swims, as it were, in a continuum of uncertainty and of indeterminacy. Now the doctrine of continuity is that *all things* so swim in continua” [8] (1.171). Furthermore, in a perfectly ‘genealogical’ spirit, Peirce ends his manuscript by pointing out that no explanation can be more satisfactory than one that considers each event as growing and developing. Peirce explicitly says that he is not just talking about living beings or conceptual elements, but about every single “thing”. “There is no difficulty in conceiving existence as a matter of degree. The reality of things consists in their persistent forcing themselves upon our recognition. If a thing has no such persistence, it is a mere dream” [8] (1.175). In a whirling “wavering” of every reality, every law, every concept and interpretation, everything there is (everything that can plausibly be included in a substantial ontology⁵) is born, grows, dies, and sometimes disappears forever.

Fallibilism emerges here as a perfect epistemological expression of Nietzschean perspectivism (one imbued with evolutionism). I will quote again the text presented at the beginning: “But everything has evolved; there are no eternal facts, as there are likewise no absolute truths” [5] (§2). The horizon opened up by the acknowledgement of the fact that “everything evolves” (“events should come to pass” ([8] (1.615) allows for a very different ontological conception from the substantialist and metaphysical one: a dynamic notion, in which not only the wavering, but also the force—the *dynamis*—expressed to access the plane of “what there is”, must be considered ontologically relevant.

Such reflections occur very frequently in Peirce’s writings. I am only interested in recalling a few of these texts, which will allow us to approach the topic from another angle.

In the *Lowell Lectures* of 1903, as part of a discussion on normative sciences—in itself revealing of the turn that Peirce was taking in his studies—the question is addressed in the most perspicuous way:

When these ideas of progress and growth have themselves grown up so as to occupy our minds as they now do, how can we be expected to allow the assumption to pass that the admirable in itself is *any stationary result*? The explanation of the circumstance that the only result that it is satisfied with itself is a quality of feeling is that *the reason always looks forward to an endless future and expects endlessly to improve its results* (my emphasis). [8] (1.614)

Peirce believes that this “growth of concrete reasonableness” [8] (5.4⁶) is what best defines the pragmatist attitude and its way of thinking about the nature of rational signification. The pragmatic maxim,⁷ proposed by Peirce himself in the 1870s, is also recalled in these *Lectures*, with an example identical to that of 1878 and referring to the word “hard”. Peirce asks: how can the meaning of this term be defined? How can we attain a definitive degree of clarity regarding this idea? By referring to every conceivable action that can be taken to overcome hardness, our understanding of the term “hard” suggests that no matter how long and in what ways we operate on any given hard material, this will indefinitely *resist* any attempt to break it. But is this a logical, watertight, and unambiguous definition of the concept? Does it really explain what we mean? No agglomerate of actual facts can exhaust its meaning, Peirce admits [8] (1.615 and 6.170); at the same time, it is precisely this overflowing, vague, and unpredictable virtuality—founded on the unfolding of “all the conceivable effects”—that perfectly delineates the field of signification of the concept

of “hardness”. Therefore, those who logically search for a clear definition of a concept must not strive to superimpose an exact term on a specific fact, let alone a “thing”, and thus to precisely record everything that is given as it is (which is what many modern ontologists are hoping to do). Instead, it is necessary to undertake the pragmatic operation of conceiving of each individual event as a repository of multiple meanings that only future time will be able to clarify more fully and stabilise on the basis of repeated occurrences in the public sphere.⁸

Later in his *Lecture*, Peirce makes another very interesting remark:

The essence of Reason is such that its being never can have been completely perfected. It always must be in a state of *incipiency, of growth*. It is like the character of a man which consists in the ideas that he will conceive and in the efforts that he will make, and which only develops as the occasion actually arise. Yet in all his life long no son of Adam has ever fully manifested what there was in him. So the development of Reason requires as a part of it the occurrence of more individual events that ever can occur. [8] (1.615, my emphasis)⁹

What we have is an infinite transaction of meaning. Peirce consciously uses this word: “Transuasion (suggesting translation, transaction, transfusion, transcendental [. . .]” [8] (2.89). One might say that it is a particular kind of transcendence (*trans-scandere*—etymologically, ‘to climb over’, ‘to go beyond’).

