

Being, Existence, and Reality:
Peirce on the Modes of Being

One of the most fundamental questions regarding Being concerns the modes of being, indeed, whether Being needs ultimately to be understood in a univocal or polysemous way (that is, whether Being is at bottom one or is properly said in many – at least, diverse – ways). Here as in so many other contexts, we can observe a largely implicit presumption in favor of monism: there is presumed to be one paradigmatic and originative mode of Being, all other modes being conceived as problematic and derivative. Even if a thinker is convinced that Being is, at bottom, one, however, it is possible for that individual to be equally convinced that Being, at the very least, permits of boundless multiplicity and contrasting modes. One might even be inclined to think that the oneness of Being inherently calls for self-fragmentation or self-differentiation (perhaps even limitless self-differentiation).

We are, seemingly, confronted with innumerable instances of individuality and irreducible modes of Being. In their efforts to do the fullest possible justice to individuality, to accord individuals (more precisely, spatio-temporal individuals) paradigmatic ontological status, however, some thinkers have tended to strip other features of reality of their ontological import. (One reason why this position is linked to nominalism is that universality or generality are ontologically denigrated.) For such thinkers, the existence of individuals is the mode of Being *par excellence*. The individual as such must actually exist *hic et nunc* (the expression from which Scotus derived his notion of *haecceity*); having actually existed there and then, also continuing to exist beyond the present moment, tend to be subordinated to existing here and now. The

paradigm of *existence*, to be actually existent here and now, is hence accorded the status of nothing less than *the* mode of Being. To be is to exist and, in turn, to exist is to occupy some determinate (at least *determinable*) spatio-temporal location, in the midst of other such existences. Insofar as the occupation of such a locus is due to forces or factors other than the existent itself, if only due to the inertia flowing from past existents, the ontological status of the individual existent is, in effect, compromised or lessened. Hence, the advocates of this position (at least the most consistent of them) stress the individual as energetically occupying the here and now: the existent asserts itself, *hic et nunc* (it actively makes room for itself in a field of relations).

In contrast, other thinkers have tried to do the fullest justice possible to other aspects of Being, not least of all intelligibility. Among them, some have in effect (or even by intent) effaced Being of the innumerable multiplicity of individual existents. Only Being, in its invincible oneness, is an individual, all else but attributes, “modes, or some other feature of Being. But still other thinkers have tried to do equal justice to individuality and intelligibility. C. S. Peirce would be a notable example of such a philosopher. Both the nominalistic impulse to reduce Being to existence and the contrasting urge simply to subordinate existence to an allegedly higher mode of Being is, in his judgment, unsatisfactory. While Peirce occasionally tends toward the subordination of individuality to generality (to the demands of intelligibility), he provides critical resources for understanding intelligible individuals. None are more important than his categories. This essay exhibits how Peirce’s categories guide him in arguing for three irreducible modes of Being but also invite him to see Being itself as one (so his ontological speculations culminate in affirming being, existence, and reality as well as

Being itself). It does so, however, in explicit appreciation of the Platonic identification of Being with power. The distinct modes of being are, on this account, distinct ways in which Being exerts itself in a discernible manner. As much as anything else, Peirce takes pains to distinguish the brute compulsion of *existence* and the suasive influence of signs (i.e., the more or less gentle influence of *reality* over the course of thought and other forms of conduct, an influence operating in accord with the innermost integrity of rational agents). In his judgment, then, the ontological status of intelligible individuals, in their irreducible plurality but inherent relationality, requires acknowledging more than one mode of Being. They specifically require acknowledging qualitative possibility, brute opposition, and boundless intelligibility. This essay sketches, if only in broad, quick strokes, Peirce's account of such individuality.