

THE DEGENERATE SIGN

It was Charles Peirce who disclosed the concept of the degenerate sign. Generally speaking, this idea derives from his ontology, and from the theory of categories, in particular. Nevertheless, it is basic for his semiotic, too, as for him there is no discrepancy between those two domains of inquiry. Defined by Peirce the distinction of the genuine and degenerate sign determines the principal structure of the world of signs. And, consequently, it produces important effects on his method of the semiotic analysis of all meaningful phenomena. My intention in this article is to make an inquiry into the sense given by Peirce to the "degeneracy" and into the influence of this concept on his semiotic.

The degenerate sign is a triadic relation which is not essentially triadic, i.e., which is not triadic on the ground of its intrinsic nature but only because of some extrinsic events. It is a triad being only incidentally triadic. There are several manners by which a sign can be degenerate from its genuine nature. Moreover, the forms of degeneracy constitute the ground for the classification of signs. Among Peircean ten classes of signs exclusively the last one includes genuine signs, all other groups register degenerate signs. So, a great majority of signs is of a degenerate character. And such is the actual structure of the world of representation.

The degenerate sign is a product of the deterioration of the triadic relation and even of the dyadic one. It is the degenerate Thirdness. Thus, Peircean doctrine of categories is the inevitable starting point of any analysis of the degenerate sign.

Thirdness is a sign, it is thought. "... all triadic relations are without exception more or less of the nature of *thought* in a very general sense." (MS 462, p. 68) The analysis of Thirdness is, for Peirce, the way to elucidate the essence of a sign. However, Thirdness is not self-subsistent. It takes for granted the previous two categories. "A Third is something which brings a First into relation to a Second." (Correspondence, p. 31) So, the interrelations of the categories are fundamental for the understanding of the essence of a sign.

Peirce writes much about the categories, he defines them many times and describes the diverse aspects of them. Despite, his idea concerning the relationship between the different categories as well as the sort of dependence bet-

ween them seems to be rather obscure. There is no precise definition of their mutual relations. So, what I am trying to do below is to reconstruct only some moments of his opinion concerning categories, and especially those moments which are of importance for the theory of signs. But, as a whole, his ontology at this point seems unfinished and vague.

First of all, Peirce declares the self-subsistence of the lower categories regarding to the higher ones. The lower does not need the higher. "It is possible to prescind Firstness from Secondness. We can suppose a being whose whole life consists in one unwarying feeling of redness. But it is impossible to prescind Secondness from Firstness. For to suppose two things is to suppose two units. (...) Everything must have some non-relative element; and this is its Firstness. (...) So, likewise, it is possible to prescind Secondness from Thirdness. But Thirdness without Secondness would be absurd." (MS 478, p. 36-37)

So, next to the belief that the lower is in its being independent of the higher, Peirce expresses the opinion that the higher takes for granted the lower. "Thirdness it is true involves Secondness and Firstness, in a sense. That is to say, if you have an idea of Thirdness you must have had the ideas of Secondness and Firstness to build upon. But what is required for the idea of a genuine Thirdness is an independent solid Secondness and not a Secondness that is a mere corollary of an unfounded and inconceivable Thirdness; and a similar remark may be made in reference to Firstness." (CP 5.91)

Thirdly, the higher level constitutes the new realm of being regarding the other categories; it is sui generis and it cannot be interpreted in terms of the other categories. Peirce writes: "... genuine triadic relations can never be built of dyadic relations and qualities." (CP 1.346) Neither dyad is a simple mixture of qualities, nor triad is a composition of dyads; a dyad is a unit of intrinsically linked two elements and it cannot be dissolved into them without the destruction of it; and a triad is the relation of mediating representation which is possible only as an intrinsic connection of three elements, some of which have an autonomous being as something else than parts of a triad. Thus, according to Peirce, the higher categories are irreducible to the lower ones.

