

GIOVANNI MADDALENA

Metafisica per assurdo: Peirce e i problemi dell'epistemologia contemporanea

Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2009. 251 pp. Name index, no subject index.

The interest in Peirce grows as his architectonics open new paths in contemporary culture. Peirce, the “19th century thinker for the 21st century” is very much alive indeed. Maddalena’s book forcefully shows how Peirce’s thought clarifies the imbroglios of our present understanding. *Metafisica per assurdo* (metaphysics by contradiction) encompasses some very original approaches to Peirce studies, as ingeniously encoded in the title. Metaphysics enters the panorama through a scientific oriented discussion (“methodological metaphysical realism”) that is based on two approaches: an investigation of the limits of analytic knowledge (with consequent openings to a *via negativa* understanding of the world and to a new synthetic paradigm), and a demonstration of how, with an eye toward Peirce’s classification of the sciences, a new metaphysical perspective, based on mathematics, phenomenology, logic and semiotics, can emerge. Maddalena’s refined method—thoroughly Peircean, consistently mediating between opposites, and always attuned to Peirce’s “reasonableness” and the *summum bonum* (openness, continuous growth, evolving richness)—fits as a glove with his valiant enterprise.

The book is composed of an introduction, eight chapters, a conclusion, a helpful bio-bibliographical note on Peirce (pp. 15–20), a bibliography (pp. 237–247), and finally a name index (pp. 249–251). There is also a long preface by André De Tienne (pp. ix–xxv) that carefully outlines Maddalena’s achievements. The *Introduction* (pp. 3–13) provides an overview of the volume, emphasizing three levels of reading (philological, methodological, and theoretical). Also shown is Peirce’s peculiar mediation between thought and reality—through a *dynamical/structural* web of signs, a *continuous* entanglement of pragmatic tools, a *phenomenological* apprehension of the Real, and a normative hierarchy in matters of creativity—that leads to a *via negativa* postulation of metaphysics, while considering alternative theses to Peirce’s mediation which appear to produce insolvable contradictions.

Chapter One (“A Methodological Reading of Peirce”, pp. 21–39) explains how Peirce’s ideas *force* a complex reading of his system, *necessarily* involving mathematics, phenomenology, normative science, and metaphysics. In fact, a multiplicity of perspectives cannot be reduced to purely logical considerations. *Complementing* the limits and limitations of analytic knowledge, a fair understanding of the density of the world (“spessore”) must be undertaken by exploring new paths in a *via*

negativa that combines mathematics, logic and metaphysics. In *Chapter Two* (“The Genesis of Research: Signs and Reference”, pp. 41–56) the focus is on Peirce’s late semiotics, which is Maddalena’s specialty. After a review of Peirce’s considerations concerning proper names and surnames, Maddalena argues that phenomenology is needed for semiotics, and *vice versa*, since both a historical level of significance (semiotic evolution) and a foundational reference (phenomenological situation) are needed to explain linguistic phenomena.

Chapter Three (Birth of Hypothesis: Abduction Between Doubt and Certainty”, pp. 57–78) introduces one of Maddalena’s strongest claims in support of his *Metafisica per assurdo*. Maddalena presents a brilliant study of Peirce’s discussion of musement in the “Neglected Argument” (1908), in which Maddalena emphasizes the central role of imagination and describes the limits of traditional knowledge with respect to the dyad singular/universal. After this he proposes to take seriously Peirce’s “rational instinct” as the perfect mediator between a singular object and the general order of signs that surrounds it. Peirce’s “rational instinct” is one that *recognizes* the interplay of singular/universal by an *ethical/esthetical* balance of the very signs involved. A fair understanding of abduction follows, where both rational and sensible (i.e. “reasonable” in the sense of Peirce and Vaz Ferreira) operations are needed in the natural selection of hypotheses. *Chapter Four* (“In the Heart of Reasoning: Evolution of Rational Instinct”, pp. 79–96) further buttresses Maddalena’s argument for the centrality of “rational instinct” within Peirce’s architectonics. As always happens with Peirce’s central concepts, the *continuity* of their development is unmistakable, something Maddalena shows carefully is true also for the idea of “rational instinct”. Maddalena shows that Pascal’s “*raisons du coeur*” come close to Peirce’s late notion of “reasonableness”, where some truly magnificent Peircean excerpts from 1913(!) are contrasted with fuzzy intuition.

Chapter Five (“The Value of Esthetics and Ethics for Logic: A Confrontation with Dewey and Wittgenstein”, pp. 97–119) insists on the *fundamental* role of the first two normative sciences for an acute understanding of logic. Between extremes (reality as arbitrary discourse, and reality traversed by normative values), Maddalena, who is always a good Peircean, looks for natural and nontrivial mediations. Going beyond Dewey and Wittgenstein, an analysis of Peirce’s “reasonableness” and the *summum bonum* proves that logic becomes part of an *extended reason*, without exhausting it. The author also confirms the role of esthetics and ethics in the understanding of icons and indexes, prior to logic and symbols. In *Chapter Six* (“Freedom in Knowledge: A Theory of Assent”, pp. 121–136) the author explores the triadic theory of assent (psychological, ethical, and semiotical) and subsequently proposes an original “semiotical grammar of assent”. A duality between freedom and teleology of interpreters is shown as a dubious weakness in Peirce’s

system. Yet the consequent *openness of the borders* of knowledge (from logic/semiotic to metaphysics) leads to a *passage* towards a “methodological metaphysical realism” addressed in the remainder of the book.