This transcendence is immanent to the process of infinite semiosis, it is inherent in it. Peirce adds: it is such in the form of an infinite “*process of beginning*” [2] (1:27), or—as he repeats here—in the form of a constant incipiency. This immanence must be seen—if I may use a pun—as the emergent imminence of what is about to happen (although we do not quite know how, where, or when it will happen). Hence, “*the reason always looks forward to an endless future and expects endlessly to improve its results*”. And no result, from this perspective, can ever be stationary. [8] (1.614)

3. “Mellonization”: Reality Is Imminent

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* (cf. [8] (2, Ch.3, § 5; 8.294¹⁰)) capable of being dynamically organised and of placing one’s meaning in the indefinite future. Here, we may consider Peirce’s interesting reformulation of the pragmatic maxim in an entry he wrote with William James for *Baldwin’s Dictionary* (1902): “The doctrine that the whole ‘meaning’ of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences, consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experiences to be expected” [8] (5.2). This means that the real consists in what my habits of expectation lead me *to hope will or would happen* in the long run. In a 1904 letter to James [8] (8.284, and again in 8.330), Peirce remarks that according to “pragmatic idealism” (his own theory, namely “true idealism”¹¹) “reality consists in the future” (*ibidem*). Peirce called this process “mellonization”, from the Greek *mellon*:

By mellonization (Gr. {mellōn} the being about to do, to be, or to suffer) I mean that operation of logic by which what is conceived as having been (which I call conceived as *parelelythose*) is conceived as repeated or extended indefinitely into what always will be [. . .] Therefore to say that it is the world of thought that 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. [8] (8.284)

Reality is constantly about to be: what has happened or been is not “real”; rather, Peirce writes that it is a *fait accompli*, a given existence¹². The American philosopher writes that what is real is what is conceived as repeated or extended indefinitely into what will be, within the public world of a communal interpretation. It is worth dwelling on these sentences to appreciate their depth. We will return to a possible interpretation of them in the Nietzschean sense at the end. Now, however, I would like to focus on a first

meaning that they clearly point to and which could be summarised in a word that Peirce frequently uses: “futurity” [8] (2.661ff. 8.225n10, 2.146), [2] (2:271).¹³ The future—or, more accurately, the *hope* of a future repeated again and again, to which we entrust our present interpretations—governs the present, inhabiting it from within; at the same time, it orients all our interpretations of the past. As Peirce effectively notes in a famous passage, this *hope* of the repetition of the present in the future is pure *pathos* that seems to channel the waters of the three evangelical sentiments: faith, hope, and charity. The very logic of scientific research is, therefore, based on ethical and pathic foundations [2] (1:149–51).¹⁴

Many scholars have observed that the main feature of pragmatism is precisely this view of the process of knowledge as one oriented towards the future. “The essential element in these steps was giving ‘real’ and ‘reality’ a forward rather than a backward reference.” [17] (p. xxix). As Fisch pointedly notes, it is not merely a matter of knowing, but of the configuration of what is called ‘real’.

Let us consider two very famous quotations in which Peirce condenses his pragmatic maxim. They are both late texts, as is the letter to James quoted above. They reveal a clear determination of Peircean thought, despite the fact that Peirce is said to have been more “idealist” (in a Berkeleyan sense) in his youth, and to have become more “realist” in the current sense, i.e., more inclined to take into account the force of the “outward clash” [8] (8.41–43),¹⁵ in his mature years. I disagree with this hypothesis, as it seems to me that a number of reflections consistently point in the direction of what Peirce termed “socialistic” ontology (from as early as his 1871 review *Fraser’s The Works of George Berkeley* ([2] (1:83–105) and the 1878 text *The Doctrine of Chances* [2] (1:142–154)). In 1893 he wrote to Paul Carus that while it is true that “reality” means what the community *will agree* it means *in the long run*, this agreement is more than likely never to become final and consolidated. Any kind of absoluteness must, therefore, be abandoned, if one embraces this ontological conception; one must rather attain a “socialistic or agapastic ontology”—as a communitarian aspiration, not a foundational truth. “All that we are entitled to assume is in the form of a *hope* that such conclusion may be substantially reached concerning the particular questions with which our inquiries are busied” ([8] (6.610–612; cf. also 2.654)).