As it was mentioned above, the higher category is impossible without the lower one. The First forms the basis for the Second and the both form the ground for the Third. That is the relationship of foundation. However, there is also a dependence between the categories which has just the opposite direction. That is, according to Peirce, the relation of determining.

Especially, the third has the power to rule over the other categories. It is so, because the Thirdness is necessity, as well. Yet, never Thirdness is determined by Secondness or Firstness. And Secondness cannot be defined by Firstness. Peirce writes about the Third ruling over the Second: "The world of fact contains only what *is*, and not everything that is possible of any description. Hence, the world of fact cannot contain a genuine triad. But though it cannot contain the genuine triad, it may be governed by genuine triads." (CP 1.478) Thus, the relation of determining sets the categories in order from the higher to the lower.

Furthermore, the next principle of Peircean ontology is the coexistence of all three categories in one phenomenon. Categories are neither the separate fields nor the disjointed parts of being; they cannot be isolated one from the others. On the contrary, there are many various junctions of them. The coexistence of categories is significant for the intrinsic structure of Secondness and Thirdness. Only Firstness which is "without reference to anything else" is simple and does not contain the other categories. But the situation is different with the two next; they are composed of the lower ones. "Secondness is an essential part of Thirdness though not of Firstness, and Firstness is an essential element of both Secondness and Thirdness. Hence there is such a thing as the Firstness of Secondness and such a thing as the Secondness of Thirdness. But there is no Secondness of pure Firstness and no Thirdness of pure Firstness or Secondness." (CP 1.530) This coexistence of the categories is of special importance for the understanding of the essential structure of semiosis.

In sum, Peirce's doctrine of categories provides some general principles of the constitution of being. The quoted above passages display his main points for this topic. The mentioned rules can be named as follows: the principle of *foundation*, the principle of *irreducibility*, the principle of *determination* and the principle of *coexistence*. All of them are engaged in Peircean theory of signs and are basic for its understanding.

However, of special importance for semiotic is not simply the concept of the category but the concept of the degenerate category. According to Peirce, there are three kinds of degenerate categories. First of all, however, there is no degeneracy of Firstness. - "Firstness is too simple to have any degenerate form." (MS 478, p. 31) But it is a different position of Secondness. "Secondness is either genuine or degenerate. There are many degrees of genuineness. Generally speaking genuine secondness consists in one thing acting upon another, - brute action." (Correspondence, p. 26) The Secondness has only the one form of degeneracy, while the Thirdness has two main degenerate forms.

The triad is either monadically degenerate, dyadically degenerate or genuine. "A monadically degenerate triad is one which results from the essence of three monads, its subjects. A dyadically degenerate triad is one which results from dyads. A genuine triad is one which cannot be resolved in any such way." (CP 1.473) The essence of the genuine triad consists in the fact that it is not resolvable into elements. It is an elementary unit. It is a triad as long as its moments are connected through the necessary links. When the links are broken the whole triad vanishes.

Thus, in Peirce, the system of categories is a hierarchical structure. There are two important moments of this hierarchy. The lower category is inferior to the higher as well as the degenerate forms are inferior to the genuine one. Consequently, the genuine triad takes the highest position in the entire structure of being. Moreover, according to the categorial principles, the triad governs the world of qualities and facts, it is the regularity of those spheres, it determines but is not determined. While, on the other hand, it is founded on all inferior forms, it takes them for granted as the basis. However, it does not exist in the empirical world of facts and qualities but it subsists in the universe of representation. That way, the world of representation is, for Peirce, closely connected with the empirical world; the interdependence of them is defined by the principles of foundation and determination.

A sign is a triad and as a triad it may be genuine or degenerate. Its way of being as well as the basic structure of the whole sign universe is described by Peirce in the terms of his theory of categories. His semiotic is just the ontology of Thirdness.

