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Persons, Signs, Animals: A Peircean Account of Personhood

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Abstract

In this essay I describe two of the accounts that Peirce provides of personhood: the semi-otic account, on which a person is a sequence of thought-signs, and the naturalistic account, on which a person is an animal. I then argue that these disparate accounts can be reconciled into a plausible view on which persons are numerically distinct entities that are nevertheless continuous with each other in an important way. This view would be agreeable to Peirce in some respects, as it is modeled on his theory of perception, incorporates his categories of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, and is in harmony with his objective idealism. But it diverges from Peirce in one important respect, viz. its rejection of the idea that some groups of human beings count as persons.

Keywords: Animals, consciousness, objective idealism, Peirce, perception, personhood, signs

Throughout his philosophical writings, Charles Peirce makes numerous pronouncements about the nature of persons, or selves, or as he sometimes says, “man.” For example, in the cognition series of 1868–69, he writes that “man is a sign” (5.314, EP 1:54, W 2:241).¹ Peirce defines a sign as, roughly, anything that stands for something to someone,² and his claim that man is a sign seems to mean that a person consists of her own thinking, and since that thinking is in signs, the person herself is a series of signs. But this *semiotic account* of personhood is far from all Peirce has to say on the subject. For example, in a late unpublished manuscript, he writes that “[b]y a ‘person,’ . . . I suppose we mean an animal that has command of some syntactical language” (R 659, 1910). This

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later, *naturalistic account* is on its face quite different than his earlier, semiotic account.

The story of Peirce's theorizing about personhood is much more complicated than these two passages indicate, since further, different characterizations of personhood occur throughout his writings. Notable among these are his view that humans are distinguished from other animals by their possession of a higher degree of self-control (5.533–34, c.1905) and his description of persons in negative terms, e.g., “[t]he individual man, since his separate existence is manifested only by ignorance and error, so far as he is anything apart from his fellows, and from what he and they are to be, is only a negation” (5.317, EP 1:55, W 2:241–42, 1868).³ A question for Peirce scholars is whether he intended these different accounts to be compatible or whether the differences among them signify changes, or perhaps even inconsistencies, in his views.⁴

While I will engage in a fair amount of historical reconstruction in this essay, my primary aim is not historical. It is, rather, to sketch an account of personhood that combines Peirce's semiotic and naturalistic accounts. Most of the reconstruction that is necessary for this project occurs in section one, in which I explain Peirce's claims that persons are signs and that they are animals. This lays the groundwork for section two, in which I show how those accounts can be combined to yield an account of personhood on which persons are distinct individuals but nonetheless continuous with one another in a meaningful way. Although obviously indebted to Peirce, this account goes well beyond what he himself says. I believe, though, that he would be amenable to it, as it is modeled on his own theory of perception, incorporates his concepts of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, and steers clear of a Cartesian view on which individual persons are absolutely discrete from one another. But this is not to say that my Peircean account would be pleasing to Peirce in every respect. In fact, it explicitly rejects Peirce's claim that some groups of human beings can count as persons. In the third, concluding section, I consider Peirce's attribution of personhood to some groups, as well as the role that consciousness plays in that attribution and, more broadly, in his objective idealism, according to which “matter is effete mind” (6.25, EP 1:293, 1891). I conclude that the latter doctrine, at least in its broad outlines, is nicely congruent with my own Peircean account of personhood and that that account can recognize the continuity among persons that is so important to Peirce, despite its rejection of corporate personhood.

1. Peirce's Semiotic and Naturalistic Accounts

Again, Peirce characterizes persons as signs. And again, he defines a sign as something that represents something to someone.⁵ So for Peirce, the sign relationship is triadic, in that it always involves three things: the

sign itself (which Peirce also calls the *representamen*), the thing that the sign represents (its *object*), and the thing that interprets the sign as representing that thing (its *interpretant*). For example, clouds can serve as a sign of rain to someone who sees them on the horizon: the sign or representamen is the clouds, which signify rain (the object) to a person, in whose mind there is the thought of rain (which thought, in interpreting the clouds to mean rain, is the interpretant of the sign). Naturally occurring objects and events, such as clouds, can function as signs, but there are also non-natural signs, such as traffic signals, weather vanes, and every instance of human language.

On Peirce's account, we cannot think other than in signs (5.265, EP 1:30, W 2:213, 1868), and when a thought-sign is about something external to the thinker, its object is the external thing that the thought-sign is about. On Peirce's early view, a thought-sign that signifies an extra-mental object does so only indirectly; what it signifies directly is a previous thought-sign about that same external object (5.285, EP 1:39, W 2:224, 1868). Peirce also maintains early on that the interpretant of a thought-sign—the thing to which that thought-sign represents its object—is always another thought-sign: “every thought-sign is translated or interpreted in a subsequent one, unless it be that all thought comes to an abrupt and final end in death” (5.284, EP 1:39, W 2:224, 1868).⁶ But Peirce later comes to believe that some thought-signs refer directly to extra-mental objects, and that some sequences of thought-signs terminate in interpretants that are not themselves thought-signs.⁷ Despite these alterations, Peirce's basic view of the nature of thought seems not to have changed: all thinking, including all thinking about the world external to one's own mind, takes the form of signs.

According to Peirce, one's mental life is a continuous process of sign generation and interpretation, and the continuous interpretation of earlier thought-signs gives one's thinking the structure of a dialogue wherein a person at an earlier time engages in cognition that she herself understands at a later time (4.6, 1906). This idea is reflected in Peirce's claim that “[a] Person is mind whose parts are coördinated in a particular way” (R 954, c.1892–93). The coordination just is this semiotic relationship between earlier and later thought-signs. In short, a person's mental life, and thus she herself, is a continuous process of *semiosis*.⁸ This idea, that each person is a continuous flow of thought-signs, reflects Peirce's *synechism*, according to which “all that exists is continuous” (1.172, c.1897).⁹

The synechistic aspect of Peirce's semiotic account also appears in his view that different persons are continuous *with each other*. To understand this, we need to attend to his claim in “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” that man is, not just a sign, but, in some sense, an *external* sign:

[A]s the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an external sign, proves that man is an *external* sign. That is to say, the man and the external sign are identical, in the same sense in which the words *homo* and *man* are identical. Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought. [5.314, EP 1:54, W 2:241, 1868]¹⁰

By “external” Peirce means that which does not depend on how anyone in particular thinks, feels or believes. The external is not co-extensive with the real, which is that which does not depend on what anyone in particular thinks, feels or believes *about it*. Everything external is real, but not everything real is external.¹¹ So an external sign is a non-mental sign.¹² Peirce is claiming that every thought, and therefore every person, is, in some sense, a non-mental sign.

This claim might at first seem to imply that the thought-signs of which a person’s thinking consists are independent of what anyone, including she herself, thinks. But it is possible to interpret this passage so as to avoid this paradoxical implication. The key is to recognize that Peirce was implicitly working with a distinction between internal thoughts and external thoughts, a distinction he made explicitly in his first Harvard Lecture of 1865. Defending his “unpsychological view of logic,” Peirce considered a syllogism written on a blackboard and asked, is the “logical character” of the argument

a form of *thought* only? My thought when I write it was a different event from each one of your thoughts, and your thoughts will be each different if you read it again from what they were when you read it just now. The thoughts were many, but this form was one. . . . [Such forms] are forms of all symbols [i.e., of all signs] whether internal or external but . . . they only are by virtue of possible thought. [W 1:164–65]

It is clear that some of his uses of the term “thought” in “Some Consequences” refer to thoughts that are internal to individual persons, e.g.,

When we think, to what thought does that thought-sign which is ourself address itself? It may, through the medium of outward expression, which it reaches perhaps only after considerable internal development, come to address itself to thought of another person. But whether this happens or not, it is always interpreted by a subsequent thought of our own. [5.284, EP 1:38–39, W 2:223, 1868]

But it is equally clear that in other, later works, he sometimes used “thought” to mean, not person-specific mental events, or even contents limited to such events, but “the objects which thinking [i.e., internal

thinking] enables us to know.” (1.27, 1909)¹³ He seems to be using “thought” in this sense when he writes that “[o]ne selfsame thought may be carried upon the vehicle of English, German, Greek, or Gaelic; in diagrams, or in equations, or in graphs: all these are but so many skins of the onion, its inessential accidents” (4.6, 1906). An external thought is thus something like a content that can be shared by or exemplified in any number of individual, internal thoughts. So when, in “Some Consequences,” he equates a human being’s life with a “train of thought,” we should understand him to be referring to internal thoughts, those that occur in or compose the mental life of an individual person. By recognizing the distinction between internal and external thoughts, we can see how Peirce’s claim that “every thought is an external sign” is quite consistent with his semiotic account of personhood, on which a given person is a sequence of internal thought-signs.