I will, therefore, set out from a letter to Calderoni:

I myself went too far in the direction of nominalism when I said that it was a mere question of the convenience of speech whether we say that a diamond is hard when it is not pressed upon, or whether we say that it is soft until it is pressed upon. I *now* say that experiment will prove that the diamond is hard, as a positive fact. That is, it is a real fact that it *would* resist pressure, which amounts to extreme scholastic realism. I deny that pragmatism as originally defined by me made the intellectual purport of symbols to consist in our conduct. On the contrary, I was most careful to say that it consists in our *concept* of what our conduct *would* be upon *conceivable* occasions. [8] (8. 208)

Peirce’s extreme scholastic realism (the very opposite of naive realism) consists in the following proposition (which I regard as very close to Nietzsche’s perspective): the only *real fact* that is ontologically given is the *interpretative habit* that we are willing and “prepared” [2] (2:399) to adopt. This is not a matter of actual conduct, or of performing an experiment to verify an objective state of affairs; what Peirce is referring to is only of “our *concept* of what our conduct *would* be upon *conceivable* occasions”. And this concept coincides with the practical consequences that would result whenever we were to adopt that particular way of thinking and acting. Futurity means *conditional futurity*. This form of pragmatism is defined by Peirce in 1907 “conditional idealism.” [2] (2:419)¹⁶

But let us move on to an essay that was published around the same time and caused quite a stir, as it led Peirce to part ways with his pragmatist friends by choosing to employ the term “pragmaticism” precisely according to the clarification just mentioned.

Another thing: in representing the pragmatist as making rational meaning to consist in an experiment (which you speak of as an event in the past), you

strikingly fail to catch his attitude of mind. Indeed, it is not in an experiment, but in *experimental phenomena*, that rational meaning is said to consist. When an experimentalist speaks of a *phenomenon*, such as “Hall’s phenomenon”, “Zeemann phenomenon” and its modification, “Michelson’s phenomenon,” or “the chess-board phenomenon,” he does not mean any particular event that did happen to somebody in the dead past, but what *surely will* happen to everybody in the living future who shall fulfill certain conditions. [2] (2:340)

Sciences (particularly historical science, as we will see) do not address events that happened in the past, events to be described and resuscitated, but what will happen in the long run and will continue to happen if certain conditions (which we hope will continue to be fulfilled) are met. It is the future that animates the past, that assigns it an origin. The future constantly makes inroads not only into the present, but also into the past—and this, precisely according to the pragmatist principles. A *fact (fait accompli)*, [2] (2:356) is approved, justified, and affirmed (Nietzsche would say “redeemed”) only insofar as it runs towards the future of intertwined practices that will continue to confirm its *facticity*. The sense of the past is continually redirected by the consequences that follow upon ‘taking charge’ of it.

I would argue that it was Willard M. Miller who, since the 1970s, grasped the radical nature of Peirce’s interpretation of time and history [20]. Miller clearly explains that “the entire intellectual purport or meaning of a sentence about the past consists in the experiential consequences which would follow were we to accept it as expressing a true proposition about the past” (*ibidem*, p. 42). In other words, when we are speaking of facts that ‘really happened’ in the distant past, we are not dealing with historical remnants, but with expectations regarding the virtual occurrence of future conditional statements related to the general modes of conduct that the acceptance of those beliefs would imply. This, however, will lead us to interpret the pragmatic attitude as a “futurist” exercise, according to which the value of the past and present must be weighed against the future, the ring of return. “Thus, memory of an event carries with it no greater guarantee of veridicality than does any inference about an unexperienced event. Both must be subject to the crucible of future events” (*ibidem*, p. 45). If meaning lies in the future, then everything is subject to becoming, as Nietzsche said; yet, not according to a linear and progressive flow of time, but according to a line that goes back and places the past where the future will continue to confirm it as a significant event in the course of history (or, alternatively, will not confirm it, creating discontinuity).