A sign is composed of the vehicle, the object and the interpretant i.e., the meaning. The vehicle has its own way of being independent of a triadic relation. It can be a quality, a fact or any other form of a dyadic relation or, finally, a law. As such a phenomenon it is self-subsistent and only due to its independence it may become a constituent of a triad. So, in each vehicle one can distinguish two levels of being: its being as such and its being as a moment (nonindependent constituent) of a triad. In this second way of being it is the First of the Third. And this kind of function may be fulfilled by every level of being. In the object of a sign one can disclose the different aspects, too. The object is something which is represented by a sign. It can be an element of the empirical world as well as a part of the world of representation. In other words, it can be Secondness or Thirdness. Nevertheless, as a moment of a triad it is always the Second of the Third. The object as a

thing, an event or an idea has its own way of being, independent of the particular triad. However, as an object of the sign it is only the derivative existence. It is the intentional object - it is such as it is represented by the sign and it exists only as a correlate of the sign. And, finally, the meaning is Thirdness by its own essence. It subsists only in the world of representation and has no other way of being outside the representation. It is the representation itself. It is the Third of the Third. The meaning is an interpretant, i.e., it is a sign. Its essential nature is triadic.

According to Peirce, there are many ways of the degeneracy of a sign. As it was mentioned before, the triad may be monadically or dyadically degenerate. However, the monadically degenerate sign is hardly conceivable. It would be the fully incidental connection of three whichever elements, deprived of any general sense or any persistence. It would be a unique happening. While, every sign needs at least some regularity. So, this kind of degeneracy almost destroys the idea of a sign. But, there are three possible dyads degenerating the triad. In the triad degenerate through a dyad the persistency and regularity are partly inherent, indispensable for a sign. The triad is degenerate when instead of the immanent relationship of three moments it has as a part of itself a dyadic connection existing independently of it. There are three ways of such a degeneracy, or one can say, three domains of it. That is the relation sign - object, the relation sign - mind, and finally, the relation object - mind. All of them, as dyadic relations, becoming the moment of a triad degenerate it, that means, deprive it of its fully triadic nature.

The first field of the sign degeneracy is the relationship between a sign and its object. According to Peirce, there are three kinds of the link connecting an object and a sign. It is a similarity, a reaction or a law. A genuine sign refers to its object "by virtue of a law", while all other versions of this connection degenerate the sign. "The representamen has its relatively genuine form which is the general sign or symbol, its first degenerate form which is the index and its second degenerate form which is the icon." (MS 307, p. 10) Thus, the classification of signs into icons, indices and symbols is grounded on the genuine or degenerate form of the relation of a sign and its object.

Only a conventional sign is a genuine one. Peirce is very categorical at this point. He writes concerning a sign being a triad: "If this triple relation is not of a degenerate species, the sign is related to its object only in consequence of a mental association, and depends upon a habit. Such signs are always abstract and general, because habits are general rules to which the organism has become subjected. They are, for the most part, conventional and

arbitrary." (CP 3.360) "The symbol, or general sign, on the other hand, is something which is a sign solely by virtue of the character imputed to it in the interpretant. (...) it is a sign (...) because it will be understood to be a sign." (MS 307, p. 11) Thus, the proper connection of the sign with its object is an interpretation. All nonconventional links degenerate the sign.

However, besides the ideal relation typical of a symbol, there are two degenerate forms of the relation of a sign to its object. An index is based on the genuine dyad, an icon on the degenerate dyad. "The index is a representamen that fulfills the function of a representation only by virtue of a relation to its object which it will possess just the same whether it be interpreted as a sign or not." (MS 307, p. 10) So, an index is a direct physical connection of two items which is fully independent of its being incorporated into the triadic relation. It is a self-subsistent dyad which can be changed into a sign due to the extrinsic making of it a moment of a triad. Thus, the relation of a sign to its object is an autonomous phenomenon rather than an effect of an interpretation. "A pure index simply forces attention to the object with which it reacts and puts the interpreter into mediate reaction with that object, but conveys no information." (MS 517) While, the relation of a sign to its object is degenerate in the different way in the icon. "A pure icon is independent of any purpose. It serves as a sign solely and simply by exhibiting the quality it serves to signify. The relation to its object is a degenerate relation. It asserts nothing. If it conveys information, it is only in the sense in which the object that it is used to represent may be said to convey information. An icon can only be a fragment of a completer sign." (MS 517) Moreover, "Icons can represent nothing but Forms and Feelings." (CP 4.544)