Recognizing that distinction can also help us avoid a potential misunderstanding of Peirce’s oft-quoted claim that “we ought to say that we are in thought and not that thoughts are in us” (5.289 n.1, EP 1:42, W 2:227 n.4, 1868), and on a correct understanding it becomes clear that that claim is consistent with the view that a given person consists of thought-signs. Here is the context of the statement:

[N]o present actual thought . . . has any meaning . . . for this lies not in what is actually thought, but in what this thought may be connected with in representation by subsequent thoughts . . . It may be objected, that if no thought has any meaning, all thought is without meaning. But this is a fallacy similar to saying, that, if in no one of the successive spaces which a body fills there is room for motion, there is no room for motion throughout the whole. At no one instant in my state of mind is there cognition or representation, but in the relation of my states of mind at different instants there is. [Footnote:] Accordingly, just as we say that a body is in motion, and not that motion is in a body we ought to say that we are in thought and not that thoughts are in us.

Peirce’s point is not that individual human beings do not think or that they do not have thoughts; were that his point, it would put this passage at odds with the project of much of “Some Consequences,” which is to argue that an individual person’s cognition consists of thought-signs. Rather, his point is that thought (cognition, representation) is something that one *does* over time, not something that a person *has* at any given instant. It is the same point he made ten years later in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”:

These two sorts of objects, what we are *immediately* conscious of and what we are *mediately* conscious of, are found in all consciousness. Some elements (the sensations) are completely present at every instant

so long as they last, while others (like thought) are actions having beginning, middle, and end, and consist in a congruence in the succession of sensations which flow through the mind. They cannot be immediately present to us, but must cover some portion of the past or future. Thought is a thread of melody running through the succession of our sensations. [5.395, EP 1:128–29, W 3:262–63, 1878]

This does not imply that thinking is something that happens outside of an individual person, any more than his point about motion implies that movement happens apart from a physical body.¹⁴

Peirce's view seems to be that thoughts, whether internal or external, are not limited to items having a propositional structure: "whenever we think, we have present to the consciousness some *feeling, image, conception*, or other representation, which serves as a sign" (5.283, EP 1:38, W 2:223, 1868, emphasis added). Although Peirce is not explicit about this, his view seems to be that, not just the propositional contents of beliefs, judgments, etc., but also feelings and images, might be external, in the sense that two individuals, in seeing the same sunset, or eating different samples of the same ice cream, might be *thinking the same thing* (in a very broad sense of "thinking" in which it includes non-cognitive mental processes), just as when they have the same belief or are entertaining the same claim.

The notion that a thought is something that any number of individuals can have in common, i.e., that the same (external) thought might be (internally) thought by multiple individuals, underlies Peirce's view that individual persons are continuous with each other. In a 1906 manuscript on pragmatism, he wrote that "two minds in communication are, in so far, 'at one,' that is, are properly one mind in that part of them" (EP 2:389). I believe that what Peirce has in mind here is something like the following. In believing that Ralph Nader is the best candidate, the thought that he is the best candidate is literally *part of me*. It is a constituent sign in the man-sign that is the person I am, and 50 people all of whom think that Nader is the best candidate are, to that degree, *of one mind* in a very literal sense. If I share several beliefs, feelings, concepts, and sensations in common with others, then I overlap with them even more. Considering the thousands of mundane beliefs that most humans share, and the thousands of feelings, sensations, etc. we also share, the degree to which our respective minds overlap—the degree to which we are continuous with one another—is astonishing.¹⁵ This continuity is vividly illustrated in a metaphor Peirce gave in the manuscript quoted above:

Let a community of quasi-minds consist of the liquid in a number of bottles which are in intricate connexion by tubes filled with the liquid. This liquid is of complex and somewhat unstable mixed chemi-

cal composition. It also has so strong a cohesion and consequent surface-tension that the contents of each bottle take on a self-determined form. [EP 2:392, 1906]¹⁶

But the claim that there is such continuity is no mere metaphor: “When I communicate my thought and my sentiments to a friend with whom I am in full sympathy, so that my feelings pass into him and I am conscious of what he feels, do I not live in his brain as well as in my own—most literally?” (7.591, W 1:498, 1866).

In his *Principles of Psychology*, William James wrote that “[t]here is no giving or bartering between” individual minds. “No thought even comes into direct *sight* of a thought in another personal consciousness than its own. Absolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law.”¹⁷ But responding to James, Peirce asked:

Is not the direct contrary nearer observed facts? . . . You think there must be such isolation, because you confound thoughts with feeling-qualities; but all observation is against you. There are some small particulars that a man can keep to himself. He exaggerates them and his personality sadly. [8.81, c.1891]¹⁸

It is because of our shared thoughts that we are continuous with one another. “When we come to study the great principle of continuity . . . it will appear that individualism and falsity are one and the same” (5.402 n.2, 1893). The individualism that denies this synechistic connection among individual persons is a “metaphysics of wickedness . . . your neighbors are, in a measure, yourself, and in far greater measure than, without deep studies in psychology, you would believe” (7.571, EP 2:2, 1893).¹⁹ This is one of Peirce’s most radical claims about personhood, a claim that distances him from Descartes’ picture of persons as isolated and discrete minds.

What I have explained so far applies to persons only in their semiotic aspect. But according to some of Peirce’s other statements on the subject, there is another important aspect of personhood. At times Peirce seems to embrace the view of persons that Eric Olson calls *animalism*, the view that persons are animals. As Olson notes, animalism “is deeply controversial. Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, and Hegel all denied it.”²⁰ But as we have seen, Peirce holds that persons are animals that have “command of some syntactical language” (R 659:10, 1910).²¹ Our embodiment as physical, language-using organisms is so central to personhood that, says Peirce, the tongue is “the very organ of personality” (8.84, c.1891). The essential difference between persons and other signs is that we are living organisms (7.588, W 1:496, 1866). On its own, Peirce’s semiotic account might seem to be too mentalistic in its disregard of the life of

action, especially in its earlier formulation, according to which every interpretant is another thought-sign rather than, for example, an action actually performed by the person in question. But his naturalistic account acknowledges the centrality of action and embodiment to personhood. Says Peirce, “the body of man is a wonderful mechanism, that of the word nothing but a line of chalk” (7.583, W 1:494, 1866).²² That a man-sign is “connected with . . . [a] physical organism” gives him “a higher degree of life than any word” (R 290, 1905).²³ Conversely, it is our semiotic nature that enables us to transcend the status of mere organisms: “[e]ach man has an identity which far transcends the mere animal;—an essence, a *meaning* subtile as it may be” (7.591, W 1:498, 1866).

2. *Combining the Semiotic and Naturalistic Accounts*

The foregoing is far from a complete picture of Peirce’s own views on personhood; as I indicated at the start, the semiotic and naturalistic accounts are only two of the characterizations of persons he provided. Having explained those accounts, I now wish to turn away from the historical question of what Peirce himself thought of personhood and instead consider the prospects for an approach to personhood that combines his semiotic and naturalistic accounts. The first challenge that this project must overcome is to show how the semiotic and naturalistic accounts can be combined into a coherent whole. How, after all, can we be both animals and sequences of signs, both physically discrete from, and yet semiotically continuous with, one another?²⁴

I believe that the two accounts can be reconciled and that this can be done without sacrificing either the physical discreteness among individual persons or the semiotic continuity among them. According to the reconciliation I have in mind, *a person is an animal whose nervous system functions in a specific way, viz. to engage in a continuous process of sign-interpretation.*²⁵ To my mind, this is a compelling, albeit still rough, picture of what it is to be a person, and in this section I will show how such an approach might be further elaborated. This elaboration will go beyond what Peirce himself has to say about personhood, and I do not claim that he himself would agree that the two accounts can or should be reconciled in exactly this way. Nonetheless, this account of personhood would, I believe, be agreeable to Peirce in at least some respects.