4. Columbus’s Discovery: A Fact of the Future

Let us further explore what has just been said by focusing on those facts of a particular sort known as historical facts.¹⁷ There is a famous statement by Peirce, often commented on in the literature, which says: “A belief that Christopher Columbus discovered America really refers to the Future” [2] (2:359). It is not easy to interpret this passage, not least because what the author states in the preceding and following lines is of little help. Everything, however, becomes quite clear if we take into account what has been said about futurity so far. According to pragmatist theory, with regard to that part of the past which goes beyond personal memory, “the meaning of its being believed [. . .] consists in the acceptance as truth of the conception that we ought to conduct ourselves according to it (like the meaning of any other belief)” [2] (2:359).

Elsewhere in this essay, in one of the few passages explicitly devoted to the issue of time (another rather obscure passage), the author affirms, on the one hand, the definite, petrified, and factual nature of the past as “the sole storehouse of our knowledge” [2] (2:358)¹⁸ and, on the other, the indefinite and vague status of the present, which is always on the verge of becoming and passing: “the ‘living present,’ as we say, this instant when all hopes and fears concerning it come to their end, this Living Death in which we are born anew” (*ibidem*). But it is the future—Peirce concludes—that allows both past and present to offer themselves eternally to our eyes; it is the future that breathes life into them.

With his pragmatism, Peirce inaugurated a new conception of time and historicity. According to it, each fact is an effect, something resulting from an action which gives meaning, a belief which only becomes truth if it is corroborated by behaviour that follows from it or a series of publicly shared behaviours. There is nothing to verify in its objectivity. The belief in Christopher Columbus's discovery had major consequences in the social, economic, cultural, and geopolitical spheres that changed human lives and produced values of unimaginable power. The reality of the discovery of America is not an event forever stored in the repository of history and abandoned to its mere factuality: it is an event that is at work in every practical-symbolic act of reshaping performed by generations of interpreters—a transgenerational life that can be seen as the flow of that indestructible life which is the "living death in which we are born anew". It is not a fact, but a belief on the basis of which we are willing to behave in a certain way. It is entrusted to that web of interpretative practices that will continue to *hold such certainty as true*, to consider it free from all reasonable doubt. It is, therefore, a projection beyond the present in the form of a desirable destination, or destiny (as Peirce himself states).¹⁹ We will have the hope—that is, the serene and joyful desire—that the community basing its cohesion on Columbus's discovery "may last beyond any assignable date" [2] (2:150). It is in such terms, perhaps, that we should interpret the following obscure statement: "The consciousness of the present is then that of a struggle over what shall be; and thus we emerge from the study with a confirmed belief that it is the Nascent State of the Actual" [2] (2: 359). We have seen that elsewhere Peirce prefers to use expressions such as "process of beginning" and "incipiency": the reference here is even clearer. The present becomes the past, struggling to find its way into the future. It is in this struggle that we witness a birth: that of the fact, of the *fait accompli*, forever assigned to the past.

5. Napoleon's Existence: A Pure Abduction

We could again sum things up by saying that the truth of an event, its being believed to have really happened and to be meaningful (i.e., fully real, in Peirce's terms), is a *function* of the *effects* that this *event* is able to produce.

I will now turn to another aspect of Peirce's investigation of this topic. I cannot dwell at length on a well-known and much discussed part of his philosophy, namely the distinction between deduction, induction, and hypothesis (or abduction);²⁰ however, I will consider his treatment of abduction in relation to historical facts. Abduction, or retroduction (a term which is particularly significant for us), is the kind of inference that reasons as follows: "The surprising fact, C, is observed; but if A were true, C would be a matter of course. Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true" [2] (2:231, *Pragmatism as the Logic of Abduction*; see also 2:75–114). It differs from induction, and it is not "secure" like induction or deduction; yet, it is remarkably "ubertous" [8] (8.387), Peirce writes.

Hypothetical reasoning very frequently infers a fact that cannot directly be observed:

Such for instance is the inference that Napoleon Bonaparte really lived at about the beginning of this century, a hypothesis which we adopt for the purpose of explaining the concordant testimony of a hundred memoirs, the public records of history, tradition, and numberless monuments and relics. It would surely be downright insanity to entertain a doubt about Napoleon's existence. [8] (5.589)

Yet, "any historical fact, as that Napoleon Bonaparte once lived, is a hypothesis; we believe the fact, because its effects—I mean current tradition, the histories, the monuments, etc.—are observed. But no mere generalization of observed facts could ever teach us that Napoleon lived," [8] (2.714) and abduction is an "Hypothetic Inference, which depends on our hope, sooner or later, to guess at the conditions under which a given kind of phenomenon will present itself" [8] (8.385).