Neither dyad by itself, no more a degenerate dyad, is capable to be a sign. Icons and indices have no meaning. They can be transformed into the meaningful phenomena due to an interpretation by symbols. Being not essentially triadic they have no self-subsistence as signs. For functioning as signs they need the system of interpretation which must be a system of symbols. Purely due to the inclusion into such a system they turn into signs, i.e., into triadic phenomena. But they never can become a genuine triad.

Another form of the degenerate sign appears in the field of the relation of a sign to an interpreting mind. The problem of an interpretant of a sign is one of the most difficult in Peircean semiotic and it is very often misunderstood. The distinction of the genuine and degenerate sign gives some additional elucidation to this problem.

The genuine sign has an abstract, logical interpretant, which itself is a sign. All other forms of interpretant degenerate a sign. In his letter Peirce writes: "In its genuine form, Thirdness is the triadic relation existing between a sign, its object, and the interpreting thought, itself a sign, considered as constituting the mode of being a sign. A sign mediates between the interpretant sign and its object. Taking sign in its broadest sense, its interpretant is not necessarily a sign. Any concept is a sign, of course. (...) But we may take a sign in so broad a sense that the interpretant of it is not a thought, but an action or experience, or we may even so enlarge the meaning of a sign that its interpretant is a mere quality of feeling." (Correspondence, p. 31)

Thus, there are three possible interpretants of a sign - the feeling, the reaction and the other sign. Peirce calls them also: the emotional, energetical and intellectual interpretants. The first and the second are the effects produced by a sign on somebody who is interpreting it. So, these interpretants do not belong to a sign being a triadic relation but are the external effects of a sign. They are extrinsic results, no intrinsic moments of a triad. And from the both of them differs the intellectual interpretant being a moment of a triad.

The logical interpretant is a meaning of the sign. Moreover, it is a sign too, because only a sign, which is Thirdness, is able to fulfill the function of meaningful interpretation. All other ways of interpretation than by signs do not constitute the meaning of a genuine sign. They could be of great importance as the empirical effects of a sign but they do not belong in the genuine triad. A sign has to be interpreted by another sign. However, there are some other ways of interpretation too, but they degenerate the sign. Furthermore, every living meaning is always a combination of the diverse levels of interpretation.

Peirce's writings are full of comments concerning the structure of meaning. The main point of his theory of meaning is the differentiation of three interpretants. The Immediate Interpretant of a sign is: "all that it immediately expresses" (CP 8.314) The Dynamical Interpretant is: "the actual effect" (CP 8.314), or it "consists in direct effect actually produced by a Sign upon an Interpreter of it." (Correspondence, p. 110) And the Final Interpretant, which is the same as the logical interpretant, is: "the effect the Sign *would* produce upon any mind which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect." (Correspondence, p. 110), or it "does not consist in the way in which any mind does act but in the way in which every mind would act." (CP 8.315)

However, one of the best of Peircean definitions of interpretation one can find in his Sketch of Dichotomic Mathematics: "We ought to take the whole effect of the sign, or at least the whole of the essential part of it, to be the interpretation, so long we have used the word interpretation to mean that effect the causing of which constitutes the being of the sign. Now it is not in any feeling or even in any particular act of thought that effect consists but in the *belief*, with all that belief essentially effects. Belief does not principally consists in any particular act of thought, but in a *habit* of thought and a conduct." (New Elements, vol. IV, p. 297)

