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TRANSCENDENCE AND THE LOSS OF THE SEMIOTIC SELF

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When semiotic explores the nature of the human self, it employs concepts and categories derived from a more general semiotic framework. While this is not always inappropriate, such a strategy is inclined to claim too much for the efficacy and scope of sign theory as it applies to the elusive nature of the self. The attempt to locate so-called anthroposemiosis within the larger biological structures of zoosemiosis runs the risk of effacing those traits of the human process that are distinctive among the living orders of the world. The omnivorous quality of semiotic theory is no where more evident than in its analyses of the basic features of the human process. What is needed is a more generic analysis that remains sensitive to those dimensions of the person that cannot be rendered into semiotic terms, even while retaining the legitimate semiotic dimensions of the self.

It is possible, of course, to exhibit those features of the self that are both directly and indirectly semiotic. But such an analysis, if it fails to acknowledge the power of the ontological difference and the fitful traces of transcendence, remains onesided and possibly destructive of the religious core of the self. In this context the ontological difference pertains to the radical and unbridgeable difference between semiosis and the clearing within which sign production and interpretation must occur (Corrington 1988). More importantly, the ontological difference is manifest in the pre-semiotic potencies of nature that make any order-specific meaning possible in the first place. Put in more traditional metaphysical terms, the ontological difference is that between *natura naturata* (nature natured) and *natura naturans* (nature naturing). From the semiotic perspective, nature natured corresponds to the innumerable signs and codes of the world, whereas nature naturing corresponds to the pre-formal potencies that empower semiosis.

Our first concern is to delineate the three semiotic orders pertinent to the human process and to demarcate them from the fourth and non-semiotic order. The first three orders participate in the ontological difference in a fragmented and muted fashion while the fourth order emerges from out of the heart of the ontological difference. In the first order, the public aspects of the self can be analyzed in terms

of the modes of semiotic communication available to the community of interpreters. Such a community welcomes the sign systems deposited in each of its members and has mechanisms for making such sign material available to the larger community (Corrington 1987a). In the second order, the private dimensions of the self can be analyzed in terms of the life of introspection and its endless generation of interpretants. While no "first self" or "first sign" can be isolated by introspection, lines of relevance are isolated that give some sense of the general contour of self identity. In the third order, the depth dimension of the self can be explored through an analysis of the complexes and archetypes that govern and mold phylogenetic evolution. The archetypes of the collective unconscious are themselves semiotic systems and represent powerful frameworks within and through which the self grasps its own inner being and the various meaning horizons of personal and social life (Corrington 1987). Together, these three orders, namely, the public, the introspective, and the archetypal, represent the domains within which semiotic theory can attain some clarity concerning the meaning of the human process. It is crucial that a general semiotic develop concepts rich enough to articulate and exhibit these three orders, both separately and in consort. More importantly, semiotic must locate its understanding of the human process within the larger ontological and phenomenological dimensions of nature. These features are manifest on the nether side of those semiotic systems and events that stand before experience. In what follows, I will briefly detail the main features of each of these three orders to prepare the way for a fourth type of analysis that will show the ultimate limits of a semiotic approach to the self. This will in turn reveal several dimensions of transcendence and their internal relation to the loss of the semiotic self.

The public self, that is, the self in the first order, emerges from social interaction and carries forward innumerable sign systems that have their own inner dynamism and history. As noted by Josiah Royce, the public or social self is a product of social contrast between the nascent I and the all pervasive not-I (Royce 1913). The contour of the self unfolds through an elaborate process of semiosis in which the individual enters into already established sign series and their interpretants. The social world surrounding the individual is constituted by an actual infinite of actual and possible signs. Self-identity, always shifting and fraught with tension, is to a large extent, a product of social semiosis. Insofar as the processes of social semiosis remain unconscious or pre-thematic, the self lives out of an identity that is derivative and possibly destructive. When Heidegger uses the metaphor of "fallenness", he implies, albeit in strikingly different language, that social semiosis is a ubiquitous and silent power that corrodes the uniqueness and possible autonomy of the self.