The fact that Napoleon has existed and that he has conquered Europe is, therefore, a pure hypothesis, an abduction which we endorse by virtue of the calculation of the effects that this notion, deemed true for a long time, has produced and still produces.

As it was with Columbus's case, we see the effects, the traces, the signs of Napoleon's passage in history: documents, monuments, memories, undertakings. The simple *fact* which we adduce as proof of his mundane existence is nothing but the set of these *effects* and, paradoxically, the fact that Napoleon really lived in that remote time may be of no real importance, because the belief in his existence has in any case produced relevant truths that have changed men's conduct.

If abduction, then, is the most fruitful logic of enquiry for understanding historical facts, it is because here too the pragmatist method is applied. Indeed, pragmatism is the Logic of Abduction (*Lecture VII of the Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism*: [2] (2: 226–240). The most defining trait of this form of inference is its being "retroductive": *apagogé*—writes Peirce ([8] (1.65)—is the most appropriate term to understand this reasoning which infers the cause from the effect, and the antecedent from the consequent (as opposed to *anagogé*, deduction, and *epagogé*, induction, *apagogé* means 'the act of going back').

Hypothesis is where we find some very curious circumstance, which would be explained by the supposition that it was a case of a general rule [. . .] Fossils are found; say, remains like those of fishes, but far in the interior of the country. To explain the phenomenon, we suppose the sea once washed over this land. [2] (2:189)

Here, we operate a process of retroduction—what Bergson called the "retrograde movement of the true" and Carlo Sini "retrogression of the witness" ("retrocessione del testimone") [22] (p.167). One might object that retrogression has nothing to do with the future. But already in his early writings, Peirce notes that we must learn to reason "against the stream of time" [2] (1:64). In logical (and indeed already Stoic) terms: if there is smoke there has been fire; or better: "If we *find* smoke, we *shall* find evidence on the whole that there *has been* fire; and this, if reality consists in the agreement that the whole community would eventually come to, is the very thing as to say that there really has been fire" (*ibidem*, only the second emphasis is Peirce's). In short, the philosopher concludes, in such reasoning every difficulty is resolved by saying that reality is "an event indefinitely future" (*ibidem*).

The pragmatic act of projection into the future is a hypothetical, conditional act, inescapably connected with the possibility of imagining an antecedent whose emergence only becomes manifest at a later time, *ex post*. We thus simultaneously proceed backwards and forwards.

If this interpretive and conditional "if . . . then" link were to dissolve, the whole explanatory framework would collapse (and with it "the fact to be verified"). In other words, if the hypothesis remains anchored to the sense-making that has generated it, if it is a link in that chain (the 'remnants' of the Napoleonic enterprise), then it is true and 'verifiable' (always within that meaningful world of life practices); otherwise, it will display the nature of a unfruitful—not "ubertous"—event and fade from our hermeneutic horizon.²¹ To take an example: Napoleon is a living fact in our everyday experience today, whereas General von Blücher has a more fleeting presence. Their degrees of 'reality' are different (but not those of their 'dumb existence', stacked in the deposits of historical factuality).

6. Conclusions

I will take the liberty of using an expression I have come across in a text by the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg: "retrospective prophecy" [24]. Ginzburg himself traces the analogies between this and abductive knowledge, clearly grasping—it seems to me—what I have sought to highlight so far. History, archaeology, geology, physical astronomy, and palaeontology—all sciences operating on the basis of mere traces or clues—share an ability to 'make retrospective prophecies', i.e., to imagine an origin, starting from a result (a fissured rock, an intermaxillary bone, the noise of the universe). The imagining of this origin thus occurs through what we might call an act of semiotic and abductive (genealogical, we could add) projection, whereby the 'reality' that a certain event comes to assume remains entirely internal to the life practices in which one is immersed—like a cause that is produced by its effects.