One of those respects is the account’s integration of Peirce’s theory of perception. It is this theory that, on my view, points the way towards a reconciliation of the semiotic and naturalistic accounts.²⁶ According to Peirce’s theory, a given perceptual experience, or *percipuum*, has two components: the *percept* and the *perceptual judgment* (e.g., 7.629, 1903). The percept itself has two aspects. First, it is the locus of phenomenal qualities. When one is, say, tasting sweet iced tea, the percept is the

aspect of the experience that encompasses the qualities of the tea, such as its coldness and its sweetness. It is not that the percept *has* those qualities. Rather, the percept *is* the experience of those qualities as they occur *in* the tea. It is the phenomenal presentation of those qualities to the experiencing subject. But it is not a representation of those qualities. The percept presents the phenomenal world but does not *represent* it in the manner required by indirect realism. When I taste the sweet tea, it is not merely a sign of the tea's sweetness that I am experiencing; rather, I am directly experiencing that sweetness itself.²⁷ In its second aspect, the percept is a "clash" between the perceiver and her environment (8.41, EP 1:233, W 5:225, 1885); it is the causal interaction between perceiver and perceived. The percept, then, is a perceiver's direct perceptual interaction with her surroundings and the phenomenal presentation of extra-mental qualities that accompanies that interaction. The two aspects of the percept respectively correspond to Peirce's universal categories of Firstness, or quality, and Secondness, or reaction.²⁸

The second component of the perceptual experience, the perceptual judgment, is a belief that automatically and involuntarily accompanies the percept. When I raise a glass of iced tea to my lips and drink, I automatically come to believe a number of things, e.g., that I am drinking iced tea, that it is sweet and cold, and that it is not anti-freeze. Unlike my percept of the tea, the perceptual judgment has a propositional content: it represents the world as being, e.g., such as to have a quantity of iced tea in it. The perceptual judgment corresponds to Peirce's category of Thirdness, generality, representation.

So a given percipuum involves both a percept and a perceptual judgment. These components of a perceptual experience are conceptually distinct, in that we can think about them separately, but neither aspect of the percipuum ever occurs apart from the other.

The semiotic and naturalistic accounts of personhood can be reconciled if we understand persons as being analogous to Peircean percipua; and what's more, by understanding them in this way, we can see how an individual person can exemplify all three of Peirce's universal categories.²⁹ A person is, on the one hand, an animal. This aspect of the person is the analog of the percept, and the dual-nature of the percept is, in fact, mirrored in that of the person-as-animal. The human animal is the hub of lived experience (including qualitative phenomenal experience, and thus Firstness), and experience is impossible without the nervous system of an animal interacting with its physical environment, i.e., without the Secondness of the embodied person.³⁰ But there is an element of Thirdness to personhood as well, in that the individual's mental life is constituted by a continuous flow of thought-signs. This flow constitutes another aspect of the individual person, one that can be partially duplicated in other, distinct embodied persons, just as you and I might make the same perceptual judgment—i.e., share the same thought—about a

glass of iced tea, even though our percepts of that tea would be distinct.³¹ Much of an individual's lived experience, and thus much of what makes her who she is, is constituted by her perceptual experiences. A person's percipua just *are* her sensory and cognitive interactions with the world, and it is not much of a stretch to say that the conscious experience of a given person is nothing but the continuous flow of earlier percipua into later ones. A person, then, is an animal who is conscious of her interaction with her environment, and that consciousness consists in part of the thought-signs that exemplify the same external thoughts as are exemplified by the thought-signs of other animals.

This is not dualism of a Cartesian stripe. Persons are embodied, and the only embodiment of which we are aware is the embodiment of a person as an animal. What's more, Cartesian minds are self-enclosed, having no ontological connection with others. On my view, persons in their animal aspect are physically distinct from one another, and in that respect each has a separate identity from the rest. But in their semiotic aspect, persons are not distinct in this way. A person overlaps with others, in that the thought-signs that constitute who she is are shared with others.³² Nor is this a Spinozistic view on which a person has two "modes," neither of which is more fundamental than the other. On my view, the animal aspect is primary, in two respects. First, the semiosis that is required for personhood is impossible apart from an existing animal.³³ Second, in the origination of an entity that will eventually be a person, that entity is an animal before it begins to engage in semiosis and thus before it is truly a person.

This account differs from Descartes' in yet another way. On Descartes' account, persons are minds that are *simple*, in the sense that they have no component parts.³⁴ My view is very different in that it maintains that in one aspect, a person is a continuous flow of thought-signs. This might be taken to mean that she is indivisible, much as a Cartesian mind. But I follow Peirce in taking something like a middle position between Cartesianism and an empiricist view on which the mind consists of discrete ideas.³⁵ The signs of which a person is composed can be distinguished, but they are nevertheless not discrete. My thought that Nader is a good candidate is distinct from my thought that some Presidential candidates are good, but each thought is part of the same continuum of semiosis. The continuity among my distinguishable thoughts is grounded, at least in part, in the fact that a thought that is at one time an interpretant is at a later time a sign that is interpreted in a further interpretant, in a subsequent instance of semiosis. Our thoughts and feelings are necessarily connected with one another, despite the fact that they can be distinguished.³⁶ As T. L. Short astutely observes, "[c]ontinuity does not preclude but rather entails difference."³⁷

But now consider the following objection to my account. The internal thought-signs of which an individual person consists are merely

sign tokens rather than sign types. Since this is the case, my token of the thought that Nader is the best candidate is distinct from your token of that thought. Each may exemplify the same external thought or sign type, but the fact that we each have tokens of that type does not imply that we overlap.³⁸ In fact, quite the opposite is true. My thought token is mine, yours is yours, and James turns out to be right after all: persons are absolutely insulated from, and not at all continuous with, each other. On the other hand, if what we “share” in thinking the same thing is literally the same thought, it is unclear how the two of us might be distinct, individual persons.

This objection misunderstands the nature of the overlapping required by my account. My thinking that Nader is the best candidate is indeed a different instance of semiosis than yours, as it must be if you and I are two numerically distinct animals. But it is not the material, animal aspect of personhood that grounds our overlapping. “Overlapping” here does not mean *spatial* overlapping. Persons are individuated from each other by being individual animals, just as different copies of Nader’s *Unsafe at Any Speed* are individuated from each other by being different bound volumes. But the thousands of copies of that book are *the same* in the sense that is relevant here (recall Peirce’s comment that “the words *homo* and *man* are identical”). If you and I each own libraries, and each of our libraries contains 100 volumes, and exactly 10 of the titles in your library are the same as 10 of the titles in mine, then it is very natural to say that our libraries “overlap.” It is exactly this sort of overlap that we should keep in mind when reading Peirce’s pronouncement that “personal existence is an illusion” (4.68, 1893; see also 8.82, c.1891).³⁹

It might also be objected that my account assumes that persons can exist outside of a community and that it therefore severs the connection between personhood and community. Were it to do so, my approach would certainly be at odds with the views of Peirce in particular and of pragmatists generally. But my view does not imply that a person can originate outside of a community, apart from other people. It implies only that an entity that is a person at a given time can be a person *at that time* apart from a community. It is consistent with my view to say that a human organism can begin to engage in the semiosis required for personhood only if he is among and is treated appropriately by a community of other persons. But once one is a person, she can live as a hermit, apart from any human contact, without thereby sacrificing her personhood. In short, my view leaves open the possibility that persons can be originated only as part of an existing community of persons.⁴⁰ This accords with Peirce’s account of the development of self-consciousness as depending on coming to believe that the testimony of others is sometimes accurate even when it diverges from one’s own (5.225ff., EP 1:18ff., W 2:00ff., 1868) as well as with his claim that

“man . . . is essentially a *possible* member of society” (5.402 n.2, 1893, emphasis added).

