

## Roundtable:

### The future of culture in more-than-human worlds of being

## Peirce's more-than-human philosophy, its precursors, and its heirs

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The paper discusses the more-than-human aspects of Charles S. Peirce's semiotic philosophy, contextualizes it within the history of ideas (Aristotle, the Medievals, Montaigne, Descartes) and examines its syntony with and differences from 21<sup>st</sup> century trends of cultural and philosophical studies (posthumanism, nonhuman studies, Object-Oriented-Ontology, and the more-than-human paradigm).

## Introduction

The expression "more-than-human culture" is a contradiction in terms to anyone used to conceive of culture as something human that arises from nature but is essentially different from it. This is the paradigm of the dualists to whom a distinctive feature of culture is its contrast to nature. Human language, symbols, rationality, myth, literature, painting, music, architecture, and customs are the manifestations of cultural life, while mere biological life and, all the more so, inanimate matter



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constitute the sphere of biological and physical nature, whose characteristics are the absence of mind, reason, and the ingenuity of creativity.

The authors of this article have defended the theory of continuity between culture and nature (Nöth 2002a; 2019) and, inspired by the doctrine of continuity (synechism) of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), even between mind and matter (Santaella 1994). Their frame of reference has been semiotics, a research paradigm of the humanities whose main representatives of the 1960s and 1970s in France and Italy first conceived this discipline as an approach to the study of human culture only. In the course of the expansion of semiotics from cultural semiotics to zoosemiotics, biosemiotics, ecosemiotics (Nöth 2000; Maran 2020), the semiotics of nature (Nöth & Kull 2001), and the semiotics of machines (Nöth 2002b), the rediscovery of Peirce's general semiotics has been of great influence. Peirce's study of signs is concerned with human and more-than human culture insofar as it is concerned with sign processes in culture and biological as well as "perhaps" even physical nature. However, the focus of this paper is not only on Peirce and his semiotics but also on diverse other tendencies in the humanities and cultural studies that have called for nondualist extensions of the humanities. There are two apparently opposite directions in which such extensions go, namely towards nonhuman animals and machines as cultural agents.

## The more-than human until the Age of Reason

Peirce was an anti-Cartesian philosopher in many respects (Santaella 2004). René Descartes (1596-1650) and his mind-body-dualism, his doctrine that only human minds are *res cogitantes*, 'thinking things', whereas the rest of the living and nonliving universe is populated by nonthinking things, has often been quoted as the epitome of all anthropocentric ideologies. Some authors have even argued that the dualist view of humans in contrast to the rest of nature dates back to the earliest Greek philosophers. Böhme, for example, argues that "Nature, natura, physis has [...] always been understood as something that was determined in opposition to man. [...] Since the Sophists, physis, natura, has been understood as the opposite of technology, of creation, of culture" (1992: 79). Nature and culture therefore also seem to coincide with the dichotomy of non-human vs. human.

However, such dualist accounts of the history of ideas overlook that the continuity between human and nonhuman nature has always had its advocates. Despite the Aristotelean doctrine that only humans are rational animals, nondualist aspects of human culture can be found even in antiquity. A case in point is Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*. Language is not only a product of human law (*théseis*); it also contains a good dose of nature and naturally given (*phýseis*), is the argument of this dialogue. Words are natural to the degree that they share characteristics of the objects they represent (see Nöth 2009).

Two other remarkable chapters of the history of philosophical approaches to the more-than-human before Descartes, which can only be touched on here, are from the Middle Ages and the century of Descartes's birth. Late medieval views concerning animal intelligence are the topic of a recent study by Anselm Oelze (2018) on *Animal Rationality*. The study shows that late medieval philosophers held quite differentiated views concerning the intelligence of nonhuman animals. Despite the Aristotelean dogma that humans are the sole rational beings on earth, some late medieval scholars did grant animals skills such as judging, reasoning, or even employing "prudence". According to Oelze's findings, the scholars' line of argument in favor of animal rationality, without daring to question Aristotle's dogmatic authority, was to the following: "The rationality ascribed to nonhuman animals is not just any kind of rationality. It differs from the full-fledged rationality that is usually ascribed to humans in at least three regards: (i) it is *rational*, not intellectual, (ii) *practical*, not theoretical, and (iii) *particular*, not universal" (Oelze 2028: 228).

From the century of Descartes's birth, Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) may be adduced as an advocate of a nondualist perspective on the difference between human and nonhuman animals (cf.

Collins 2018). His anti-Cartesian (*avant-la-lettre*) argument was not only that humans are no better than nonhuman animals but also that the other animals have the advantage of not suffering from the hubris and arrogance in relation to the rest of nature so characteristic of human beings. In *his Apology for Raimond Sebond* (1580), Montaigne argues against the common view of animals as inferior beings that we should not believe that animals, when they do the same things that we do, do so by instinct (“by natural and compulsory tendency”), whereas when we do the same, we do so by our own free will and diligence (“by our choice and industry”): “We ought, from like effects, to conclude like faculties, and from greater effects greater faculties, and consequently confess that the same reason, the same method by which we operate, are common with them, or that they have others that are better. Why should we imagine in them this natural constraint, who experience no such effects in ourselves” (Montaigne 1910: 14; see also Wild 2006: 79).

## Peirce on the minds of human and nonhuman animals

The inclusion of nonhuman animals in his studies of cognition and the continuity between nonhuman and human minds are recurrent topics of the philosophical writings of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Animals are feeling and thinking creatures endowed with consciousness, is his conviction. Anticipating 21<sup>st</sup>-century philosophers of mind who argue in favor of attributing consciousness to bees and crabs (Tye 2017), Peirce found evidence that the three modes of consciousness, which he distinguished in humans (Nöth 2021), consciousness of feeling (firstness), (2) reaction (secondness), and (3) reasoning (thirdness) are present in all animals.