I will quote again the fine passage on “mellonization” I have already commented on:

By mellonization (Gr. {mellön} the being about to do, to be, or to suffer) I mean that operation of logic by which what is conceived as having been (which I call conceived as *parelelythose*) is conceived as repeated or extended indefinitely into what always will be [. . .] Therefore to say that it is the world of thought that 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. [8] (8.284)

Peirce returns to this topic in another letter, where he clarifies: “When we pass from the idea of an event to saying that it never will happen, or will happen in endless repetition, or introduce in any way the idea of endless repetition, I will say the idea is *mellonized* ({mellön}), about to be, do, or suffer” [8] (8.330).

I will try to interpret these words by bearing in mind the perspective on temporality that Nietzsche developed in the last years of his life. This philosopher has bequeathed us an idea—a powerful and dazzling idea—that could be put to good use as a way to further develop Peirce’s thought. This idea concerns the eternal recurrence of the same. As is widely known, Nietzsche does not present it as a definite and well-argued theoretical solution, but rather as a “vision” and “riddle”.²² Let us, therefore, set out from this *vision* of Nietzsche’s, in order to acquire a new *vision* of Peirce’s exposition and reach what I hope will be a more fruitful interpretation of it. Peirce expressly states that in order to be considered truly ‘real’, what has been must be conceived as repeated or extended eternally into a future time. But he also seems to be saying something more, namely: that what has been “surely will happen to everybody in the living future who shall fulfill certain conditions” [8] (5.425). The only reality is that which returns and, at the same time, eternally surges into the future. Only that which will be repeated in the future, which will be held true by a future community, will have been true—regardless of our past opinions about what it was. Everything becomes, everything returns, Nietzsche writes [28];²³ and it is through the ring of return (of re-troduction, in Peircean terms) that the semiotic chain unfolds. After all, this is precisely the meaning of the famous motto that serves as the subtitle to *Ecce Homo*: become what you are. As Nietzsche states, the eternal recurrence teaches one “to will backward” [25] (p. 112, *On Redemption*).

In this perspective, the “enigma” of the eternal recurrence could be stated as follows: everything that is, is given twice, as a mere given (dumb actuality or Secondness, as Peirce would put it) and as something that is interpreted (Thirdness); as a brute fact and as meaning and value: “All ‘it was’ is a fragment, a riddle, a grisly accident—until the creating will says to it: ‘But I will it thus! I shall will it thus!’” (*ibidem*). Ultimately, the propositions by Peirce we have just read affirm something similar: so it was, so I can interpret it to be, so I can firmly hope that it will indefinitely be for the community to which I entrust the feeble torch of today’s knowledge in the fast-paced race of public truth. And this means constantly recreating, reshaping, and resignifying the past and its ‘data’—“once again”, says the eternal return, in its constant rhythm.

Obviously, the two philosophers’ perspectives differ enormously and I will not even begin to embark on the philological quest to compare their different conceptions.²⁴ However, it seems to me that both point to this ability to avoid petrifying the past and to envisage the *esse in futuro* as the key to interpreting the being-time nexus in a different way, by learning to reverse the flow of time.²⁵

Reality is dynamic, it only stops for a while, when an interpretive habit proves effective and is believed to be true, generating shared actions, gestures, life practices, and discourses. Here we find a point of arrival, an Ultimate Interpretant, however mobile and fallible [33] (p. 4). This bumpy *process* is the *real* event we seek. “Our life is progressing with the future of the past” [33] (p. 2, my translation).

Being is to be understood as eternal becoming, the young Nietzsche insisted in 1878; but also as the eternal possibility of rebecoming, as we read in later, posthumously published fragments: an eternal duration that shapes and reshapes the past and future. Thus, becoming becomes being [28]²⁶—a dynamic being, of course, a transitional being, an eternally mellonized and ungrounded being.

I will, therefore, return to the question I posed at the beginning of my enquiry: how can this change of outlook lead to an ethical, rather than merely theoretical, transformation of the subject? Nietzsche has taught us how very well: being *dynamic*, i.e., testing our *dynamis* (strength) through an endless hermeneutic exercise, means learning to protect ourselves from the suffering engendered by the belief in certain rigid, fixed, and normative notions that weigh upon our existence with their “You must”. It means working to reconfigure our form, by adhering to an extreme perspectivism whereby we learn to deal with the multiplicity and contradictoriness of what exists [34] (ch.1). The vision of the eternal recurrence should, therefore, be approached as a spiritual exercise ([35,36]); and emancipation from metaphysics should be thought of as a gesture to fulfil life needs and not as a purely theoretical move based on inference to the best explanation.