3. *Personhood and Consciousness*

As the preceding has made clear, my account of personhood, according to which persons are animals that engage in semiosis, agrees with Peirce’s own account in a number of ways. Still, I do not endorse everything that Peirce says regarding personhood. As I mentioned at the start, I wish to steer clear of his claim that some groups of human beings are persons. Peirce writes that an individual human being’s “circle of society (however widely or narrowly this phrase may be understood), is a sort of loosely compacted person, in some respects of higher rank than the person of an individual organism” (5.421, EP 2:338, 1905).⁴¹ On its face, this seems to anticipate Peter French’s *corporatism*, according to which a corporation can be, not simply a legal person (i.e., a person under the law), but a “metaphysically separate person,” an independent “member of the moral community” with its own moral rights, duties, and so on.⁴² But there is a significant difference between French’s and Peirce’s views, one having to do with consciousness as a requirement for personhood. In this final section, I will consider the role that consciousness plays in Peirce’s attribution of personhood to groups, and since that attribution originates within Peirce’s evolutionary cosmology, I will give special consideration to the aspect of that cosmology that most directly addresses the connection between mind and matter: his objective idealism, according to which “matter is effete mind” (6.25, EP 1:293, 1891). As I will show, Peirce does not give us sufficient reason to extend personhood to groups, but his objective idealism is, at least in its broad outlines, in harmony with my own Peirce-inspired account of personhood.

I will begin with a more explicit statement of the difference between Peirce’s and French’s respective attribution of personhood to groups. French’s corporatism assumes that a corporate entity that is not itself capable of conscious experience, i.e., not capable of consciousness over and above the separate streams of conscious experience of the individual human beings who belong to it, can count as a person. From his point of view, what is necessary for an entity to count as a (metaphysical, not merely legal) person is that it possess agency, the ability to act intentionally or purposefully. French argues at length that a corporation in which the decision-making process is structured in a specific way possesses agency. It matters not that the corporation itself is incapable of consciousness.

So French’s position rejects what I will call the *consciousness requirement*, that only entities which are capable of consciousness are persons.⁴³ The consensus view among contemporary philosophers, including bioethicists concerned with end-of-life issues, seems to be

that consciousness is a necessary condition of personhood,⁴⁴ and many readers may find French's view difficult to accept precisely because it extends personhood to entities that are incapable of consciousness. But why assume that the consciousness requirement is true? A comprehensive defense of this assumption is far outside the scope of this paper, but here I can still briefly state one reason for thinking that anything that is not capable of consciousness should not be considered to be a person. The reason is that there is an essential connection among personhood, consciousness and *interests*. An entity that has never been and will never be conscious is altogether devoid of interests. On this point I agree with Peter Singer:

The capacity for suffering and enjoying things is a pre-requisite for having interests at all, a condition that must be satisfied before we can speak of interests in any meaningful way. It would be nonsense to say that it was not in the interests of a stone to be kicked along the road by a schoolboy. A stone does not have interests because it cannot suffer. Nothing that we can do to it could possibly make any difference to its welfare. A mouse, on the other hand, does have an interest in not being tormented, because it will suffer if it is.⁴⁵

An entity that cannot suffer pain or experience any sort of enjoyment does not have interests, at least not in any deep sense. There is a loose sense in which it is not in the interests of a champagne glass to be filled with cement, not in the interests of a house to be set on fire, and not in the interests of a corporation to be forced into bankruptcy. The glass, the house and the corporation may well be destroyed by such conditions, and thus it is to their respective advantages not to undergo them. But it would be stretching the sense of "interest" to say that the glass or house or business *has* an interest in avoiding those conditions. Only sentient entities *has* an interest in being treated (or not being treated) in certain ways, and only if an entity has such interests is it plausible to say that it is a person. This position has the benefits of implying that ordinary inanimate objects are not persons and leaving it an open question whether sentient non-human animals are persons.⁴⁶

While Peirce shares with French the idea that some groups of individual human beings are persons, his way of reaching this conclusion does not involve denying the consciousness requirement. In fact, nothing that Peirce says about group personhood is inconsistent with that requirement. Instead, he argues that some groups of individual humans may exhibit some sort of consciousness, some capacity for feeling, over and above that of their individual members:

All that is necessary . . . to the existence of a person is that the feelings out of which he is constructed should be in close enough connection to influence one another. . . . [I]f this be the case, there should be

something like personal consciousness in bodies of men who are in intimate and intensely sympathetic communion. It is true that when the generalization of feeling has been carried so far as to include all within a person, a stopping-place, in a certain sense, has been attained; and further generalization will have a less lively character. But we must not think it will cease. *Esprit de corps*, national sentiment, sympathy, are no mere metaphors. None of us can fully realize what the minds of corporations are, any more than one of my brain cells can know what the whole brain is thinking. But the law of mind clearly points to the existence of such personalities . . . [6.269–70, EP 1:349–50, 1892]

Elsewhere Peirce writes that “the *esprit de corps* of a military company, a club, a university, a nation, is essentially of the same nature as the consciousness of a person” (R 961a:87, 1891).⁴⁷ So Peirce does not affirm that groups of individual humans are persons by denying the consciousness requirement; rather, he asserts that some groups possess something like a group consciousness.⁴⁸

Peirce views this *prima facie* implausible claim as an hypothesis that is confirmed by empirical observation. On Peirce’s view, “None of us can fully realize what the minds of corporations are, any more than one of my brain cells can know what the whole brain is thinking.” Still, he holds that this view has “a consequence which it may be possible to submit to experimental test”:

[T]here are many ordinary observations which, if they were critically examined and supplemented by special experiments, might, as first appearances promise, give evidence of the influence of such greater persons upon individuals. It is often remarked that on one day half a dozen people, strangers to one another, will take it into their heads to do one and the same strange deed, whether it be a physical experiment, a crime, or an act of virtue. When the thirty thousand young people of the society for Christian Endeavor were in New York, there seemed to me to be some mysterious diffusion of sweetness and light. [6.271, EP 1:350]

But this argument fails. To explain the observations Peirce describes, it is not necessary to postulate the reality of a higher-order consciousness, one that somehow transcends that of the individual group members. Rather, they can be explained much more economically simply by saying that the thought-signs belonging to (and, on Peirce’s view as well as mine, constitutive of) the individual persons that make up such a group have a tendency to spread from one individual to another through ordinary forms of communication, including but not limited to linguistic communication, and thus to become dispersed throughout the group. Peirce himself describes Ockham’s razor as “the very roadbed of science” (4.1, 1898), and in the absence of a better argument, the

consciousness of a group of individual persons is something “which Ockham’s razor would clean shave off” (5.416, EP 2:336, 1905).⁴⁹

Peirce’s argument that there is “corporate personality” (6.271, EP 1:351) occurs at the end of “Man’s Glassy Essence,” the fourth article in the cosmological series of 1891–93.⁵⁰ One of the unifying ideas of the cosmological series is his objective idealism, the doctrine that “matter is effete mind” (6.25, EP 1:293, 1891); it is “a Schelling-fashioned idealism which holds matter to be mere specialized and partially deadened mind” (6.102, EP 1:212, 1892).⁵¹ Here Peirce probably has in mind Schelling’s “*Aufhebung alles Dualismus*,” his cancellation or reversal of all dualism, and his description of matter as “*erloschene Geist*,” which Peirce, in his *Century Dictionary* (1889) definition of objective idealism, translates as “extinct mind.”⁵² Despite my rejection of Peirce’s claim that there is corporate consciousness, there is a nice congruence between his Schelling-inspired doctrine and my account of persons as animals engaged in semiosis.⁵³ The congruence I have in mind lies not in the recalcitrant details of Peirce’s theory but instead in its general outlines. But to see those outlines accurately, we need first to work through some of the details. In particular, we need to dispense with one possible, and seriously misleading, interpretation of Peirce’s objective idealism.

