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John Deely

Loras College

SEMIOSIS AND THE PHENOMENON OF WORLDHOOD

Robert S. Corrington
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park

In 1905 Peirce made the following observation in his *Monist* article, "Issues of Pragmaticism" (1905: 5.448, n. 1):

> It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe--not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part, that universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as "the truth"-- that all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs.

Leaving aside the issue of whether this view is fully consistent with other aspects of Peirce's semiotic, it stands as a major metaphysical statement concerning the scope and fecundity of semiotic theory. Insofar as whatever is, is a sign, either actually or potentially, it follows that semiosis is the only proper organon of metaphysics. No natural complex or phenomenon can fail to be rendered into sign theory.

This paper will not specifically concern itself with the debate between semiotic realists and idealists (and the implied problems of panpsychism and pansemiosis) but will focus instead on the problem of the ontological difference and its impact on the role of sign theory in determining a comprehensive portrayal of reality. When semiotic uses such phrases as "the wider universe" or, simply, "the universe" it runs the risk of effacing differences which have been elucidated within the phenomenological tradition and which have become increasingly compelling for thought. In particular, it ignores the profound difference between intraworldly complexes and the

phenomenon of worldhood itself (Corrington 1987b: 21-35). It is the contention of this paper that worldhood is fundamentally recalcitrant to articulation or analysis in semiotic terms and that this conceptual and experiential alterity radically limits the claims of semiotic to comprehensiveness.

To elucidate and evoke our prethematic grasp of worldhood, and thereby make it thematic, it is necessary to briefly detail six dimensions of sign function as they evolve from the least generic dimension toward that symbolic inversion in which worldhood becomes thematic for thought and experience. At the same time, these six dimensions must be articulated in terms of their relation to various modes of the Encompassing. The concept of the Encompassing, itself related to that of worldhood, will become thematic only through the detailed analysis of its modes which stand over against and within sign function.

It is necessary to engage in the Peircean technique of "prescinding" in order to isolate and exhibit each of the dimensions of sign activity. Consequently it must be born in mind that a complete sign, especially when it becomes a symbol, will exhibit all of these six dimensions.

Within sign function two broad categories can be defined. On the less generic level, signs function in asymmetrical reference relations in which the referent of the sign need not refer back to the sign dimension proper. The relation is asymmetrical insofar as the sign points toward a referent but does not feel the 'back pressure' of the referent on its own constitution. Such relations need not be temporal. On the higher generic level, signs function in symmetrical relations in which the being of the sign and referent co-determine each other. In traditional logical terms, a symmetrical relation is one in which the structure aRb obtains if and only if bRa. If looked at structurally, this symmetry need not be temporal. However, as will emerge shortly, semiotic forms of symmetry are by definition temporal and entail more than the mere symmetry of reciprocal forms of relation. Consequently, a symmetrical relation will be constituted by the traits of communication and shareability.

The first two dimensions of sign function are asymmetrical reference relations while the final four exhibit symmetrical relations. Hence the first two dimensions need not be temporal while the last four must be.

The least generic dimension of sign function is the reference of a simple sign to a local trait. For example, in a landscape painting by Cezanne, the color yellow may refer to a particular and insignificant aspect of the mountain vista and thus exhibit traits with limited scope. This sign dimension has both restricted scope and limited semiotic density. The meaning conveyed is local only and does not function to sustain the more generic sign structures.

In the second dimension a more complex sign refers to one or more regional traits. These regional traits have greater scope than their less generic local cousins and therefore also convey greater

meaning. Such a reference need not be temporal and may detail certain structural configurations which link sign and referent. Regional traits (in both sign and referent) are more than the mere 'sum' of local traits and represent fairly autonomous and distinct values. The movement from local to regional traits therefore requires a kind of categorial leap or higher categorial analysis. Continuing with our example from Cezanne, the basic color groups of brown, green, and blue, serve to order and govern the subaltern and local color configurations of yellow or red. By the same token, the geometric values of the cube, sphere, and cylinder, govern and order the local spatial features of the scene. Regional traits provide the *topos* for all lesser configurations. As such they carry a greater semiotic load and have far greater scope. Both the local and regional dimension of the sign function refer to their object in an asymmetrical manner insofar as the referent cannot determine part of the constitution of the sign relation.

