

Contents

PART I.

THE IMPACT ON PHILOSOPHY OF SEMIOTICS

<i>Chapter 1</i>	
The State of the Question	3
<i>Chapter 2</i>	
Demarcating Modernity within Philosophy	10
<i>Chapter 3</i>	
Why the Doctrine of Signs Is Not Modern	28
<i>Semiotics Is More than Peirce</i>	29
<i>The Postmodern Definition of Human Being</i>	48
<i>Chapter 4</i>	
How Semiotics Restores Tradition to Philosophy	51
<i>The Language of Semiotics</i>	58
<i>From Latin Signum to English Sign</i>	62
<i>Where Is the Latin in the English Word "Semiotics"?</i>	83
<i>Peirce's Privileged Purchase</i>	87
<i>Chapter 5</i>	
Classical Antiquity and Semiotics	90
<i>Chapter 6</i>	
Prospective	96
<i>History as Laboratory and Landscape</i>	96
<i>"Semiotica Utramque Comprehendit"</i>	100
<i>Vale</i>	112

THE IMPACT ON PHILOSOPHY OF SEMIOTICS

PART II.

THE QUASI-ERROR OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

<i>Section 1</i>	
Betwixt and Between	117
<i>Section 2</i>	
The Egg of Postmodernity	119
<i>Section 3</i>	
The Egg Hatches	125
<i>Section 4</i>	
Skirmishes on the Boundary	131
<i>Section 5</i>	
Reality too Is a Word	140
<i>Section 6</i>	
A Modeling System Biologically Underdetermined	145
<i>Section 7</i>	
<i>Blickwendung</i> : A Glance in the Rear-View Mirror	147
<i>Section 8</i>	
Updating the File	150

PART III.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN A 'SEMIOTIST' AND A 'REALIST'

"A Sign Is <i>What?</i> "	
A Conversation between a 'Semiotist' and a 'Realist'	157
<i>Diagram: The Semiotic Spiral</i>	164
References, Historically Layered	209
Index	250

Chapter 1

The State of the Question

In the conventional wisdom, as Descartes was the father of modern philosophy in the early 17th century, so Ferdinand de Saussure was the father of semiology in the early 20th century, and Charles Peirce the father of semiotics in that same time-frame. The picture is fair enough.

But if we ask what has been the impact of semiotics upon philosophy over the course of the 20th century, early in the 21st century to answer anything beyond “marginal” would be an exaggeration. This situation, as I read it, is about to change dramatically. In the less than a century of dominance enjoyed by so-called “analytic philosophy” in English-speaking and Hispanic academic worlds of the late modern twilight, it was the custom regularly to issue “promissory notes” on philosophical programs, usually epistemological in character, never realized in detail. As modernity and postmodernity reach the stage of passing one another in the night, the first

receding in its twilight as the other moves toward a brilliant dawn, I would like to give a passing example of a reverse procedure. Instead of going from a brief programmatic statement to a grand project never to be fulfilled, I want to present instead an abstract of an already completed larger project,¹ a setting of contemporary semiotics fully within the horizon and context of philosophical history as a whole, from its origin in ancient Greek Ionia to its latest manifestation as semiotic, the doctrine of signs.

Of course, I could be wrong in my belief that the philosophy establishment will not be able much longer to avoid refurnishing its house along semiotic lines – but I have gotten so used to being wrong, especially in prophecies, that the prospect hardly daunts me. And this time, wrong or not, I can tell you for sure from personal experience that, even though the situation has begun to change over the last two decades particularly, semiotics has been and still is at the margins of philosophy. Analytic philosophy in particular, after all the dominant paradigm in academic departments of philosophy throughout the English speaking and Hispanic worlds, has not been receptive to semiotics, though superficially you would have expected a proclaimed linguistic perspective in philosophy to be receptive of the semiotic point of view, particularly when you consider that the dominant model for the study of signs in the 20th century, to wit, semiology, has

¹ The “completed project” in question is the thousand-page book, *Four Ages of Understanding*. The first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twenty-first century (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2001), referred to hereafter as the *Four Ages* (Deely 2001). The present brief version of the story is based on my December 1, 2000, presentation, “The Impact of Semiotics on Philosophy”, at the first Annual Hommage à Oscar Parland at the University of Helsinki, toward the close of my semester there as the first Visiting Professor of Semiotics.