Prima facie, the claim that “matter is effete mind” certainly seems to mean that everything material is also, in some way or other, conscious. But a careful reading shows that this is not what Peirce’s objective idealism amounts to. Having advocated monism (or as he calls it, hylopathy), the view that mind and matter are not “two radically different kinds of substance” (6.24, EP 1:292), he considers which of three theories—idealism, materialism, or neutralism—is true. But Peirce does not conceive of these as theories about the ultimate kind of substance or stuff. Instead, he thinks of them as theories about the relation between two types of law. In considering these theories, the question he wishes to answer is not what type of substance there is in the world, but rather what the relationship is between different types of lawfulness. His view seems to be that there is only one sort of stuff and the interesting question about it is not what it is, but how it behaves, i.e., what sort of laws govern its behavior.⁵⁴

The first type of law is a physical law. Such laws are “absolute,” in that they require “exact relation[s]”; events “must actually take place exactly as required by” a physical law (6.23, EP 1:292). The second type of law is a mental or psychical law. These laws require “no exact conformity”; a given mental law merely makes a given feeling “*more likely* to arise” and therefore does not necessitate its arising (Ibid.). According to neutralism, physical and psychical laws evolved independently of each other. Materialism maintains that physical laws evolved first and psychical laws evolved from them. And finally, idealism holds that psychical laws evolved first and physical laws evolved from them. This

third doctrine, which Peirce adopts over against neutralism and materialism, is simply the claim that absolute laws evolved from non-absolute laws. As Peirce himself wrote, “The one intelligible theory of the universe is that of objective idealism, that matter is effete mind, *inveterate habits becoming physical laws*” (6.25, EP 1:293, emphasis added). In this context, “mind” is Peirce’s technical term for substance that obeys laws that do not require “exact conformity,” and so the claim that something is mind does not imply that it is conscious but only that it does not conform to exceptionless, absolute law. From this point of view, a given human consciousness is an instance of mind (in Peirce’s technical sense of “mind”), in that it does not operate deterministically, but not every instance of mind is conscious.

Correctly understood, Peirce’s objective idealism does not require that all material objects exhibit consciousness. Were it to have this implication, it would render the consciousness requirement for personhood trivial.⁵⁵ Instead, it requires only that substance that obeys absolute laws be the evolutionary outcome of substance that obeys laws that are not absolute. It is unfortunate that Peirce chose to explain objective idealism in terms that are potentially so misleading. To this point, T. L. Short has recently written:

Peirce’s strategy . . . is to find something very abstract . . . common to mind on the one hand and to nature on the other. Then we can see how, despite their very great difference, (a) mind may have emerged from unthinking nature and (b) the physical world may be known. . . .

Now, Peirce typically expressed these abstract commonalities in mentalistic terms. . . . That is a rhetorical strategy that served to startle his audience, challenging their Cartesian preconception of matter and mind as utterly different. However, as well as being beneficially leading, it was disastrously misleading. It has misled many into thinking that Peirce was attributing more of human mentality to nature than he really was, horrifying sober-minded philosophers and over-exciting some of his disciples.⁵⁶

We need not be horrified at Peirce’s objective idealism—or, at least, we need not be horrified by any implications it might have about consciousness being ubiquitous in the material world.

This brief exposition has revealed the general outlines to which I referred above and thus set the stage for my final point. Peirce’s objective idealism implies that there is continuity between matter, which obeys absolute, exceptionless laws, and consciousness, which obeys non-absolute laws and is thus an instance of mind. There is no sharp division between matter and mind. Rather, there is a gradual shading of one into the other as the increasing complexity of the organization of the matter of a developing human nervous system gradually gives rise to

human consciousness,⁵⁷ which is itself not all-or-nothing but instead comes in degrees.

Within this framework, the animal-body and semiotic-mind of an individual person are seen to be not wholly disjoint from, but rather continuous with, each other. The animal-aspect of a given person and the semiotic-aspect of that same person are continuous and inseparable. This upholds Peirce's own emphasis on continuity, and it also leaves open the possibility that not just consciousness but also personhood comes in degrees. My view is that the physical organism with which a given person is numerically identical comes into existence continuously rather than all at once,⁵⁸ and I see no reason for thinking that the same cannot be true about persons as such. For example, the sign-relationship that is a necessary condition of the reality of a person need not be all or nothing. It can be a matter of degree whether a given triadic relationship is in fact an instance of the sign relation, and more specifically, whether the psychology of a young human at a given time is such as to instantiate that relationship.⁵⁹ An adequate theory of personhood will, I believe, make room for this sort of gradual and continuous coming into existence of persons and thus incorporate Peirce's own synechistic emphasis on continuity, including the continuity of and among persons themselves.⁶⁰

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NOTES

1. References in decimal notation are to C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss, and A. Burks, eds., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1931–60), by volume and paragraph number. Other references to Peirce's works are as follows. "EP" refers to N. Houser, C. Kloesel, and the Peirce Edition Project, eds., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992–98); references by volume and page number. "W" refers to M. Fisch, C. Kloesel, E. Moore et al., eds., *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982—); references by volume and page number. "R" refers to the Harvard manuscripts cataloged in R. Robin, *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1967) and "The Peirce Papers: A Supplementary Catalogue," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 7 (1971): 37–57; these manuscripts are available in a microfilm edition, *The Charles S. Peirce Papers*, produced by Harvard University Library; references are by Robin's manuscript number and, when available, page number. "N" refers to K. Ketner and J. Cook, eds., *Charles Sanders Peirce: Contributions to The Nation*, 4 vols. (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 1975–87); reference by volume and page number. "RLT" refers to K. Ketner, ed., *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: The Cambridge Conferences Lectures of 1898* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

2. Peirce's work within semiotics, or as he sometimes wrote, "semeiotic" (e.g., 1.444, c.1896; 4.9, 1898; 8.343 and 377, 1908), was pioneering and wide-ranging, and the relevant secondary literature is vast. Representative writings by Peirce occur in the *Collected Papers*, the *Essential Peirce* and the *Writings*. For a single volume, see Charles S. Hardwick, ed. *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Lady Victoria Welby* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

3. On persons as negations, see also W 2:168–69, 1868; 5:233–35, EP 1:19–20, W 2:202–203, 1868; and R 1108, n.d. but no earlier than 1909. I do not address either characterization of personhood in the present essay.

4. Perhaps the scholar who has done the most to help clarify the development of Peirce's multifaceted account of personhood is Vincent Colapietro. In *Peirce's Approach to the Self: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Subjectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), Colapietro traces in detail the evolution and expansion of Peirce's account of the self, and he does an outstanding job of showing how various aspects of Peirce's view can be reconciled. Also noteworthy, especially with regard to Peirce's negative conception of the self, is Cornelis de Waal, "Science Beyond Self: Remarks on Charles S. Peirce's Social Epistemology," *Cognition* 7.1 (2006): 149–63. De Waal illuminates the connections between Peirce's negative account of self as given in the cognition papers of 1868–69 and his social account of inquiry, truth and reality as given in the "Illustrations of the Logic of Science" series of 1877–78.

5. For example: "I define a *Sign* as anything which on the one hand is so determined by an Object and on the other hand so determines an idea in a person's mind, that this latter determination, which I term the *Interpretant* of the sign, is thereby mediately determined by that Object. A sign, therefore, has a triadic relation to its Object and to its Interpretant" (8.343, 1908). If Peirce intends to *define* persons simply as beings who consist of signs, then that definition, paired with his definition of signs as things that represent something to *someone* (i.e., to a person), would be objectionably circular. However, I do not take Peirce to intend his claim that "man is a sign" to serve as a definition of persons. He says many things about persons, and while collectively they amount to a rich philosophical picture of personhood, none of them on its own is plausible as a definition, and to my knowledge he only once suggests that a description of persons he has given is intended as a definition, viz. when he puts forward the naturalistic account of persons as animals (R 659; see note 21). What's more, Peirce sometimes states his definition of signs more broadly, such that a sign is anything that "stands for something to *the idea* which it produces, or modifies" (1.339, n.d., emphasis added). On the assumption that Peirce can define ideas without reference to persons, this is a second reason for thinking that what Peirce says about "man" and signs is not circular.