The public self prevails at the intersection of innumerable communities, some primary but most secondary and pre-thematic. The individual struggles to integrate these competing or augmenting communities in order to attain a stable contour. A given community is constituted by an endless series of interpretants that have their own codes and inner momentum. Sign series are dynamic orders that have internal trajectories manifest in the clustering of sign material. It is important to stress that the signs of community are both natural and conventional but in different respects. Many semiotic frameworks overstress the scope and force of conventional signs thereby ignoring the more pervasive natural orders that give birth to and validate sign systems. As a result, signs are seen to be cultural artifacts with no extra-cultural referents. Consider the claims of Eco (1976: 66 & 67):

> Every attempt to establish what the referent of a sign is forces us
> to define the referent in terms of an abstract entity which moreover is
> only a cultural convention. . . . What, then, is the meaning of a term?
> From a semiotic point of view it can only be a cultural unit.

This emphasis on the manipulative and conventional dimension of semiosis makes it difficult to understand the natural enabling conditions of public life. Is the public self merely the battleground of cultural codes or is it the 'place' where both natural and conventional signs struggle for transparency and some form of validation? The latter alternative makes more sense in that it enables semiotic to get clear on the political and structural possibilities latent within communal transaction. In a striking sense, the conventionalist view produces a kind of political paralysis and ignores the natural potencies that pervade and govern the public self. A genuine cultural critique is replaced by an aesthetic analysis of arbitrary cultural codes.

As noted, the public self is the locus of intersecting meaning horizons and must struggle to integrate competing sign systems. Most persons live in what Royce called "natural communities" that are rarely, if ever, self-conscious. However, within the heart of the pre-thematic natural community lies the latent power of the community of interpretation that transforms natural and conventional signs into conscious and circumscribed interpretants that can be analyzed and judged. The public self overcomes its "fallenness" insofar as it enters into an emergent community of interpretation and breaks free from the semiotic opacity and inertia of the natural community. The community of interpreters is emancipatory and open for novel forms of semiosis. Codes and their attendant signs are brought into methodic interaction with other semiotic possibilities thus expanding the scope and subtlety of the public self. This process is semiotic through and through and essential to the public self's well being.

The transition from a natural to an interpretive community runs parallel to the transformation within the introspective self. In the second order of the human process, the interpretants of inner life undergo the same movement from opacity toward illumination and self-conscious appraisal. It is a truism that the introspective self is to a large extent a product of the public self. But the correlation between the public and the private orders is far more dialectical and involves the movement backward and forward between social semiosis and introspection. The introspective self becomes thematically self-transparent insofar as it participates in the unfolding of the community of interpreters who provide the measure within which self-consciousness attains some form of validation. By the same token, the nascent community of interpretation derives much of its richness from the projected wealth of individual interpreters who externalize introspective sign systems. Consider how an artist externalizes introspective signs through an aesthetic shaping of publicly available media of expression. The interpretive community adds to its scope and interpretive power whenever it integrates such sign systems.

The introspective self is burdened with more interpretants than it can integrate and often struggles against recalcitrant or even hostile semiotic material. Many of the dominant signs of inner life are centers of autonomous power in their own right and are beyond the manipulative reach of the self. It must be stressed that the interpretants of inner life are as real and as powerful as the signs of public interaction.

Deely uses the metaphor of "embodiment" to cover both the internal and external dimensions of semiotic life (1989: 4):

> Embodiment is a general phenomenon of experience, inasmuch as whatever we encounter, learn, or share through experience has about it an aspect which is accessible by some secondary modality, be it only the physical being of marks or sounds subsumed within language and employed to create some text (a literary *corpus*, we even say) wherein resides and is conveyed some object of consideration which, we learn on occasion, while at other times knowing from the start, has no other body besides a textual one, such as the medieval unicorn, the ancient minotaur, the celestial spheres which gave occasion for the condemnation and imprisonment of Galileo.

Insofar as the celestial spheres, surely products of the introspective self, entered into public appraisal, they served to shape political interaction. Consequently, the celestial spheres were as much forms of embodiment as was Galileo, and for a certain period of history, had more efficacy. The endless dialectic between the projection of internal signs and the public assimilation of these signs marks all stages of cultural evolution.