I.1: The State of the Question

emphasized the linguistic paradigm for studying even signs in general. But this superficial impression would be belied by the fact that the conception of language itself within analytic philosophy has been that of a self-contained whole, even as a system of signs. By contrast, semiotics has insisted from the first that linguistic semiosis, the action of signs within human language, is far from a self-contained universe of discourse. On the contrary, according to semiotics, the action of signs exceeds the boundaries set by the human use of signs, and the human use of signs would not be even possible except in constant collaboration with and on the basis of an action of signs at many levels surrounding linguistic usage and rendering it successful whenever and to whatever extent it does succeed (which of course is far from always).²

² The human use of signs is commonly referred to as “anthroposemiosis”, or the action of signs within the sphere of human thought, feeling, and activity. Whence the term “anthroposemiosis”, in sharp contrast to all variants on the Greek root “psyche”, connotes both “the self/nature correlation” and “powers of the unconscious” requisite to convey “a sense of the relationship between human forms of semiosis and semiotic cosmology as a whole”, denoting precisely “the human order and its unique forms of semiosis” according to an overall perspective wherein, as Corrington (2000: 86–7) puts it, “semiosis is the genus of which particular orders of semiotic interaction are species.” Somewhat oddly, in the very course of saying all this, Corrington suggests that we opt rather for the term “psychosemiosis” to convey “some of the drama of the internal work on the unconscious with a sense of the relationship between human forms of semiosis and semiotic cosmology as a whole”. But here his preoccupation with the idea of ‘psychoanalysis’ as connoting (ibid.) “something confined to the human process, something at once private and too linked to a dyadic structure of analyst to analysand”, which he wants to “get beyond”, has led him into a trap. For the suggestion of ‘psychosemiosis’ as the “natural replacement term” for psychoanalysis hardly moves us as far as we need to go. Not only is the root term “psyche” too generic for the purpose, even in the context of ancient

Indeed, within semiotics, the open question is not whether the action of signs is broader than any construal of language, but rather how far the paradigm for the action of signs extends. There is general agreement by now that the action of signs, “semiosis”, extends at least as far as awareness or cognition occurs, which includes the entire domain of animal sign usage, or “zoösemiosis”. This already defeats the proposal Saussure embodied in the semiological model of sign which would have made of the study of signs a variant of modern idealism (the philosophical doctrine distinctive of modernity according to which the mind knows only what the mind itself constitutes or makes³). In the model of sign operative within semiotics, every sign consists in a relation connecting three terms, one of which performs the vehicular function of other-representation (and which Peirce calls accordingly the “representamen”⁴), a second of which performs the function of self-representation or objectification

thought (cf. Deely 2001: 85n57); the corruption of the root in modern context guarantees an ongoing misunderstanding. For the ‘replacement’ of ‘psychoanalysis’ with ‘psychosemiosis’ all too naturally connotes the mind-body dualism of modern philosophy as a whole wherein psychoanalysis took root, and this connotation is only reinforced when we try to take ‘physiosesemiosis’ under the genus as well. After all, a “psycho”, whether semiotic or not, is not the way one spontaneously describes an individual in whom integration and balance of natural processes is exhibited.

³ See the Four Ages (Deely 2001), Chap. 16.

⁴ A term habitually mispronounced, as my students know, by the Anglophile Peirceans as a consequence of their general ignorance of Latin. In 1992 I launched, by way of a footnote (Deely 1992: 157n), my quixotic crusade to correct the pronunciation of contemporary Peirceans of the term “representamen”, which I may as well continue here. Since it is a question of pronunciation, an audial form, and here my sole medium is scriptal, my foray remains no doubt doubly quixotic. Nonetheless, here goes (again). The term “representamen”

I.1: The State of the Question

(which Peirce calls the “object signified”, a somewhat redundant expression, as we will see⁵), and the third term of which performs the function of relating within the signification itself – even when the representamen or sign-vehicle is a natural event, such as a volcano belching smoke, as we will see – the representamen to the significate, thus completing the triad on the basis of which Peirce, following his Latin predecessors (so difficult for his late modern followers to acknowledge) from whom he learned the fact, identified the sign strictly so called with a triadic relation. Thus Peirce, exactly as did the Latins before him, Poinset in particular,⁶ distinguished between signs *loosely so-called*, which are strictly representamens, and signs *strictly so-called*, which are the triadic relations themselves and as such, in contrast to each and every one of the three terms united within the sign,⁷ and in contrast to the objects related within the web of sign relations.