6. See also W 2:173, 1868, and 5.253, EP 1:24, W 2:207, 1868.

7. T. L. Short documents these two changes in Peirce's semiotics in *Peirce's Theory of Signs* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) secs. 2.5 and 2.7.

8. "Semiosis" is Peirce's term for the triadic action of a sign. See 5.484, EP 2:411, 1907.

9. Later, synechism turns up as less a metaphysical doctrine and more a guideline for philosophical inquiry. Peirce describes it as the "tendency of philosophical thought which insists upon the idea of continuity as of prime importance in phi-

losophy and, in particular, upon the necessity of hypotheses involving true continuity.” (6.169, 1902)

10. It is tempting to interpret Peirce’s pronouncement that “man is a sign” to mean that each person is a sign (of something or other) to other people or to himself, rather than to mean that each person *consists* of signs. However, while the former claim may have more *prima facie* plausibility as a philosophical claim about man, it is not a plausible interpretation of Peirce’s words. The claim occurs in “Some Consequences,” in Peirce’s examination of the consequences of the anti-Cartesian doctrine that thought is impossible without signs. In context, Peirce’s meaning is plain: the mental life of man is composed of signs. It echoes what Peirce had said two years before, in the Lowell Lectures of 1866: “[E]very state of consciousness is an inference; so that life is but a sequence of inferences or a train of thought. At any instant then man is a thought, and as thought is a species of symbol, the general answer to the question What is man? is that he is a symbol” (7.583, W 1:494).

11. For example, see 7.339, W 3:29, 1873.

12. Peirce is explicit about the distinction between mental signs and external signs at 4.583, 1906. For a very different interpretation of Peirce’s claim that “man is an external sign,” see Patricia Muoio, “Peirce on the Person,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 20.2 (1984): 169–81, pp.178–79.

13. The context makes it clear that Peirce is very much a realist about external thoughts. He is considering conceptualism, according to which universals are real but “are only real thoughts.” On his view, conceptualism is “essentially the same thing” as nominalism, since it denies that there are real generals independent of what any individual person happens to think. He concludes that “[t]he conceptualist doctrine is an undisputed truism about *thinking*, while the question between nominalists and realists relates to *thoughts*, that is, to the objects which thinking enables us to know” (1.27, 1909).

14. My interpretation of the passage from “Some Consequences” might be challenged by pointing to the following, which Peirce wrote in a 1902 letter to William James: “[O]ne must not take a nominalistic view of Thought as if it were something that a man had in his consciousness. Consciousness may mean any one of the three categories [viz. Feeling, Reaction, Thought]. But if it is to mean Thought it is more without us than within. It is we that are in it, rather than it in any of us” (8.256). But despite the similar language, Peirce’s point in his letter to James is very different than the point he makes in “Some Consequences.” By 1902 he is explicitly distinguishing between *thinking*, something in which an individual person can engage, and *Thought*, which falls under the heading of Thirdness and has being apart from any specific instance of thinking. Again, “[t]he conceptualist doctrine is an undisputed truism about *thinking*, while the question between nominalists and realists relates to *thoughts*, that is, to the objects which thinking enables us to know” (1.27, 1909). The point Peirce is making in his letter to James is that Thought, as Thirdness, has being apart from any individual’s thinking, while, again, in “Some Consequences,” his point is that thinking does not occur instantaneously but is instead something that an individual does over time. Neither claim implies that an individual is not constituted by or composed of thinking or thought-signs.

For other passages in which Peirce is working with an explicit distinction between (internal) thinking and (external) thought, see 4.6, 1898; 2.53, 1902;

and 4.551, 1906. For a reading of 8.256 that is in line with the one I give here, see N. Houser, "Peirce's General Taxonomy of Consciousness," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 19.4 (1983): 331–59, p.345.

15. I take the term "overlap" from de Waal, who describes the Peircean community as "a multitude of dynamic minds overlapping at countless places and deriving much of their identity" from that overlapping (Op. cit., p.155).

16. I thank Jaime Nubiola for drawing this passage to my attention. While I have used it to illustrate continuity among individual persons, Peirce intended this metaphor, much of which I do not quote, to help illustrate the idea that a sign can be "a determination that really acts upon that of which it is a determination" (EP 2:392, 1906) Also, his notion of a quasi-mind is not at all that of a person, or man, or mind (in the sense in which a mind is necessarily capable of consciousness); rather, by "quasi-mind" Peirce means anything that is "capable of varied determination as to [the] forms" that are communicated from an object through a sign to its interpretants. (EP 2:544 n.22, c.1905)

17. James, *Principles of Psychology* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1981 [1890]), p.221; quoted in part by Peirce at 8.81, 1891. Colapietro notes that "for [James], the most fundamental feature of personal consciousness is the irreducible fact of privacy whereas, for [Peirce], its most basic characteristic is the ubiquitous possibility of communication" (Op. cit., p.78).

18. This overlap is so great, in Peirce's view, that he comes close to saying that a person can be in two places at once: "A word may be in several places at once, *six six*, because its essence is spiritual; and I believe that a man is no whit inferior to the word in this respect" (7.591, W 1:498, 1866). Happily, later in this same work he pulls back from embracing this consequence: "When I, that is my thoughts, enter into another man, I do not necessarily carry my whole self, but what I do carry is the seed of the part that I do not carry—and if I carry the seed of my whole essence, then of my whole self actual and potential" (7.592, W:499, 1866).

19. The passage continues: "Really, the selfhood you like to attribute to yourself is, for the most part, the vulgarest delusion of vanity." In the very next paragraph Peirce refers to "the barbaric conception of personal identity" which, he says, "must be broadened" (7.572, EP 2:3, 1893). On my reading, Peirce means to imply, not that *any* conception of personal identity is barbaric, but that the commonly accepted conception of personal identity is barbaric because of its narrowness. Colapietro agrees: "What is wicked and barbaric is not the concept of the self without qualification, but the conception of the self that portrays the self to be an absolute rather than a relational being" (Op. cit., p.78).

20. "An Argument for Animalism," in *Personal Identity*, eds. Raymond Martin and John Barresi (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003) 318–34, p. 318.

21. This is connected to his view, mentioned above, that humans have a greater degree of self-control than other animals; it is our greater self-control that enables us to use signs in a more sophisticated way (5.534, c.1905). The relevant passage in R 659 is as follows: "By a 'person,' by the way, I suppose we mean an animal that has command of some syntactical language, since we neither call any of the lower animals persons, (for, though they be able to convey their meanings by various sounds, they do not combine different sounds so as to build sentences,) nor do we call an infant that cannot yet put two words together to make a sentence. One might almost define a person as an animal possessed of moral self-control; but that would not be correct unless we were prepared to call some dogs,

horses, parrots, hens, and other creatures persons, which I take it nobody does, in spite of the moral respect to which they are often well-entitled. One feels that there is an injustice in our non-expression of respect for them. Yet, after all, the word *person*, p|e|r|s|o|n|a, has explicit reference to speech” (R 659:10–11, 1910). Note that the page break occurs between “but that would” and “not be correct,” and that Peirce has drawn a large “X” over the whole of p.11; it is unclear why he wished to delete this page from the manuscript.

22. In this regard, the following manuscript passage is worth noting: “a *mind* may, with advantage, be roughly defined as a *sign-creator in connection with a reaction-machine . . .*” (R 318:18, 1907; quoted by Colapietro, op. cit., p.95). Peirce is here making a claim about *minds* and not necessarily about *persons*, but perhaps *person* is one of the psychological or metaphysical senses of “mind” to which he refers at 4.550, 1906.

