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## Chapter 1

### Requirements of the Discussion

First of all, it is no longer possible to participate intelligently in this discussion without taking account of the fact that there are qualitative differences in the communication systems of all biological species or forms. Not only the human species, but, it would seem, every species exhibits species-specific modalities of apprehension and consequent communication.<sup>1</sup> So the question of whether human understanding differs qualitatively or only quantitatively from the cognition of other animals becomes to a large extent moot. Every cognitive organism belongs to one or another species, and every cognitive species is distinguished by apprehensive modalities peculiar to itself. This point is quite independent of the question of whether, underlying such differences, is not simply a difference in arrangement of basic material particles.

Of continuing relevance here is the Aristotelian idea of substance as the formal unity to which different material arrangements (of genes, in current parlance) give rise and which in turn makes that arrangement cohere as a unity so

<sup>1</sup> For details, see Sebeok Ed. 1977; Sebeok 1978; Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok 1979-1982; Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok series 1979-; Umiker-Sebeok and Sebeok Eds. 1980; Sebeok and Rosenthal Eds. 1981.

long as the individual exists with a distinguishable identity. By way of anticipating one of the principal rectifications of terms that the fuller development of semiotic consciousness requires, some remarks are in order already here regarding this term "substance".

So far as this term was original with Aristotle and came into later general use among the Latin scholastics, despite a misleading characterization of the abstract situation of individuality in terms of an "absolute" subject or being, "substance" conveyed the notion of an individual (even as merely possible) capable of actual existence only through a network of environmental relations (by definition "physical") within which (or at whose center) would be sustained the intrinsic unity of the individual (its "substantial form") as relatively independent respecting this or that of its circumstances. Later modifications of Aristotle's original conception of substance transformed it from a notion having positional as well as self-referential or "absolute" value into the notion of something wholly self-contained, as we find in the work of Kant and, typically, throughout the rationalist works of the classical moderns. This rationalist transformation led directly to the rejection of the notion of substance among the empiricists.

Since this is one of the fulcrum points on which the development of semiotics turns away from classical modernity (or, as might also be said, on which the classical development of modernity turned away from the nascent semiotics of the closing Latin centuries), it is worth being as clear as possible on what is at stake in these two very different significations, the ancient and the modern ones – verging on, if not actually achieving, equivocation – conveyed by the misleadingly "same" word (or, rather, character string) "substance". Clarification of the contrast is all the more called for in view of the fact that the actual focus of modern philosophy on epistemological concerns pushes into the background and, effectively, hides the basic question of preajacent connections among physical things in the environment by the fact that, as Handyside well observed,<sup>2</sup> "the things are no longer the independently conceived

<sup>2</sup> Handyside 1929: x.

substances of intellect, but the conjointly perceived objects of sense". But if we look at those of Kant's writings that preceded and laid the ground for the celebrated *Critiques* which established his place as Master of Modernity, we find, as clearly as in Descartes or in Leibniz, that pragmaticistically insupportable notion of substance, the "monad without windows", which came to occupy the field of modern philosophy. Kant puts the matter thus:<sup>3</sup>

Since every self-sufficient being contains within itself the complete source of all its determinations, it is not necessary for its existence that it stand in relation to other things. Substances can therefore exist, and yet have no outer relation to things, nor stand in any actual connection with them.

A notion so remote from experience hardly justifies supplanting entirely the original notion of substance as derived from the experience of changing individuals, in view of which experience the notion was fashioned by Aristotle to provide the ground for understanding the difference between those changes which any given individual does and those which it does not survive. Cut loose from all reference to experience, Kant is able to *deduce* from *his* notion of the individual substance conclusions which Aristotle only *abduced* of the physical universe or "world" as a whole, such as that it has no "place" where it exists (no *ubi circumscriptivum*), and "other propositions, which are not less remarkable, and which capture the understanding so to speak against its own will".<sup>4</sup> (It would be hard to find a better capsule summary of modern philosophy.)

This perverse development, nonetheless, should not be allowed to gainsay the value of the original notion of substance not as something entirely self-contained but merely as something self-identified within a network of external contingencies

<sup>3</sup> Kant 1747: 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kant *loc. cit.*

from which the individual has both existence and place. This individuality, being relative from the outset and throughout, therefore, can be more or less pronounced. It is empirically the more pronounced as we ascend in observation the scale of being from those material particles and interactions for which we have no empirical grounds for abducing the presence of life to those forms where life becomes more and more clearly evident as a warranted abduction, ending in ourselves where our very existence as thinking beings is its own warrant – this I think is the enduring value of the Cartesian formula, *Cogito ergo sum*. For while it is equally true of any action – drinking, running, breathing – that the action implies existence (*agere sequitur esse* was the way the medievals epitomized the general situation), yet the action of thinking as involving a self-awareness, a reflective activity which has itself for its own object, is the premier action where an existing and living subject grasps itself, makes a part of its own physical reality an object. In this case physical existence not only intrudes itself as such as part of the objective realm (the order of whatever exists as known), but to be a thing partly objectified is also to be oneself.