The introspective self thus 'contains' embodied signs and struggles with and against them for some sense of self-identity. As noted, certain of these signs of inner life have a special power and dynamism and groove and shape inner life. For Jung, these unique sign systems are the true center of the self and exert a growing power over subaltern sign systems. His technical term for the dominants of inner life is the "complex". Jung states (1928: 11):

> The feeling-toned content, the complex, consists of a nuclear element and a large number of secondarily constellated associations. The nuclear element consists of two components: first a factor determined by experience and causally related to the environment; second, a factor innate in the individual's character and determined by his disposition.

The complex is a sign system in its own right as it contains the cumulative result of the self's interaction with the environment. More importantly, the complex, for example, a power complex, gathers new interpretants into its orbit and compels them to reinforce the already attained web of meanings. All experience and ideation runs the risk of falling under the power of the complexes of the unconscious. Whenever the introspective self encounters a complex it enters into the third order of the human process and is regrounded in vast evolutionary and archetypal structures.

A complex may or may not participate in an archetype. Whenever a personal complex contains an archetypal core, its power is dramatically augmented and it serves to relocate the various signs of inner life. All sign systems have an internal drive toward greater degrees of encompassment. This hunger for greater generic scope is most forcefully manifest in archetypal sign systems that absorb much of the private and public signs that belong to the individual. While Jung was not fully aware of the semiotic structures embedded within the archetypes, he was clear that the dominants of the unconscious condition all intra and inter-subjective life. Consider how a given complex, such as a father complex, conditions the introspective self. All

older male figures run the risk of being absorbed by the complex and serving a psychic economy that may be as powerful as it is mysterious. The individual caught in a father complex will restructure all experience to satisfy the imperial needs of the complex. As carefully described by Freud, such a complex can even determine the shape of religious categories. Does it follow from this that the self is merely the plaything of complexes and archetypes?

This unhappy conclusion is avoided when it is remembered that the signs of the self are permeable to the orders of nature that lie outside of the innumerable sign systems of private and social existence. Even a sign system as powerful as an archetype points away from itself toward the potencies of nature that were responsible for its emergence. These natural potencies were internalized by the self through a kind of introjection long before they were projected outward onto the world. Consequently, a father complex would make no sense at all were it not for forms of domination and power that unfold within pre-human and extra-human orders. Put in colloquial terms, an archetypal sign system always has somewhere to hang its hat.

The dynamism of the collective unconscious is manifest in its continual ability to spawn and shape archetypal images that form the true identity of the self. Both instinct and ideation emerge from the archetypal sign systems that have their ultimate source in nature. It would not be inappropriate to see the archetypes as codes, provided that the concept of coding looses its arbitrary and constructivist connotations. Both private and public orders are encompassed by the complexes and archetypes of the unconscious.

The first three orders of the self, the public, the introspective, and the archetypal, live within embodied signs and sign systems and struggle toward some unity. The introspective self grapples with its complexes and archetypes so as to attain a stable public existence. By the same token, the public self attempts to shape and control internal semiosis so that it does not intrude too dramatically on public life. The more encompassing archetypal order imposes its own semiotic structures on the first two orders and gives them little peace. No task is more fraught with difficulty than that of integrating these three semiotic orders. For the most part, the individual makes a series of tactical compromises that assure momentary stability for this infinite semiotic wealth. Ironically, the true unity of the self cannot be found within the three semiotic orders and must come from a realm on the other side of semiosis.

The fourth order of the self cannot be described through analogies derived from the first three orders. In approaching this final realm, different language must be used to elucidate the self beyond the self of signs. Transcendence emerges over against the first three orders giving them a new sense of their ultimate limitations. The power of transcendence is a postsemiotic power that cannot be circumscribed by any sign system no matter how fecund.