The remaining sign dimensions are symmetrical in that the sign and referent actively co-determine each other's evolving contours. The third dimension of sign function involves two triadic structures. Each triad entails that an interpreter actively assimilates and manipulates sign material. Both triads were first isolated and articulated by Josiah Royce in 1913 and exhibit the richness of the interpretive process (Corrington 1986). The first triad is best termed the "hermeneutic triad," which involves the correlation of a bare percept (as a moment within perception), a concept, and the interpretation which links the two. This internal triad functions intrasubjectively to generate the initial data of semiotic life. Out of the specific interpretation emerges a concrete sign which stands before the interpreter as the product of the hermeneutic triad. Out of this sign emerges the impetus for the second triad, perhaps best termed the "semiotic triad," which shows how sign linkage begins to unfold for more than one interpreter. The semiotic triad involves the sign being interpreted, the interpreter making the interpretation, and the interpretee (implied or actual) for whom the interpretation is being made. Needless to say, the given interpreter can function as both interpreter and interpretee and thus make sign translations and interpretations to him or herself.

The hermeneutic triad is not obviously temporal while the semiotic triad must be. The third dimension of sign function, which works through both triads, is symmetrical in that the resultant concrete signs receive part of their evolving meaning contour from the referent pole. The hermeneutic triad derives its value from the semiotic triad which fulfills it. In this sense, the hermeneutic triad of percept, concept, and interpretation, enters teleologically into the deeper logic of the semiotic triad. Other complexes and interpretants shape the meaning and determine the scope of the sign being articulated by the interpreter. Obviously, this process is fully temporal when signs emerge on the level of the semiotic triad. A

sign interpreted is a sign changed. Consequently the flow of temporality cannot be reversed.

If the third dimension of sign function works through the two triads, one internal to the human process and the other external and potentially communal, the fourth dimension is explicitly social. The semiotic triad, which brought together sign, interpreter, and interpretee, now explodes into a temporally extended and highly ramified community of interpreters for whom sign translation is necessary and constitutive of its evolving life (Corrington 1987). Numerous interpreters and interpretees converge on a common body of signs and share in the translation and articulation of meanings. The scope of the sign is increased as more interpreters develop further elaborations. Returning to our example of the landscape painting of Cezanne, we see how such a cultural artifact becomes part of the provenance of a community of interpreters. The individual interpreter examines local and regional configurations in the painting and combines percepts and concepts to sustain a body of personal interpretations of the work. These interpretations become concretized in communicative signs which in turn become part of an evolving community of interpreters. As the painting becomes further ramified, its intrinsic sign functions receive even greater degrees of meaning. Semiotic density and scope are enhanced insofar as the work becomes an operative potency within a self-conscious and convergent community. The given interpreter conveys his or her signs to another who in turn transforms and alters the communicated sign material. This process is potentially endless. Ramificational possibilities always transcend the number of interpretations made and signs articulated.

If the fourth dimension of sign function involves the unfolding communication between interpreters and interpretees, the fifth dimension involves the intentional objects of these semiotic acts. Specifically, this dimension is that of the endless sign series that emerge from within the community of interpreters. No sign is bereft of at least one sign series within which it will function to determine the evolving shapes of meaning. As signs form into unlimited sign series with neither beginning nor end, they ramify indefinitely into numerous branchings and sub-branchings. This process of serial ramification is that of an actual infinite (Corrington 1982). Any given sign series will itself be infinite insofar as its relational and semiotic boundaries are not circumscribed by the given community of interpreters. Sign series exhibit a semiotic hunger and have their own lines of convergence. This process is fully symmetrical and temporal. In a sense, any given sign series will have an imperial drive toward total encompassment in which it forgets its own limitations and pursues a totality just beyond its reach.