Here, as we shall see more fully in what follows, in the awareness of the self by the self we find vindicated those arcane early semiotic discussions of the difference between, on the one hand, the experience of objects which have as such a physical dimension within their very objectification here and now and, on the other hand, objects cognized without an accompanying verification here and now of any such dimensions. This pragmaticistic difference was clumsily labeled “intuitive versus abstractive cognition” under the historical determinism of the transitional influence of Duns Scotus<sup>5</sup> who, toward the opening of the 14th century, turns Latin epistemological and ontological discussions in the semiotic direction that would culminate in the early 17th century *Tractatus de Signis* of Poinso<sup>6</sup> at the very moment that Descartes turned

<sup>5</sup> See Tachau 1988: 70, 80 ff.

<sup>6</sup> See the *Tractatus de Signis*, Book III, Questions 1 and 2; and see also Beuchot and Deely 1995.

what was to become the classical modern development toward the dead-end of an idealism confining the mind to its own workings (classical modern idealism, common to Rationalism and Empiricism in their fatal shared assumption reducing signification to representation in the idea of ideas of human understanding). We shall see in discussing below the semiosis of sensation that, *pace* Descartes, the experience of the self by the self in reflective thought is far from the only instance where the subjective or physical as such is transformed, by the simple addition of a cognitive relation to a cognitive organism, into something objective. In sensation generally, just as in the reflective grasp of the self thinking, something existing subjectively becomes the focus of an "intuitive apprehension"; only now, in place of (though along with, as we shall see) the self some aspects of the physical environment here and now impinging on a cognitive organism are apprehended as so impinging. Indeed, it is just this paradigm case of sensory experience that the possibility of reflection on the self presupposes. But let us not get ahead of the story.

In modern philosophy, the notion of intuition has come to be more or less completely discredited. No one has made this point more abundantly than the principal progenitor of contemporary semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce, in his 1868–1869 series of articles on intuitive knowledge (so Burks 1958: 261 describes the series) in the then-recently founded *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. But, where intuitive awareness in the Latin sense was expounded in the original systematization of semiotic foundations essayed under the title of *Tractatus de Signis*,<sup>7</sup> as the Peirce scholar, Michael Raposa, has recently demonstrated in detail, "appearances are deceptive and there is no fundamental disagreement between the two philosophers" – Charles Peirce and John Poinset – either "on this

<sup>7</sup> Book III *Concerning Modes of Awareness and Concepts*, Question 1 "Whether Intuitive and Abstractive Awareness Differ Essentially in the Rationale of Cognition" and Question 2 "Whether There Can Be an Intuitive Cognition, either in the Understanding or in Exterior Sense, of a Thing Physically Absent".

issue" or on the issue of introspection.<sup>8</sup> To follow the details of Raposa, Poinsett, and Peirce simply on this matter of terminology would lead us by many steps outside our present path of reflection. Suffice it to mark here, as a reference for other researchers,<sup>9</sup> that in the terminology of "intuition" and "intuitive awareness" we encounter another of those fulcral points at which classical modern philosophy sharply turned away from any semiotic development of consciousness in favor of a view of mental representation which could have no other outcome than candid solipsism or decadent skepticism. The change of significations behind the mask of a continuity in literal form is, in this area, every bit as dramatic as the change we noted in more detail – because more directly in the line of our present concern – on the character string "substance".

Yet another fulcral point of terminology. We need to note here specifically that there was among the Latins a fragmentary and only implicitly systematic use of the term "objective", which was consistent with their original use of the notion of sign as applicable to natural and cultural phenomena alike. In modern philosophy this use came to be quite reversed. This reversed use, wherein "objective" becomes synonymous with what is the case apart from any opinion, thoroughly established by our own time, nonetheless proves incompatible with the general doctrine of signs and is, I would go so far as to say, ultimately incoherent. This incoherence is what we see at play at the level of popular culture in the inane debates about whether reporting can or should be "objective", as also, more fundamentally, in the interminable struggle within modern philosophy between "realisms" and "idealisms", a struggle which continues to confuse and delay semiotic developments. Semiotics in effect compels us to resume the nascent medieval notion of objective as whatever exists as known, but now to thematize and systematize that

<sup>8</sup> Raposa 1994: 396; see further esp. 399–402.