Transcendence exists in tension with embodiment. Following Deely we asserted that all signs, be they internal or external, are embodied. There is no such thing as a non-embodied sign. Yet the category of embodiment has its own other in the category of transcendence and must efface itself before this other. When a given sign points toward transcendence it ceases to be a sign and becomes what Karl Jaspers calls a "cipher". For Jaspers, cipher script lies beyond semiosis and illuminates that which has no contour or semiotic identity. While we can secure and examine signs,

even those that are especially elusive, we cannot hold fast to ciphers of transcendence. For Jaspers (1962: 231 & 167):

> But no cipher can be held fast. Whether it is an idea or an image, it can be neither known nor embodied; it remains suspended and evanescent in the movement of our temporal imagination. . . . The tension lies in transcendence as manifested to us both in ciphers and beyond all ciphers. Any relaxation of this tension plunges us either into the infinite void of mere Being or into an unequivocal theistic piety that will turn image and likeness into transcendence itself.

The tension between embodiment and non-embodiment is pervasive in the human process and lives out of the heart of the ontological difference. If signs are embodied, ciphers live on the razor's edge between embodiment and non-embodiment. On the deepest level, ciphers actively overturn all of the embodied forms that are used to express them. Ciphers are fundamentally religious and open themselves to the God beyond the God of signs. Ciphers are not conventional but derive their peculiar potency from nature naturing. The self enters into the evanescent cipher script whenever it lets go of its semiotic plenitude and becomes permeable to the abyss that stands beneath all signs. Any given religious sign can become a cipher of transcendence by denying its culture-specific referents. For the Christian, for example, this would mean that the symbol of the Christ ceases to be the locus of a historical incarnation and empties itself before transcendence. The true Christ would disappear at the very moment that it would be grasped by the self.

Transcendence is not free floating any more than it can exist without a specific location. To envision some special realm of transcendence is to ignore the fitful role of transcendence in giving shape to the human process. Signs live out of the tension between finitude and transcendence and provide a map of the movement of the self between these two poles. Insofar as a sign 'clings' to its semiotic content, it points toward those dimensions of the self that remain embedded within the orders of the world. Insofar as a sign becomes transfigured into cipher script, it lets go of its semiotic plenitude and evokes a sense of transcendence. The unique existential power of cipher script derives from the fact that it participates in both side of the semiotic/post-semiotic divide. On the semiotic side, cipher script re-empowers signs so that they may evoke more open meanings and thereby free the self from semiotic inertia. On the post-semiotic side, cipher script brings the self into correlation with *natura naturans* so that the potencies of nature may measure and articulate the self.

Does the semiotic self cease to exist in the moment of transcendence? It is tempting to split off the semiotic self from the self-in-transcendence and to argue that the post-semiotic self cancels the previous three orders of the person. However, the situation is far more complex. In the moment of transcendence, which should not be understood in spatial terms, the semiotic self is briefly suspended and denied any direct efficacy. It is as if the semiotic self recedes from view. Yet the correlation between transcendence and the self contains a deeper logic.

At the moment of transcendence, the self recognizes the "not" that lies within it and allows this "not" or "not-yet" to enter into its internal and external signs. Insofar as the semiotic self becomes permeable to the self-in-transcendence it recognizes the intrinsic limitations of all signs and meaning horizons. By living on the boundary

between signs and ciphers, the self learns the inner freedom of the religious life. After the encounter with transcendence, the self can no longer ignore the emptiness that lies within all sign systems. This emptiness transforms semiosis and makes it open to the potencies of nature that have no ultimate shape or contour. Signs remain embodied but become more reticent to exert their imperial claims on the self.

The self is thus compelled to participate in both sides of the ontological difference, i.e., the difference between nature natured (the world's complexes) and nature naturing (the potencies of nature). These are dimensions *within* nature and do not split nature into two separate realms. For the most part, the self remains oblivious to nature naturing and thus lives out of the signs that pertain to nature natured. In the three orders of the self that are pertinent to nature natured, that is, the public, the introspective, and the archetypal orders, signs function to give shape to a full human contour that, while ofttimes elusive and fraught with mystery, yet remains knowable and traceable. In the fourth order, correlated to nature naturing, the semiotic self is shriven of its plenitude and serves the deeper potencies of nature that are without shape or voice.

The semiotic self is regained only after it is lost. All signs become remade when they point toward the cipher script that eludes all semiosis. The semiotic self remains in tension with the post-semiotic self and learns to live out of the grace of transcendence. In the words of Jaspers (1962: 286), "From embodiment to speechless-ness--this is the path we must tread over and over."

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