The “open question” within semiotics today, thus,⁸ is not

is derived from the Latin for “to represent”, or “a representation”, more specifically understood in context as an “other-representation” in contrast to a “self-representation”. In accordance with this etymology, the term should not be pronounced, as by the Anglophile Peirceans, “represent-a-men”, but rather as “represent-tá-men”.

⁵ In Chap. 3 below, p. 44.

⁶ Poinset was the first author to establish (just a year before the Galileo debacle quite eclipsed the Latin epistemology that had been developing along semiotic lines over the last two-and-one-half Latin centuries) the unity of the subject matter a doctrine of signs undertakes to investigate: see his *Tractatus de Signis* of 1632 (Poinset 1632a, in the References), Book I, Question 1.

⁷ See the “hard distinction” discussed in Part III below, pp. 166, 196–97, 200–201, and 202.

⁸ So, for example, the international colloquium recently held in Germany (Nöth 2001) on “The Semiotic Threshold from Nature to Culture” as the pressing question for semiotics opening the new millennium.

whether semiology is co-ordinate with or subaltern to semiotics, but only whether semiotics is broader even than zoösemiotics, and on this question two positions have emerged. There is the comparatively conservative position which would extend semiotics to the whole of living things, plants as well as animals. This extension was first formally proposed and argued in 1981 by Martin Krampen under the specific label “phytosemiotics”, the study of an action of signs in the realm of vegetable life, a powerful case quickly ridiculed, but one which I, initially among the skeptics of the proposal, wound up early defending.⁹ The conservative faction in the matter of whether the action of signs, and hence the paradigm of semiotics, can be extended beyond the sphere of cognitive life has rallied around the generic label of *biosemiotics*.¹⁰

The more radical faction (chief among which must be counted Peirce himself) does not quarrel with the inclusion of phytosemiotics along with zoösemiotics under the umbrella of biosemiotics, but argues that even this extension leaves something out, namely, the physical universe at large which surrounds biological life and upon which all life depends. Heretofore the development of the physical universe as able to spawn and support life has been studied under the rubric of *evolution*. The radical faction in semiotics today argues that what is distinctive of the action of signs is the shaping of the present, and hence of the past in its pertinence, on the basis of

⁹ Krampen 1981; Deely 1982b. See the reprintings in Deely, Williams, and Kruse 1986: 83–103.

¹⁰ Three whole issues of *Semiotica* have been devoted to this topic in recent years: Vol. 120–3/4 (1998), thirteen reviews of Hoffmeyer 1996 with a rejoinder; Vol. 127–1/4 (1999), a Special Issue titled “Biosemiotica”; and Vol. 134–1/4 (2001), a Special Issue on Jakob von Uexküll Guest-Edited by Kalevi Kull. See the capsule summary of the matter in Sebeok 2001: 31–43.

I.1: The State of the Question

future events.¹¹ On this accounting, the action of signs (or “semiosis”) can be discerned even in the rocks and among the stars – a veritable *physiosemissis*, theoretical justification and practical exploration of which marks the final frontier of semiotic inquiry, “final” only in the sense that there is nowhere left in the universe of finite being for semiosis to be looked for, it having now been found to occur (if the notion of physiosemissis be finally vindicated) wherever finite beings interact, and so to justify Peirce’s proposal that the universe as a whole, even if it does not consist exclusively of signs, is yet everywhere perfused with signs.

In this debate between the conservative biosemioticians and the radical proponents of the correctness of Peirce’s fundamental intuition of the permeation of finite being by semiosis the “philosophers of language” have been left in the dust, as it were, of the intellectual race which turns out to have carried philosophy itself beyond modernity and the paradigm of knowledge that modernity embodied as its very identity as a distinct philosophical epoch.

Let us consider this situation, for without a clear idea of modernity in philosophy it is bootless to quarrel over the meaning or lack of meaning in the label *postmodernity*.

¹¹ See the further discussion in Part III, pp. 168 and 203–4.