Returning to our example, the sign series of the community ramify and extend the meanings of the Cezanne painting and begin to locate it within a larger historical and cultural context in which its local and regional configurations receive even more scope and

density. In the language of Ernst Cassirer, such a sign system now functions as a true "symbolic form" which represents an objectification of the forces of spirit working within human cultural evolution (Cassirer 1929). The painting is itself an actual infinite while also participating in other infinite series which have indefinite boundaries and hidden lines of convergence and divergence.

The "symbolic pregnancy" of the sign now makes it possible for the sign material to reach a high degree of semiotic scope and density of meaning (Krois 1987). The fullness of the sign demarcates it and sets it apart from other signs within the infinite wealth of competing or parallel sign series. At the point of maximal semiotic density the sign is on the verge of becoming transformed into a symbol. In the movement from semiotic plenitude toward symbolic presence, the sixth dimension of sign function appears. As the sign becomes a true symbol it gives birth to a radical inversion of value and meaning and assumes a transparency which lets ultimate import gather up the semiotic components of its pre-symbolic life. In this inversion the sign empties out its content and becomes the locus of a meaning which cannot be circumscribed. The sign becomes a trace which does not refer to anything appearing or to a Peircean "would be" but to the highly elusive and reticent power of that which can never be a referent or another sign.

Again returning to our example, the painting of Cezanne ceases to be merely the locus of attained and attainable semiotic structures and possibilities and allows itself to be shattered in the power of a worldhood which cannot be part of any sign series or even of the 'sum' of all such series. The work of art becomes fundamentally transformed in its meaning values when its signs become open to the sixth and final dimension of sign function. The local, regional, and interpretive traits do not cease to prevail when the symbolic level is reached but serve as ciphers of that which can never be part of the web of semiotic meaning.

These six dimensions of sign function illuminate several aspects of the ontological difference and must thus be reexamined from the purview of the difference. An experiential and categorial abyss opens out within sign functions to show the encompassing structures which limit and define the actualities and possibilities of semiotic theory. In what remains, these limits will be exhibited.

The ontological difference is not only manifest in the distinction between Being and beings but emerges whenever a given structure, trait, or event, is encompassed by something radically other. Hence this difference will be manifest in ways appropriate to the mode of reality under investigation. Three primary forms of this difference show themselves. The first is the difference between the sign and the signified. The second is the difference between a sign and the one or more series in which it is embedded. The third is the difference between the 'sum' of all actual and possible sign series and the worldhood of the world. Each of these three forms of difference or radical alterity represents a mode of the Encompassing.

In analyzing these three forms of difference we will focus on the phenomenon of worldhood which stands as the most forceful way in which the Encompassing appears for us.

The first level of the difference, that which obtains between a sign and its referent, is most clearly manifest in the sign dimensions referring to local and regional traits. The referent cannot be exhausted by the reference relations sustained by the sign or signs and exhibits the characteristics of resistance and reticence. The referent contains integrities and traits which remain hidden to the sign even though the sign may attempt to exhaust and enumerate its traits. For Husserl, the process of adumbration (*abschattungen*) empowers consciousness to sketch and shadow forth the missing facets of an intentional object (Husserl 1913). Missing traits have their own form of co-presence which can pass over into presence proper whenever they are brought before thematic intuition. However, the full contour of the referent can never be exhausted by this shadowing process, which means that the full phenomenality of the object remains obscure. For Peirce, the hidden dimension of the phenomenon is its dynamic aspect, which exerts a constraint on our interpretive acts. On this level, then, we see the difference between a sign and the hidden dimensions of the referent.