Thus, it is obvious that Peirce makes a very clear distinction between the empirical, factual action of a sign on the mind and the meaningful interpretation of it. The genuine interpretant is only the logical interpretant, all other forms of interpretation degenerate a sign. This idea is expressed by his concepts of the logical, emotional and energetical interpretants as well as by the "immediate", "dynamical" and "final" interpretants. The main point is the separation of the additional and less important elements of interpretation from the interpretation itself. And the interpretation itself is that which belongs in the triad, i.e., it is a sign being Thirdness. Thus, the genuine sign must have the logical or final interpretant, all other interpretants are not the constituents of the genuine triad. However, they constitute the degenerate signs. So, there is no negligence of them in Peircean semiotic.

Peirce's idea of the various interpretants provides a solution to the problem of the identity of the meaning opposing to the diversity of its realization. The ideal meaning of a sign (its content) is the final interpretant, whereas all empirical facts of deciphering a sign are the dynamical interpretants. The final interpretant is "that toward which the actual tends". It is independent of them. However, all movement and development of thought realize itself owing to those actual events of interpretation.

Thus, Peirce's idea of the sign degenerate through the interpretation which is not purely of a semiotic character, that is, which is achieved not merely by a sign, grounds his theory of meaning. According to the principle of determination, the genuine sign, which is superior to the degenerate one, rules over it. The genuine sign being Thirdness determines that which is only Secondness or Firstness. And action and feeling belong in those inferior categories. So, the final interpretant determines all inferior forms of interpretation. Such a conclusion, giving a kind of supremacy to the meaning *in abstracto* over the meaning *in concreto*, assigns Peircean theory of signs to the semiotic idealism.

Furthermore, according to Peirce, there is another form of the degeneracy of a sign, as well. It consists in the way of being of an object as it is represented by a sign. The genuine sign represents its object as a necessary one. The representation of possible or existent objects provides only degenerate signs. A sign being for its interpretant a sign of possibility is called by Peirce the Rheme, a sign of fact is the Dicisign, and a sign of law or reason is the Argument. "Now the symbol (...) has its relatively genuine, its relatively first degenerate and its relatively second degenerate forms. Its relatively genuine form is the *argument*, its relatively first degenerate form is the *proposition*, its relatively second degenerate form is the term or *rhema*." (MS 307, p. 12) Another clear definition of them is expressed in Peirce's letter to Victoria Welby (Correspondence, p. 34).

According to this last trichotomy only the argument is a genuine sign. The term is not by itself a representation, it is nothing else than the possibility of meaning, because it represents its object "in its characters merely". But it has not yet the object. It is meaningless because it is objectless. Dicent is a particular meaning, its object is represented just "in respect to actual existence." Its object is an existent individual. While, the argument has a full, abstract meaning, it is "understood to represent its Object in its character as Sign". It is interpreted as a sign standing for another sign. Consequently, the genuine sign represents its object to its interpretant as a sign. The mediating representation is degenerate when it includes the dyadic relation of object and mind. That can be a genuine dyad-dicent, or a degenerate dyad-term.

Peirce emphasizes very often the idea, that the object of a sign must be an ideal, general object. He writes: "Every sign stands for an object independent of itself; but it can only be a sign of that object in so far as that object is itself of the nature of a sign or thought. For the sign does not affect the object but is affected by it; so that the object must be able to convey thought, that is, must be of the nature of thought or of a sign." (CP 1.538) And that is precisely the argument which is interpreted as a sign having thought as its object.

Thus, according to Peirce, the genuine sign must be a symbol, have a logical interpretant and its object has to be a sign. The genuine sign is pure thought. That is the consequence of defining a sign as a triadic relation, i.e., as Thirdness. Moreover, that being the case, the entire world of representation would be of an unmixed intellectual character. It would be composed simply of

pure thought and the spheres of intuition and of experience would be completely excluded from the semiosis. There is no doubt, that Peirce was fully aware of such a possible result of the definition of a sign as Thirdness. And, in order to escape this conclusion, he develops his idea of the degenerate Third, i.e., the degenerate sign. A degenerate sign combines in itself abstract thought with intuition and experience. As well as, it combines in itself the various ways of being, that is, it includes the level of ideal being and the level of empirical, factual existence.