Chapter Seven (“The Limits of Analytic Reasoning: A Mathematical Gesture and the Discussions on Foundations”, pp. 137–192) is the longest and most difficult chapter in the volume. It compares Cantor and Peirce and their diverging conceptions of mathematics. Cantor’s analytic approach, used to establish the foundation of mathematics on logic, is contrasted with Peirce’s “synthetical” views, in which the primacy of “mathematical gestures” (along the classification of the sciences and diagrammatical reasoning) asserts an inverse situation in which logic is founded on mathematics. Maddalena proposes a duality of mathematical/synthetical and logical/analytical, which profits from Peirce’s distinction between *logica utens* (closer to the practice of *doing* mathematics) and *logica docens* (closer to reasoning about mathematics), and explores diverse mediations between the counterparts. A debatable, but wonderful claim asserts that mathematics deals mostly with icons and indexes, and logic with symbols. And an even bolder line of thought argues that Russell’s paradox arises from a misunderstanding of the synthetic character of mathematics. However, the *bold-est* claim in support of *Metafisica per assurdo* arises when Maddalena declares—after a careful study of Peirce’s conceptions of the infinite—that a thorough understanding of Peirce’s “true continuity” leads *necessarily* to the *limitations* of analytic knowledge. Indeed, mathematical creativity, imaged in the “mathematical gesture” and in Peirce’s supermultitudinous continuum, *exceeds* reflexivities, totalities, boundaries, and *must by contradiction* presuppose alterations, synthetic contaminations, and metaphysical assumptions. *Chapter Eight* (“Metaphysics of Continuity”, pp. 193–223) is a proposal to extend Potter’s study (1996) on the evolution of Peirce’s continuity of ideas. Independently of Jérôme Havenel’s Ph.D. thesis (2006, still to be considered as the most important work on the subject), Maddalena comes to similar conclusions by detecting six basic periods in Peirce’s development. Between Maddalena’s many important remarks two stand out: the recognition of the nature of metaphysics—understood as the study of *modalities* of the Real—following the emergence of modalities in Peirce’s continuum, and the connection of the “rational instinct” with the *true continuity* between Mind and Nature—a true “rational instinct” which, on its hand, supports fully the web of abduction.

The *Conclusion* of the work (“A Second (Peircean) Chance for Metaphysics?”, pp. 225–236) presents to the community, with unusual generosity, *two truly revolutionary* ideas. The first includes new definitions of the synthetical (“recognition of identity through change”) and analytical (“loss of identity through change”), which permit a refined understanding of their borders and passages, in the hope that they bring back the

reign of creativity banned by analytic philosophy. The second is a new appraisal of the concept of negative residue in the history of philosophy, in particular, a new assessment of a *via negativa* metaphysics.

In a Peirce monograph (usually well confined and somewhat uninteresting beyond specialists), a fresh and strong wind of ambition and novelty is to be welcomed. In fact, Maddalena does not fail to enter into some of the most fascinating open problems concerning knowledge. His remarks on creativity—Involving esthetics, rational instinct, abduction, reasonableness, and the *summum bonum*—provide a nice dialogue with Sara Barrena's *La razón creativa* (reviewed in *Transactions* 44 (2008): 532–534), which is perhaps the best monograph in any language dedicated to Peirce's imagination and creative power. Maddalena's claims show forcefully the many tools needed beyond analytic philosophy to tackle these pregnant questions. On the other hand, Maddalena's rendering by contradiction the limits of analytic philosophy coincides with two tendencies: (i) the strong tradition of French philosophers of mathematics (Poincaré, Brunschvicg, Lautman, Cavailles, Vuillemin, Desanti, Châtelet, Petitot and Badiou) who held that mathematics goes well beyond logic, with a complex thread of obscurities, singularities and dead ends that are *crucial* for mathematical creativity, and (ii) the many clear trends within contemporary mathematics (1950–2000) which indicate that the paradigm of classical logic and set theory, which supports analytic philosophy, should be *counterbalanced* with a new one, Sheaf Logic and Category Theory. These latter two are extremely close to Peirce's fully modalized pragmatic maxim and are capable of supporting an emerging "Synthetic Philosophy". In particular, the strong *creative* forces of mathematics and esthetics—two *major poles* of human invention if we follow Francastel, carry us well beyond analytic knowledge and open the possibility of traveling along banned alternative routes.

The roads that are opened by Maddalena are wide and engaging. Most has yet to be done, but the clarity of the author's perspectives is extensively appreciated. We have in this author a young Peirce scholar fully engaged with our time. The combination of analytical power and synthetic vision, that is so characteristic of Peirce, is well emulated. The richness of the contents of this volume matches the methodological approach undertaken, and even better, becomes amplified by the very *style* of the author. A *magnificent Italian*, that of a great essayist in the close future, goes well beyond the boring "non-style" of many beloved, academic colleagues. A pleasure to read—in all "conceivable effects"—Maddalena's book should be considered one of the major contributions to Peirce studies in the first decade of the 21st century. Profiting from this situation, a recommendation may be given to American publishing houses. Already for twenty years or so, many monographs on Peirce were published in French, Spanish, and Italian

that have no counterpart in English. Closer to the Peirce Centennial (2014), a translation into English of some of them should be undertaken. Peirce's range has become universal, and an acknowledgment of that state of affairs should honor the Master.

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