In the second form of the difference, that between a sign and its series (which is most clearly manifest in the fifth dimension of sign function), the hidden and encompassing dimensions can be seen in the traces left by the sign series in its evolution and expansion. Neither the beginning nor the end of the series can ever be brought within the purview of thought. Yet the given sign will be part of felt lines of convergence which have their own compulsive natural history. Just as the referent of the sign operates under the impress of the dynamic object, the series itself will have dynamic and immediate aspects. The dynamic object 'behind' the sign series serves to govern and order the unfolding of serial meaning. Any given sign will receive its contour and meaning value from the hidden and dynamic dimensions of the sign series within which it is embedded.

The power of the dynamic dimension of sign series is itself related to forms of continuity which link and order sign series and enable each sign to forge and sustain lines of identity with other signs in the series. The members of a sign series are not merely related through spatial or other forms of contiguity and resemblance but live out of natural continua which exert a hidden pressure on the evolution of sign material. Both the dynamic and immediate dimensions of continuity are hidden from any given sign or finite interpreter. The hidden power of dynamic continua can only be gauged by the efficacy of sign series on their immediate level. The difference between a sign and its series is more than an ontic difference between greater and lesser degrees of scope and only becomes clear in its ontological dimension when the power of

continuity is understood to be greater than the power of 'all'
continuous signs.

The third form of the ontological difference is the most
important for showing the limitations of sign theory. The distinction
between the 'sum' of all actual and possible signs and the phenome-
non of worldhood manifests its own form of resistance and measure
(Corrington 1985). This resistance is not that of hidden integrities
or of an elusive contour but speaks from beyond any understanding
of intraworldly structures. In 1929, Heidegger made the following
assertions about this form of the difference (1929: 85):

> As a totality, world "is" no particular being but rather
> that by means of and in terms of which *Dasein* gives
> itself to understand (signify) what beings it can behave
> toward and how it can behave toward them... The world
> has the basic character of the "for the sake of..." in the
> primordial sense that it insures the inner possibility of
> every factical "for your sake," "for his sake," "for its
> sake," etc.

Worldhood prevails as the "for the sake of" which provides the
access structures for the human process. Meaning horizons emerge
as the intelligible side of worldhood and contain innumerable signs
and sign series with their own lines of convergence. Worldhood
resists being encompassed by horizonal and semiotic plenitude and
actively overturns the imperial reach of signs. While signs provide
their own clearing onto the innumerable complexes of nature,
worldhood cannot be brought into the clearing by sign systems.
Rather, worldhood is that primal clearing away which gives sign
series the very 'space' within which they may function. As such,
signs only live through a presemiotic potency which enables meaning
to arise and decay within the gift which comes from out of the
difference.

Signs derive their power and import for the human process
from natural potencies which emerge from out of the heart of
nature itself. If worldhood is the clearing within which the "for the
sake of" can become manifest and meaningful, than nature lives as
the seed bed for all of those potencies that struggle into intelli-
gibility through sign systems. Justus Buchler distinguishes between
world and nature in a way that more clearly opens out our third
dimension of the ontological difference (1966: 100):

> If *natura naturata* is "the world" or "the universe," then
> *natura naturans* is the order of provision and determina-
> tion. It is reflected in the fertility of any complex
> whatever. Nature is not so much the order which contains
> or even includes all other orders as the order which
> permeates them all; not the order within which but by

which new orders are discriminable and explorable, whether through assertion, action, or contrivance.

Neither world nor nature can be encompassed by sign systems no matter how fecund or robust. Nature, as the "order of provision" is the realm of presemiotic continuity and discontinuity which makes it possible for any natural complex to become a sign in the first place. Not only is nature the ultimate "fore-structure" for the emergence and prevalence of any natural complex whatsoever, it lives as the only source and goal for signs and their meaning values. The difference between sign series and the worldhood which gives them their 'space' of intelligibility is deepened in that nature which prevails as the ultimate enabling condition for intraworldly and intranatural signs.