<sup>9</sup> The interested reader will find pieces of the story in Deely 1985: 485–87, Raposa 1994, and Deely 1994a; but the story as a whole remains – perhaps for some ambitious doctoral student – to tell as a whole.

usage in light of the discovery that the sign is what every object presupposes. This backward step, as it were, is for the sake of two steps forward.<sup>10</sup> In any event, the *Cogito* is simply the fixed point, among a synechistic continuity of contingent points at every moment of experience, where a coincidence of the two orders of objective and physical being is always inescapable – a situation quite different from that which Descartes tortured the data to construe,<sup>11</sup> and one to which is pertinent the idea, called “intuitive” by the Latins, of cognition as the awareness of a physical aspect of the environment as such here and now part of the sensory core of perception and understanding.

This terminological point may be regarded as preliminary to what is the point crucial to our present consideration, to wit, that awareness, whether reflective or not, whether turned toward or away from the immediate physical surroundings, belongs to the formal dimension or side of organismic life. Whatever it may presuppose on the material side, and however much it may depend on that material organization in order to enter or continue in existence, it cannot be reduced to an identity with the material without the organism ceasing to be. True, there have been those, at least as far back as Thales (c.640–546BC), who professed to see no essential difference between living and dead. (He defended his preference for life over death on the grounds that “there is no difference”<sup>12</sup>). But we cannot take responsibility for the thought of others. Confronted with the corpse of a friend, few would deny that something was missing, and that this something took along

<sup>10</sup> Retrieving the signification of objectivity consistent with the perspective of semiotics was part of the essential project of *The Human Use of Signs* (Deely 1994), and I continue it here.

<sup>11</sup> That the experience of the *cogito* points rather to embodiment than, as Descartes tried to argue, to disembodiment was most effectively demonstrated, perhaps, in the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty; but one of the best attacks upon the problem from within semiotics has been that of Greimas and Fontanille 1991. See the “Foreword” to the English trans. of this work by Perron and Fabbri 1993.

<sup>12</sup> As reported (c.220 AD) by Diogenes Laertius, “Thales” viii.

the side of the corpse, there is no more *cogito*.

Our thinking, of course, *pace* Descartes, is hardly what ensures our existence. Our existence is ensured by the environmental conditions including relations without which its possibility – the possibility of ourselves as thinking beings – would be removed. These conditions are indeed material, beginning with the air we breathe and the gravity which holds us to the earth, along with the surrounding temperature which enables our system to circulate and the atmospheric pressure which keeps us from exploding from the pressures within. Psychological conditions too are necessary to our sustenance, beginning with memory – “the closest link in the body with the self”<sup>13</sup> – without which there is no “I” to think. We may become, as they say, vegetables through some disaster or misfortune; we may exist without thinking. That is not the point. That we exist while thinking is all that thinking can assure.

This is another of the points at which semiotic thought departs definitively from the epistemology of classical modernity. To say that all thought is in signs is to say that all thought is of significates, that all ideas give rise to relations at whose suprasubjective term are the signified objects – whether mere objects or objects which are also things – which the ideas are not.<sup>14</sup> For nothing prevents an object signified from having

<sup>13</sup> Sebeok 1988: 191.

<sup>14</sup> This was the essential insight of the late Latin Hispanic thinkers (beginning at least as early as Soto, who may have taken the idea from his Paris professors) who founded their semiotic epistemology by sharply distinguishing representation as such from signification. They pointed out that, in the sign, the representative element as such does not constitute the sign but merely provides the foundation or basis upon which the pure relation in its proper character as suprasubjective constitutes the sign as terminating at a significate. In all cases, a significate is irreducibly other than the representation which finds its objectivity. These considerations are summarized at the very outset of the *Tractatus de Signis*. See esp. the 2nd Preliminary Chapter, 25/11–27/6; and Book I, Question 1, 116/14–117/17, 121/19–123/25, etc.

and revealing itself precisely within the signification – that is to say, as part and parcel with the significate – an existence which does not reduce to the signification. This is what the formula *cogito ergo sum* actually gets at when read semiotically: the self given in thinking is given as other than the thinking, even though accessed only through the thinking.<sup>15</sup> The complement of Descartes' maxim would appear to be Aristotle's maxim about perception: that when its objects are not present in sensation it is a mystery whether they continue physically to exist.<sup>16</sup> I went to the September 26–28, 1995, Conference on "Perception and Self-Consciousness in the Arts and Sciences" organized in Porto, Portugal, by Norma Tasca, for example, expecting to see Thomas Sebeok and hence assuming that, in the interim, he would continue to live. As it turned out, the expectation was happily justified; but it need not have been so, and one time a similar assumption may not be (assuming Sebeok predeceases me, which also need not be).