While the consciousness of reaction has always been recognized in nonhuman animals, not least by the behaviorists in their inquiries into stimulus-and-response patterns of animals, the denial of consciousness of feeling to nonhuman animals has been common with all anthropocentric followers of Descartes’s doctrine that human beings are the only creatures endowed with a “soul”. However, the attribution to feeling at least to pet animals, whose clearest evidence is probably the classification of animals as nonedible (Leach 1964), is nevertheless culturally widespread.

For Peirce there was no doubt that animals were not only reacting beings but also feeling and rational ones. Consciousness is not only defined as a feature of human but also as one of animal life when Peirce defines it as what “is dimmed when animal life is at its ebb, in age or sleep, but which is [...] more lively the better *animal* a man is, but is not so the better man he is. You can all distinguish this sensation, I am sure; we attribute it to all animals [...] because we have reason to believe that it depends upon the possession of an animal body” (CP 7.585, 1866). Almost half a century later, Peirce reaffirmed that “Beasts and birds, tortoises and toads, and even some fishes [...] must feel, it would seem, if they are living things in a sense resembling in the least degree to what anybody means when he says that he is alive, that is, if he has any inside life, – anything in which nobody else and nothing partakes with him. This seems to be precisely what we mean by *Feeling*: it is that which is within some single person and which nobody else has anything to do with (MS 658: 2-3, 1910).

The consciousness of reasoning, which has been most commonly denied to nonhuman animals since Aristotle had chosen rationality as a distinguishing feature of humans in his *Nicomachean Ethics* I.13, is also out of question for Peirce. Not only the human being is a *zoon logikon* (‘rational animal’), he objects: “The psychological instructors of my college days used to tell me that when a dog is observed to act as if he had reasoned, he was really acting, not from reason, but from ‘the association of ideas’. [...] All the operations of the soul take place according to one general formula which applies to reasoning and instinctive action alike. [...] Certainly, dogs do, occasionally, really reason” (MS 691, 1901).

For Peirce, not only animals but also plants, machines, and even the whole cosmic universe (Nöth 2018) are candidates for phenomena endowed with minds, since the whole universe is in evolution,

and evolution presupposes the capacity for creativity, which must hence be understood as a more-than-human capacity.

## The more-than-human philosophies after Peirce

Peirce's evolutionary postulate of the omnipresence of mind in the nonhuman biological and even physical universe had few direct followers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but in the more-than-human philosophies since the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the growing number of trends away from anthropocentrism, tendencies have come to the fore that propagate ideas which give continuity to Peirce's broad concept of mind (Santaella 1994), mostly without recognizing this ancestry.

Most influential among these trends towards the more-than-human paradigm has been the group of scholars who have proclaimed the advent of a posthuman era. Donna Haraway (1991), Katherine Hayles (1999), and Lucia Santaella (2003) are its protagonists. While the posthumanists had their focus on cybernetic machines on the one hand and animals on the other, mere objects have been the field of study of philosophers towards which philosophers have expanded their horizons under banners such as Speculative Realism (Haarman 2010), Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) (Haarman 2008), and Actor-Network Theory (Latour 1996). The Speculative Realists have provoked their readers by placing "the universe of things" (Shaviro 2011) at the center of their research interests, asking stunning questions such as "What is it like to be a thing?" (Bogost 2012), writing manifestos in favor of the "Democracy of Objects" (Bryant 2011), or attributing agency to a mere key (Latour 1990).

An attempt at constructing a bridge between the research spheres of animate posthumans and inanimate things has come to the fore with a group of scholars that have proclaimed a "nonhuman turn" away from anthropocentric cultural studies. In his introduction to a collection of position papers on the issue, Grusin (2015) proclaimed the aim of decentering human beings from their allegedly privileged place in the cosmic design. The twenty-first century's nonhuman turn, as Grusin sees it, "covers a wide variety of recent and current critical, theoretical, and philosophical approaches to the humanities and social sciences [...] engaged in decentering the human in favor of a turn toward and concern for the nonhuman, understood variously in terms of animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies" (2015: vii). The cover design of the book edited by Grusin presents the fragments of an electronic circuit board and incomplete drawings of two insects. It thus reduces the plurality of trends under the nonhuman heading to two rather divergent ones, animal studies and the study of digital technologies. The visual argument is that animals and digital technologies are the two major challenges in the current trend of decentering humans towards the nonhuman.

The adjective "nonhuman" had the disadvantage that it could be read as excluding humans from the horizon of "nonhuman studies", which the designation "multidisciplinary study of the more-than-human culture", to which this journal is committed, and which seems to have its origin in 1997 (Abram 1997), succeeds to avoid. However, the term "nonhuman" is more ambitious insofar as it is not programmatically committed to the domain of culture.

Charles S. Peirce is not generally invoked as an ancestor of the ideas of the more-than-human paradigm, but those who are familiar with his thought cannot help recognizing echoes of his ideas in the current intellectual movement. Peirce does not need to be subsumed under labels like posthuman or nonhuman because his philosophy was never restricted to the study of human minds. Like the Speculative Realists he had a post-Kantian theory of reality and like them, he had a theory of objects (Nöth 2015). However, his objects are not necessarily "things", and his approach cannot be called "ontological". Peirce's things are the objects of signs, but not unlike Latour's things, they are agents, although not sociological but semiotic agents.

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