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Notes

- ¹ “Thinking otherwise” is a Foucauldian expression. See [1].
- ² Peirce believed that classical metaphysics could be purified and become “scientific” and “pragmatic”. Therefore, he was not a fierce opponent of all forms of metaphysics, but only of foundationalist metaphysics. On these issues, see, among many others, [3,4].
- ³ In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari use the expression “conceptual personae” to describe those places of thought that enable the extension of the concepts created by an author. They simply manifest a territory of thought. It is impossible to see new ideas, or create concepts, without referring to the conceptual personae that embody them and that point to them before they become perfectly clear to us. I regard Nietzsche precisely as a territory of this sort.
- ⁴ In his attack on metaphysics in this text, Nietzsche touches upon many issues, from “first and last things”—Which is also the title of the first chapter I am quoting from—to the critique of moral and religious feelings, from the distinction between inner and outer to the desire for truth and justice. The central point, however, is the need to learn to see “the history of the origin of thought”: “That which we now call the world is the result of a mass of errors and fantasies which arose gradually in the general development of organic being, which are inter-grown with each other, and are now inherited by us as the accumulated treasure of all the past” [5] (§ 16). Already at this stage in Nietzsche’s intellectual career, a crucial role is played by the issue of history and time. For this interpretation, see [6].
- ⁵ But is it really possible to build such an ontology? “According to a certain familiar way of dividing up the business of philosophy, ontology is concerned with the question of what entities exist (a task that is often identified with that of drafting a ‘complete inventory’ of the universe) whereas metaphysics seeks to explain, of those entities, what they are (i.e.), to specify the ‘ultimate nature’ of the items included in the inventory)” [9]. The problem is to understand what kind of “being” and “existence” the things we place in the inventory have, and what we mean by “being” or “ultimate nature”.
- ⁶ See on that [10] and [4].
- ⁷ “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” [2] (1:132).
- ⁸ I cannot dwell here on this side of Peirce’s thought related to the concept of “public truth”, as laid out from his 1868 writings onwards. We will consider its relevance later. See on it [2] (1:52-3).
- ⁹ “Personality, like any general idea, is not a thing to be apprehended in an instant. It has to be lived in time; nor can any finite time embrace it in all its fullness [. . .]. It implies a teleological harmony in ideas, and in the case of personality this teleology is more than a mere purposive pursuit of a predetermined end; it is a developmental teleology. This is personal character. A general idea,

living and conscious now, it is already determinative of acts in the future to an extent to which it is not now conscious. This reference to the future is an essential element of personality" [2] (1:331).

10 "Now as I understand pragmatism it is of the very essence of it that belief is expectation of the future in all cases" [8] (8.294).

11 In a 1903 text Peirce states that his doctrine "might very well be taken for a variety of Hegelianism (because Hegel is so nearly right)" ([8] (5.38)). The bibliography on this topic is vast. One might start from [11] and go on with [3,12,13].

12 Here one should note the distinction that Peirce draws between existence and reality, i.e., between his categories of Secondness and Thirdness. On Peirce's categories in relation to the issue of time, see [14]. On the distinction between existence and reality, see [8] (5.503): "[...] inasmuch as *reality* means a certain kind of non-dependence [sic] upon thought, and so is a cognitionary character, while *existence* means reaction with the environment, and so is a dynamic character; and accordingly the two meanings, he would say, are clearly *not* the same." Rosenthal provides a wonderful double quotation, where it is important to grasp the value of the terms emphasised: "'an *existing* thing is simply a blind reacting thing' (5.107, italics added), though existing *things* 'do not need reasons: they are reasons' (4.36)." [15] (160). The past is, therefore, "the world of actuality and its influence take the form of a dumb Secondness" [16] (159).

13 Rosenthal goes as far as to argue that "Peirce's metaphysics is often accused of over-futurism". According to this scholar, "the pragmatic emphasis on the 'would be' does not require that the future actuality in some sense be real now, but rather that present possibilities of future actualities be real now" [15] (156). Peirce, therefore, is not a hyper-futurist: "he draws the past and the future into the present in the form of present possibilities which are real now, though not actual" (*ibid.*, 161).