A representation is by its essence an intellectual operation and it cannot be anything else. However, it is not detached from the other cognitive faculties. And Peircean concept of the degenerate sign discloses this fact very precisely. Due to its degenerate forms a sign is able to appeal to our feelings, to produce our perceptions, to determine the actions, as well as, to rise our thoughts. Of course, it cannot function without the involvement of our intellect; the reasoning is an indispensable moment of every semiotic process, because it is the act of mediating representation itself. Without reason semiosis, i.e., the process of interpretation, is impossible. So, reasoning is the essence of semiosis, nevertheless, in the most part, intellectual semiosis is mixed with the other acts of human mind. Peircean concept of the degenerate sign is an interesting way of expressing the old philosophical truth concerning the unity of the cognitive faculties. However, Peirce not only expresses the idea of the wholeness of mind but he ascribes the leading role in it to reasoning. Plainly, then, there is a significant epistemological aspect of his concept of the degenerate sign.

Furthermore, there exists an ontological aspect of it, too. The degenerate sign unites the world of representation with the empirical world. The genuine sign is purely ideal, general, timeless object. However, the degenerate sign belongs to the both worlds, it constitutes the bridge between them. The general rules over the empirical but finds also the foundation in it. The coexistence of categories finds its full realization in the degenerate sign. So, the concept of the degenerate sign is a tool of explaining the ontic status of the world of representation.

At last, the concept of the degenerate sign is full of consequences for semiotic. First of all, it emphasizes that the essence of semiosis is reasoning. The "degenerate" sign is only the opposition to the "genuine" one. And the genuine sign is pure thought. So, the degenerate sign as inferior is *less* intellectual but it must include the moment of reasoning to be a sign at all.

It is very typical of Peirce that according to him the model for semiosis is the syllogistic reasoning. It influences his entire semiotic. On the one hand Peircean concept of the degenerate sign intellectualizes the semiosis - every sign has its intellectual interpretation, which is its condition sine qua non - but, on the other hand, it opens a very broad field for semiosis - everything can make the entrance into semiosis (and can be the object of the semiotic analysis) on the condition of becoming a moment of the mediating representation. So, the concept of the degenerate sign provides a solution to the problem of the unity and diversity of semiosis. The unity is implied by the essential nature of the triadic representation and all various forms of the realization of this essence constitute the diversity of semiosis. Peircean concept of the sign is very precise and very broad.

Moreover, the distinction of the genuine and degenerate sign also provides a solution to the question of the arbitrariness of a sign. According to Peirce, the genuine link between a sign and its referent is of a conventional character. All natural connections have only an additional, incidental importance and are not typical of a sign. They can appear in the semiosis but are only of inferior function and are not able by themselves to constitute a sign. The conventional nature is a genuine essence of a sign.

The concept of the degenerate sign discloses the many-dimensional structure of meaning, as well. The meaning of a sign, which substantially is a general, timeless, intellectual content, appears accompanied by individual feelings and actions. They are the incidental moments of semiosis, which by themselves cannot constitute the triadic relation. They are the effects of a sign but are insufficient to originate the mediating representation. However, they belong in the empirical level of the process of interpretation.

And finally, the concept of the degenerate sign reveals the autonomous character of the world of interpretation. The sign universe is not determined by the world of experience. On the contrary, it is grounded on it and being independent it determines that which is the lower level. Consequently, for Peirce, semiotic is not an empirical science but it is just a logic.

Generally speaking, the category of the degenerate sign is full of contents and being an opposition to the genuine sign it reveals with special accuracy the essence of the mediating representation.

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