23. Quoted by Colapietro, op. cit., p.85.

24. The possibility of reconciling the semiotic and naturalistic accounts of personhood is suggested by Susan Haack’s sign-mediation theory of intentional states. On Haack’s view, belief states are multiform dispositions to behave in specific ways, both verbal and non-verbal, and belief contents are those propositions expressed by the sentences to which, as part of one’s belief state, she has a disposition to assent. This Peircean theory implies that “thinking is in signs” [*Evidence and Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993) p.178], since belief contents are signs that represent the world, e.g., my belief that the ice will bear my weight is about some frozen body of water. But it also requires that “the pattern of dispositions involved in believing . . . [be] grounded in an enormously complex neurophysiological configuration” [*Defending Science—Within Reason* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2003) p.159] and thus requires as a condition of its realization the nervous system of an animal.

25. I am not proposing this as a definition of personhood. Rather, I mean it as a descriptive claim about *us*: the persons *we are* are animals that engage in semiosis. Here my approach is similar to that of Olson, who believes not that being an animal is a necessary condition of personhood but rather that the persons that we human beings are happen to be animals. He notes that others have used “animalism” to mean the view that any person must be an animal, i.e., that being an animal is part of what it means to be a person. But his own animalism does not entail this and thus leaves open the possibility that there be non-animals that are persons, e.g., angels (Op. cit., pp. 319–20).

In an earlier draft of this essay, I used the phrase “semiotic animal” to refer to animals that engage in semiosis. At the time I took the phrase to be an original coinage. Since then I have learned that John Deely, Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio had already used the phrase (on the history of their respective uses of the phrase, see the preface to Deely, Petrilli and Ponzio, *The Semiotic Animal* (Ottawa: Legas Publishing, 2005) p. 11 n. 2). What’s more, they seem to use the phrase in a much narrower sense than I do, e.g., “As a semiotic animal, the human being is capable of reflecting upon signs, therefore to suspend action, deliberate and make decisions, they are also in a position to answer for themselves” (Petrilli, “From the Semiotic Animal to the Semioethical Animal. The Humanism of Otherness and Responsibility,” in Deely et al., op. cit., 67–86, p. 67); “A semiotic animal is an animal that lives with the awareness that the action of signs is more fundamental to the constitution of human experience than are either objects or things” (Deely,

“Why the Semiotic Animal Needs to Develop a Semioethics,” in Deely et al., op. cit., 207–21, p.207). This use is narrower than that to which I had put the phrase, since, when conjoined with the claim that all human persons are semiotic animals, it implies that human persons came to exist only at the point at which humans began to reflect on signs and their role in human experience. So, to distinguish my work from that of Deely et al., I now avoid the phrase “semiotic animal.”

26. The following account of Peirce’s theory of perception borrows from my “*Perception: Haack’s Critical Common-sensism about Perception*,” in Cornelis de Waal, ed., *Susan Haack: A Lady of Distinctions—The Philosopher Responds to Her Critics* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 109–22.

27. This is compatible with the view that my gustatory experience of sweetness is a thought-sign that is interpreted in further thought-signs, e.g., when I take the sweet taste of the tea to mean that it is high in calories. The realist work that this view of the percept does in Peirce’s theory of perception is to avoid the notion that we are never immediately aware of qualities outside the mind, but in doing this Peirce need not give up the conception of tastes, sights, sounds, and the like as thought-signs that get interpreted in subsequent thought-signs.

28. Peirce anticipates his later account of the percept in an early statement of his semiotic account of personhood: “everything which is present to us is a phenomenal manifestation of ourselves. This does not prevent its being a phenomenon of something without us, just as a rainbow is at once a manifestation both of the sun and of the rain. When we think, then, we ourselves, as we are at that moment, appear as a sign” (5.283, EP 1:38, W 2:223, 1868).

29. Peirce himself maintains that human *consciousness* exemplifies all three categories: Feeling, Reaction and Thought (see note 14 and Houser, op. cit.). The point I am making here is that a person conceived as an animal engaged in semiosis exemplifies all three categories.

30. In emphasizing the need for a person to be physically embodied in order to exist at all, I agree with Stanley Harrison (“Charles S. Peirce: Reflections on Being a Man-Sign,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 53 (1979): 98–106, pp.103–104). However, Harrison does not notice Peirce’s own naturalistic account or connect the embodied aspect of personhood with the notion of Secondness.

31. Muoio combines different aspects of Peirce’s views of personhood in an “attempt to construct a coherent notion of the personality from Peirce’s scattered comments on the subject,” a notion that demonstrates how a person might exemplify Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness (Op. cit., p.169). But her account is very different than my own, especially in its incorporation, as the part of personhood that exemplifies Firstness, of “the feeling of what it is to be [a specific] personality” (Ibid., p.174) rather than of the phenomenal aspect of conscious experience, and in its use, as the part of personhood that exemplifies Secondness, of mere reaction against other things rather than of the physical embodiment of a person in an animal body (which, as a physical entity, is capable of such reaction).

32. There are further respects in which persons embody continuity. In her capacity as an existent, physical entity (an animal), a person is continuous through time. Her existence as an organism does not occur in discrete temporal units; she does not “pop” into and out of existence—there are no instants, and no infinitesimal gaps between instants, during which she does not exist as a physical being. Here I use “pop” in the same way as Warren Quinn, “Abortion: Identity and Loss,”

Philosophy and Public Affairs 13 (1984): 24–54; reprinted in Quinn, *Morality and Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

33. This claim does not imply that semiosis itself never occurs apart from animals, although that very well may be the case. My claim here is only that the semiosis required to qualify a given human being as a person does not occur apart from some animal or other.

34. “[T]he mind is utterly indivisible. For when I consider the mind, or myself in so far as I am merely a thinking thing, I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something quite single and complete. . . . As for the faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on, these cannot be termed parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions.” *Meditations on First Philosophy* VI:86, in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.120.

35. Colapietro also emphasizes Peirce’s difference with Descartes regarding the divisibility of the self, but takes the central difference to be that, in Peirce, thinking takes the form of a dialogue between two selves (Op. cit., p.93).

36. In 1893’s “Man’s Glassy Essence,” Peirce wrote: “The consciousness of a general idea has a certain ‘unity of the ego,’ in it, which is identical when it passes from one mind to another. It is, therefore, quite analogous to a person; and, indeed, a person is only a particular kind of general idea. Long ago . . . I pointed out that a person is nothing but a symbol involving a general idea; but my views were, then, too nominalistic to enable me to see that every general idea has the unified living feeling of a person” (6.270, EP 1:350, 1868). (This passage should not be taken to indicate that in 1868 Peirce was a nominalist, in the sense of denying the reality of universals, or as he frequently says, generals. See my “On Peirce’s Early Realism,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 40.4 (2004): 575–605.) Here Peirce is referring back to 1868’s “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities,” and he is indicating that when he wrote that article he had not yet come to think of general ideas as having “the unified feeling of a person.” What Peirce means by this is not obvious. However, I believe his point is that, in the earlier article, he had come too close to an empiricist-style atomism about thinking according to which a person is composed of discrete ideas. His later view seems to be that a person is a continuous flow of non-discrete thoughts. As he writes in “The Law of Mind,” “personality is some kind of coördination or connection of ideas. Not much to say, this, perhaps. Yet when we consider that . . . a connection between ideas is itself a general idea, and that a general idea is a living feeling, it is plain that we have at least taken an appreciable step toward the understanding of personality” (6.155, EP 1:331, 1892; see also R 954, c.1892–93).

37. Op. cit., p.152.

38. The distinction between sign type and sign token is due to Peirce (4.537, 1906).

39. About this idea of Peirce’s, Colapietro writes: “One of the reasons why the denial of personality is antinomialistic is that it entails the rejection of the self as an unknowable reality; and, according to Peirce, the unknowable is a nominalist heresy” (Op. cit., p.63). My synthesis of Peirce’s semiotic and naturalistic accounts safely avoids that heresy: neither man-as-animal nor man-as-sign is unknowable.