Signs are no more bereft of a profound rootedness in nature than prevailing without explicit recognition of the three dimensions of the ontological difference. Anthroposemiosis, which exists within the humanly occupied *Lebenswelt*, is itself grounded in larger sign networks which come from the innumerable orders of nature. In the words of John Deely (1986: 267):

> The results of such study lead inexorably far beyond the confines of human language and consciousness, into the depths of nature itself, which reveals itself more and more intimately, and throughout, as a network or web of sign relations, to borrow the felicitous analogy of Thomas Sebeok.

Each sign using organism will occupy what J. von Uexküll calls an *Umwelt.* The *Umwelt* functions as the sphere within which sign meanings can be developed and sustained (see von Uexküll 1940, Krampen 1981). Each *Umwelt* will represent a semiotic clearing onto vast orders of nature and insure that the organism remains attuned to environing structures which may help or thwart its life. In its own way, the *Umwelt* manifests the ontological difference in that it prevails as a prethematic semiotic clearing, the full contour of which is in principle unknown to its sign using organism.

It is important to stress that the *Umwelt* derives its potency and evolutionary value from a nature ripe with its own semiotic meanings. If nature is the ultimate "fore-structure" for any natural complex, then the *Umwelt* is the ultimate "fore-structure" for any sign using organism. As such, both nature and the 'sum' of all *Umwelten* prevail as originating forms of provision for any and all signs. No sign can be validated or interpreted without the presemiotic power of the *Umwelt.* Yet the inner logic, as well as the 'outer' circumference of the *Umwelt*, will always remain hidden on the other side of the ontological difference.

Worldhood encompasses all that comes to pass as a sign or symbol. It resists the hubris of outward driven meaning and brings

all sign functions to a shipwreck which momentarily shatters the sign vehicle while letting ultimate import appear within the traces of the receding sign.

Semiotic cannot speak of "the universe" or "the world" without living out of the ontological difference. Worldhood is not to be understood as a whole with delimited parts or as the set of all signs. Nor is worldhood to be envisioned as the container of all actual and possible sign meanings. If the phenomenon of the world is thought of in this manner it would follow that the structure of the container is itself translatable into semiotic structures which would be seen to govern and locate all intraworldly sign series.

The clearing away provided by the "for the sake of" is experienced by the human process as a lack or as a not-yet (Bloch 1959). This not-yet cannot be filled in by sheer semiotic plenitude. The not-yet is that which encompasses all attained meanings. As such, it lives as a lure which keeps sign systems from closure and demonic self-inflation. All three modes of the ontological difference manifest the not-yet. Insofar as the referent of a sign lures both the sign and its interpreter beyond meanings and values attained toward an adumbration of further meanings, it manifests the restless lure of the not yet. Whenever a sign series, emergent from out of its own unique *Umwelt*, lacks clarity about its own origins and goals, it stands within the receding vacuum of the not-yet. And finally, whenever sign series reject their own illusory plenitude and face into the shattering gift of the Encompassing, they feel the most forceful not-yet of that which can never participate in semiosis.

Worldhood, experienced as the lack, is itself a mode of the Encompassing. More specifically, worldhood is that side of the Encompassing that is available to us through experiences of semiotic shipwreck and foundering (Jaspers 1947). The positive side of the not-yet is hope which provides the ultimate access structure to all signs and their values, as well as showing horizons their translucency in the face of the Encompassing itself.

Semiosis participates in both sides of the ontological difference but in very different respects. Worldhood, as that mode of the Encompassing which is most forcefully manifest to the human process, resists being measured by sign systems. The human drive toward transcendence pushes against the limits of all finite structures and traits (Corrington 1987a). Consequently, nature itself exerts the ultimate counter-pressure against the eternal hubris of sign systems. While signs are deeply rooted in the innumerable orders of nature, they are never able to articulate or capture the inner mystery of the Encompassing. Like the human process from which they often come, signs are servants of that elusive presence which stands beyond all origins and goals and serves as their measure.

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