A Synthetic Pattern: Figural and Narrative Identity

Giovanni Maddalena

How can we recognize an identity? This fascinating topic is approached from a pragmatist perspective that tends to include our concrete way of reasoning into the rationale of our synthetic reasoning. Following Peirce’s semiotic study of elements of Gamma Graphs as the multidimensional sheet of assertion and the line of identity, the paper will individuate the semiotic characteristics necessary to the recognition of identity. These characteristics lead us to discover “complete gesture” as the tool that we use in our everyday reasoning for recognizing identity. “Complete gesture” is the key element for a pragmatist version of the narrative paradigm that is particularly apt to recognize an object that appears with different determinations at different moments. Naming them as “figurae,” the paper will call “figural” identity the kind of identity that we obtain from this synthetic process.

The issues about what identity is and how we can recognize it remain some of the most challenging topics of philosophy. This paper wants to propose a new approach to them drawn from classic pragmatism. It will focus on the second question: how can we recognize an identity? There is a hope that this will cast light also upon the ontological theme of the first question, but it will not be addressed in this paper directly.

The epistemic theme of the recognition of identity is decisive in any philosophy, but it is even more important when one wishes – as in the case of pragmatism – to radically change logical patterns and philosophical presuppositions. The study of pragmatism, in particular of Peirce’s pragmatism, permits us to enter into a new conception of this topic. This new conception, in fact, can be formulated starting from a kind of new logic, which – in my view – tends to be “synthetic” rather than “analytic.”

Synthesis is the rational procedure by which we can think a predicate, and, more generally, a concept that is not altogether included in the subject (cf. Kant 1996, A7; B11). Here we will understand synthesis starting from the characteristics pointed out by Robert Hanna in his studies about Kant: (1) a judgment is synthetic when it advances beyond the intension of a concept and
establishes a novel connection with another concept; (2) this connection is made possible by something ‘altogether different’ from a conceptual content; (3) the negation of a synthetic judgment does not have to be a logical contradiction necessarily; (4) synthetic judgments amplify the intensional structure whereas comprehension is narrowed (Hanna 2001, 191). Hanna understands ‘something altogether different from conceptual content’ as Kant’s intuition, and this latter is marked mainly by individuality and not conceptuality (Hanna indicates it also has priority to thought).  

If we set aside the Kantian notion of “intuition,” obviously foreign to pragmatists, we can still consider synthesis as marked by this use of non-conceptual singulars or individuals.

If we understand synthesis as this use of “non-conceptual individuals” in order to unify concepts, a love of synthesis prevails in pragmatism in the concrete development of scientific reasoning, a development which is well-represented by the progression of the degrees of clarity that Peirce ascribes to ideas: familiarity, definition, pragmatic maxim, concrete reasonableness. And you can find the same attitude in James’s attention to the relationship between psychology and epistemology, Dewey’s logic of inquiry, and Mead’s concept of significant symbol. Pragmatism was and is strongly committed to understanding and using ampliative, or in other words ‘synthetic’, reasoning and to grasping its concrete way of acting with and through individuals. This attitude persists, including the extreme case of considering tools and experiments as part of our logic, leaning toward a ‘complete synthetic’ pattern of reasoning or a ‘synthetic’ philosophy. A synthetic philosophy is one in which the connection among concepts is made possible by tools “altogether different from a conceptual content.” In other words, a completely synthetic pattern of reasoning would show that we can think a predicate, and more generally a concept, not included in the subject through a rational method that involves and implies non-conceptual singular tools. What these non-conceptual singular tools are is difficult to understand, but the topic of identity will help us to single them out.

The topic of recognition of identity provokes a pattern of reasoning that could represent our concrete way of synthesizing new contents, above all if we consider the difficult recognition of the identity of an object that has two different determinations at two different moments. In this case, identity cannot be thought of in an analytic way (the predicate included in the subject) because it involves the notion of ‘change’ through which we have to operate our synthesis.

We can sum up this point in the formula: what does recognizing identity through change mean? If we recognize identity through changes we can account at the same time for the historicity in which our thought operates (change) and for the quest for certainty and stability in our knowledge (re-cognizing; identity). Combining these two characteristics is fundamental to a more complete theory of syntheticity.

The proposal for comprehending identity through change starts from some of Peirce’s suggestions taken from Existential Graphs (1) and runs through