I cannot think without existing, and I cannot exist without an environment. Whenever I think, both my physical existence and something of my physical environment enter into my awareness. What in fact of my environment is objectified depends on what I am thinking about and where I am as well as upon my biological constitution. Thus the entrance of the environment into my awareness is more variable than the

<sup>15</sup> The disappearance of the self in a stream and flow of detached associations, images, and ideas, as portrayed by Hume and others, we may say, is a direct consequence of the classical modern failure to distinguish between representation as such and signification, which we noted above (note ) as one of the cornerstones of semiotic thinking.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, c.335–4BC: *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, 139b20–22 (p. 1799): "of things capable of being otherwise we do not know, when they have passed outside our observation, whether they exist or not." Similarly, c.348–330BC: *Met.* VII, 1036a1–8 (p. 1635): "when we come to the concrete thing . . . whether sensible or intelligible . . . of these there is no definition, but they are known by the aid of thought or perception; and when they go out of our actual consciousness it is not clear whether they exist or not". See further in Ch. 6, note 34, p. 107, below.

entrance of myself, though there is always necessarily something of both. I am a necessary object of my own thought, or, perhaps better to say, my self is an aspect of objectivity as I think about anything whatever. I am the only particular object within my environment that is, in this sense, in all cases necessary. When I open my eyes in a conscious state, if I am not blind I will necessarily see something of what the surrounding physical conditions of light and circumstance dictate. When the moon is full and I am outdoors I cannot open my eyes with my head turned in that direction without seeing the moon, even though the question of what I am seeing – a planetary body in space, a giant cheese, a source of direct or reflected light, a body embedded in a rotating sphere – is another matter. In both cases, what is objectified – something of myself along with whatever part of the environment – is something that exists subjectively and physically, now made also to be objectively. But this is a pragmaticistic proposition, the statement of a discovery, of a realization, not the assertion of a dogma. How the discovery comes about, it seems to me, is the key to the difference between perception and understanding – between, to use the canonical terminology, “sense” and “intellect”. And to see how this is so it is necessary to approach the matter from a semiotic point of view.

A semiotic point of view is fundamentally one which takes its origin from the consideration of the action of signs as its first object, its primary focus. From within this point of view, of course, many methods or further standpoints are possible.<sup>17</sup> If we may credit the testimony of the first thinker to systematize initial requirements of such a point of view, the first requirement is to adopt a standpoint which transcends the difference between objects which have also a physical existence and objects which have only an objective existence; for the sign, as giving to experience whatever structure it has including the sheerly biologically determined, is our avenue equally to both sorts of object.<sup>18</sup> It is only through the use of

<sup>17</sup> See “Semiotics: Method or Point of View?” in Deely 1990: 9–21.

<sup>18</sup> *Tractatus de Signis*, Book I, Question 1, 117/28–118/18: “And we speak here of ontological relation – of relation according to the way it has

signs that we come to realize any distinction between the physical, the objectified physical, and the merely objective. To ground such distinctions it is necessary rightly to construe the nature proper to signs as relative beings.

For the remainder of my discussion here I am going to proceed on the assumption that the standpoint adopted for the *Tractatus de Signis* should be taken seriously. By this I do not mean to say that I am going to presuppose the validity of Poinso't's doctrine and proceed from there, but rather to say that I am going to begin with the *primum semeioticum* as expressed in the text of his *Tractatus de Signis* and proceed to explore its implications for the interpretation of experience. In this way, the "assumption" of validity, far from being "taken for granted in what follows", functions heuristically in such wise that, in the course of the very discussion it originates, it must become self-refuting or critically validated. As to which of the two, the final decision is left to you the reader.

being – not of a determinately physical relation as such, because we are discussing the sign in general, as it includes equally the natural and the social sign, in which general discussion even the signs which are mental artifacts – namely, conventional signs as such – are involved. And for this reason, the rationale common to signs cannot be that of a categorial being, i.e. a being restricted as such to the physical order, nor a determinately physical relation as such, although it could be an ontological relation, a relation according to the way it has being [inasmuch as relation so considered] is purely a relation and does not import anything absolute". – "Et loquimur hic de relatione secundum esse, non de relatione praedicamentali, quia loquimur de signo in communi, prout includit tam signum naturale quam ad placitum, in quo involvitur etiam signum, quod est aliquid rationis, scilicet signum ad placitum. Et ideo praedicamentale ens esse non potest nec relatio praedicamentalis, licet possit esse relatio secundum esse [inquantum relatio sic considerata] pure relatio est et non aliquid absolutum importat".