40. Although he is not entirely clear on this point, Harrison seems to maintain that one is a person only if one is actually living among and interacting with other

persons: “My being-in-community with others . . . is . . . an ontological requirement for personal existence. . . . [B]eing one who can affirm or express truths requires certain actual, dynamic relations with other persons. . . .” (Op. cit., p. 101). Short avoids the mistake of saying that an entity must be part of a community at a given time in order to be a person at that time: “There is no self-consciousness and, hence, no personality or ego apart from *past* actual relation and *future* potential relation” [“Hypostatic Abstraction in Self-Consciousness,” in J. Brunning and P. Forster, eds., *The Rule of Reason: The Philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) 289–308, p. 306, emphases added]. Short also provides an excellent account of how, on Peirce’s view, a being can become self-conscious only as part of a community. Note, though, that Short’s reconstruction of Peirce’s view is very different than the Peirce-inspired view developed here, especially its claim that the self, although quite real, is created by an act of hypostatic abstraction.

41. In this same vein, see Peirce’s descriptions of individual persons as “cells” in a “social organism” (1.647, EP 2:40, RLT 121, 1898; and 1.673, 1898). Peirce also writes that a thought “may affect a whole people or community in its collective personality, and be thence communicated to such individuals as are in powerfully sympathetic connection with the collective people” (6.307, EP 1:364, 1893).

42. “The Corporation as a Moral Person,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16.3 (1979): 207–215.

43. In what follows I will sometimes write “consciousness” rather than “capacity for consciousness,” but throughout I mean to refer to the capacity for conscious experience rather than to actual consciousness and thus to include within the category of conscious beings humans who are psychologically normal but who happen to be sleeping or otherwise temporarily unconscious. This broad use of “consciousness” is consistent with Peirce’s view that consciousness has three aspects: Feeling, Reaction and Thought (see notes 14 and 29).

44. See for example Ben A. Rich, “Postmodern Personhood: A Matter of Consciousness,” *Bioethics* 11: 3 and 4, 1997, 206–216, pp. 213–14; and David DeGrazia, *Human Identity and Bioethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 6.

45. Peter Singer, “All Animals are Equal,” *Annual Proceedings of the Center for Philosophical Exchange* 1.5 (1974): 103–11; reprinted in James Rachels and Stuart Rachels, eds., *The Right Thing to Do*, 4th ed. (New York, McGraw-Hill, 2007), 166–76. The quotation is at p. 172 of the reprint.

46. This brief argument may not be enough to convince those who do not already hold the consciousness requirement themselves. But readers who reject that requirement can still agree with everything that I have said in the first two sections of the paper, and they can also agree with much of what follows in this concluding section.

47. Quoted in de Waal, op. cit., p.157.

48. In “Some Consequences,” Peirce seems to acknowledge that consciousness, and thus the animal body which is a necessary condition of consciousness, is important to personhood, but he nonetheless downplays its importance: “this consciousness, being a mere sensation, is only a part of the *material quality* of the man-sign” (5.313, W 2:240, EP 1:54, 1868).

49. De Waal defends Peirce’s attribution of personhood to groups, but it seems to me that this defense fails. He comments that “from a Peircean stance . . .

attributing personhood to individuals is an ill-conceived attempt to apply the concept of personhood to something it strictly doesn't apply to. What personhood applies to is the individual interacting with his future self. Hence, it's a social concept. . . . Because of the dialogic nature of thought we are social even when we are alone. Mapping personhood to self-enclosed atomic individuals, as the Cartesian tradition tried to do, is misconceived" (Op. cit., pp. 157–58). But the dialogical nature of the self requires only that the concept of a person be a *relational* concept, not that it be a *social* concept. "Social" connotes multiple people, whereas Peirce's dialogical account of thought requires only that there be a single person-as-sign whose distinct (but non-discrete) parts are related to each other in a specific way. As Peirce himself describes it, "thinking always proceeds in the form of a dialogue—a dialogue between different phases of the *ego*" (4.6, 1906), not necessarily a dialogue between different egos.

50. 6.7–65, 102–163, 238–71, 287–317; EP 1:285–371.

51. In 1893, Peirce notes that his objective idealism makes him "a Schellingian, of some stripe" (6.605). In January of the next year, Peirce writes to William James that "my view were probably influenced by Schelling,—by all stages of Schelling, but especially by the *Philosophie der Natur*. . . . If you were to call my philosophy Schellingism transformed in the light of modern physics, I should not take it hard." (E. Berkeley and I. Skrupskelis, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, 12 vols. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992–2004) 7:487.) However, in this letter he cites, not a specific doctrine of Schelling's, but rather the fact that Schelling exhibited what Peirce elsewhere calls the scientific attitude: "I consider Schelling as enormous; and one thing I admire about him is his freedom from the trammels of system, and his holding himself uncommitted to any previous utterance. In that, he is like a scientific man." (Ibid.) One year later, in a *Nation* review, he again praises Schelling, and for the same reason: "Schelling . . . was a babe in exact science. Nevertheless . . . [he] seems to really desire to find out the truth, ready at a moment's notice to dump all pet dogmas for her sake. The two revolutions his opinions underwent, though they are in many critics' eyes his shame, are his honorable scars in those of the physical experimenter" (N 2:107).

52. My thanks to Cornelis de Waal, associate editor at the Peirce Edition Project, for pointing me to the *Century Dictionary*, and to Ivo Ibrri, whose forthcoming "Reflections on a Poetic Ground in Peirce's Philosophy" helped me find the passage in which Schelling uses the phrase "*erloschene Geist*": "*Es braucht nicht weitläufig gezeigt zu werden, wie durch diese Aufhebung alles Dualismus, oder alles realen Gegensatzes zwischen Geist und Materie, indem diese selbst nur der erloschene Geist, oder umgekehrt jener die Materie, nur im Werden erblickt, ist, einer Menge verwirrender Untersuchungen über da Verhältniß beyder ein Zeil gesetzt wird*" [*System des Transcendentalen Idealismus* [1800], in H. Korten and P. Ziche, eds., *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe* v.9 pt.2 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2005) p. 149]. Peter Heath translates "*erloschene Geist*" as "mind in a condition of dullness": "There is no need to demonstrate at length how, by means of this elimination of all dualism, or all real opposition between mind and matter, whereby the latter is regarded merely as mind in a condition of dullness, or the former, conversely, as matter merely in becoming, a term is set to a host of bewildering enquiries concerning the relationship of the two" [*System of Transcendental Idealism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978) p. 92]. Just before the quoted passage, Schelling cites as antici-

pations of his view Leibniz's claim that matter is "*den Schlafzustand der Monaden*" (Heath: "the sleeping state of monads") and François Hemsterhuis's view that matter is "*geronnenen Geist*" (Heath: "congealed mind").

53. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for bringing this point to my attention.

54. I owe this important point to Sandra Rosenthal, *Charles Peirce's Pragmatic Pluralism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 109.

55. That is, it would trivialize that requirement so far as it applies to *embodied* persons. It would have no such consequence for a view that wishes to allow for the possibility of disembodied persons—God or angels, for instance.

56. T. L. Short, "Response" (part of a symposium on his *Peirce's Theory of Signs*), *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43.4 (2007), 663–93, p. 668.

57. Admittedly this reverses the order that Peirce describes, since, as he has it, it is "mind" that gives rise to "matter" rather than vice versa. But it is consistent with Peirce's objective idealism to maintain that *conscious* mind (i.e., stuff that not only behaves non-deterministically but is also conscious) can arise only from a sufficiently complex arrangement of matter (i.e., stuff that behaves deterministically).

58. See my "Why I Was Never a Zygote," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 41.1 (2003): 63–83 and "Synechistic Bioethics: A Peircean View of the Moral Status of Pre-Birth Humans," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 3.2 (2006) pp. 151–70.

59. I take this idea to lie behind Peirce's insistence, in the 1868–69 cognition series, that there is no first cognition of a given object, but that each cognition of an object is determined by an earlier cognition of that same object. Peirce himself takes the synechistic view that consciousness is a matter of degree (6.174, 1902).

60. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the International Conference on Persons, Asheville, NC, August 3, 2007, and at the meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, East Lansing, MI, March 14, 2008. I am grateful to audience members and to my respective commentators, Troy Catterson and Stanley Harrison, for their insightful criticisms.