14 "It may seem strange that I should put forward three sentiments, namely, interest in an indefinite community, recognition of the possibility of this interest being made supreme, and hope in the unlimited continuance of intellectual activity, as indispensable requirements of logic. Yet, when we consider that logic depends on a mere struggle to escape doubt, which, as it terminates in action, must begin in emotion, and that, furthermore, the only cause of our planting ourselves on reason is that other methods of escaping doubt fail on account of the social impulse, why should we wonder to find social sentiment presupposed in reasoning?" (*The Doctrine of Chances* [2] (2:150)).

15 See as a comment [3,18] (Ch.V) and [19] (II.4).

16 "That is to say, I hold that truth's independence of individual opinions is due (so far as there is any 'truth') to its being the predestined result to which sufficiently inquiry *would* ultimately lead." (*ibidem*)

17 On Peirce and history, see the recent and very complete study by Tullio Viola [19]. See also [16]. Peirce's most significant text concerning this topic is *On the Logic of Drawing History from Ancient Documents*, especially in relation to abduction. But see also [8] (5.541) for one of Peirce's few definitions of historical science.

18 "The mode of the of Past is that of Actuality" [2] (2:357).

19 There are many passages in which the word "destiny" or "fate" appears, for example, in the first pragmatic writing *How to make our ideas clear* [2] (1.139).

20 We must bear in mind that Peirce had inherited a perspective on the question according to which induction and hypothesis were roughly equivalent. Peirce was the first to distinguish the two and to identify their respective, independent argumentative structures. See [21].

21 [T]he significance of the historical past is, for the constructivist, something to be constructed or created. What has actually happened derives its point and purpose from how it focuses the energies and enlarges the imagination of agents *in the present*. The historical past is made up not of dead facts but of enlivening forces. For the constructivist at least, history is not a meaningless sequence of 'just one damn thing after another,' but an intelligible series of intertwined developments. For the pragmatist, it is no less so. [23] (§ 36).

22 The *Zarathustra* chapter on the eternal return is entitled precisely "On the vision and the riddle", [25] (3rd Part). Concerning this interpretation of the eternal return as a pure vision and metaphor that cannot be subjected to logical interpretation, see the observations by M. Heidegger [26] (pp. 217–218). On the anti-metaphysical centrality of this explosive idea, which shatters any progressive and finalistic framework for history, see [27].

23 "Alles wird und kehrt ewig wieder –entschlüpfen ist nicht möglich!!" [28] (24, 7, 1883), in an English translation: "Everything becomes and recurs eternally – escape is impossible!" [28] (§ 1058). I quote firstly from the *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Werke und Briefe, Digital Critical Edition of the Complete Works and Letters, Based on the Critical Text by G. Colli and M. Montinari*; online edition edited by Paolo D'Iorio; secondly from the English translation *The Will to Power*; de Gruyter: Berlin, Germany; New York, NY, USA, 1967.

24 The reading I am supporting in this article is greatly indebted to the interpretations provided by Deleuze [29], who proposes we look at the eternal recurrence as a dynamic interplay of forces (particularly active and reactive ones), and Klossowski [30], who views such forces as fluctuations of intensity that characterise Nietzsche's life and madness, noting that it is impossible to distinguish between the health of the man and that of his philosophy.

25 In this respect, a significant passage already occurs in *Human all too Human*: "Our destiny rules over us, even when we are not yet aware of it; it is the future that makes laws for our today" [5] (Preface, § 7). Čapek [31] provides a detailed analysis of those passages in which Peirce seems to propose a cyclical conception of time in a scientific way, curiously using arguments similar to Nietzsche's (see esp. [8] (1.274 ff.)). However, Čapek rightly notes that Peirce's tychism prevented him from pursuing the

hypothesis all the way through. On the various scientific and cosmological hypotheses that inspired Nietzsche's vision of the eternal recurrence of the same, see the important and exhaustive article by D'Iorio [32].

- 26 "Dem Werden den Charakter des Seins aufzuprägen—das ist der höchste Wille zur Macht" ([28] (7, 54, 1886-87). "To impose upon becoming the character of being—that is the supreme will to power" [28] (§ 617).

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