

the review of  
**metaphysics**

a philosophical quarterly

---

Review: [untitled]

Author(s): Robert S. Corrington

Reviewed work(s):

Semiotics in the United States by Thomas A. Sebeok

Source: *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Dec., 1992), pp. 422-423

Published by: Philosophy Education Society Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20129361>

Accessed: 02/07/2009 17:58

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=pes>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Philosophy Education Society Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Review of Metaphysics*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

ontologically inescapable,” and that “one cannot escape the existence of universals”; but it then asserts the ultimacy of the question whether there are universals. It divides the field of theories about universals into such inane categories as the “straightforward” versus the “more complex.” It serves up such truisms as, “Without [universals] there could be no language as we understand it,” and, “Thinking and language go hand in hand.”

The introductions to the individual selections are not more helpful. In discussing St. Thomas, for example, Schoedinger says that “form acts on matter to give it recognition as types of things” (p. 35); in introducing Duns Scotus, that “the morning star and the evening star refer to the same thing—the planet Venus” (p. 42); and in opening for Strawson, that “a particular, to be a particular, requires more than the meanings [sic] of a singular substantival expression” (p. 212). It might be too much to demand that the editor of an anthology should display a clear understanding of the material he presents, but surely it is not too much to expect of both editor and publisher that introductions be presented in at least rough conformity with standard grammatical conventions.

On the other hand, perhaps these flaws are not fatal. I often encourage my students not to bother with introductory essays in anthologies, for better or worse preferring my own backgrounding to the editorial comments of others. Furthermore, I cannot imagine trying to do a truly comprehensive historical presentation of the problem of universals in a single term or semester. So I, and perhaps others, might be able to make good use of Shoedinger’s book, just as a sampler of important ideas and arguments on its subject. In the absence of the packages of copied readings so many of us had learned to rely upon, this anthology might prove to be pedagogically valuable despite its shortcomings. It certainly provides ample material for fruitful study and discussion, and suggests more.—Peter C. Appleby, *University of Utah*.

SEBEOK, Thomas A. *Semiotics in the United States*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. 173 pp. Cloth, \$29.95; paper, \$10.95—Semiotics in America has had a long and rich history. It has been customary to begin historical accounts with Peirce, and to trace his influence through subsequent generations of semioticians as they in turn encounter Continental structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics. Sebeok’s account strikes out in new directions by tracing semiotics back to Native American sources (in the mode of the hunter-tracker), moving through the “book of Nature” framework of subsequent Eurocentric North Americans, passing through literary models (such as the detective fiction of Poe), and moving forward into nineteenth-century sources that in some respects made Peircean pragmatism possible.

Sebeok gives particular attention to the correlation between language and nature in the American tradition, and insists that

contemporary semiotic theory remains impoverished insofar as it refuses to acknowledge earlier sources that took the priority of nature seriously. Sebeok quotes, with some approval, the amateur philosopher Alexander Bryan Johnson (lecturing in Utica, New York in 1825): "My lectures will endeavor to subordinate language to nature, to make nature the expositor of words, instead of making words the expositors of nature" (pp. 12–13). Needless to say, Emerson could make similar claims effective because of soil already well prepared.

Sebeok takes pains to show how early American writers anticipated many of the insights later developed by Peirce. In particular, he shows how such now-classical Peircean distinctions as: icon/index/symbol and sign/object/interpretant, were already common coin among American religious and philosophical writers. More and more commentators (for example, David Savan) are coming to the recognition that there is a rich field of pre-Peircean semiotic theory awaiting further exploration.

Long active in animal research, the domain now known as zoosemiotics, Sebeok argues that semiotic theory needs to remain in deep contact with the life sciences so that its own categorial structures reflect the more pervasive structures of natural forms of communication and signification. Referring to the biological theories of Jakob von Uexküll, Sebeok argues that animals inhabit a semiotic *Umwelt* (environment or semiotic modeling system) that is species specific. The *Umwelt* provides the animal with a way of exchanging information with nature. "Behavior" is here defined as the "sign trafficking among different *Umwelten*" (p. 103). Preverbal forms of semiosis connect the animal to its own *Umwelt* and to other *Umwelten*. Only the language-using animal, studied by the discipline of anthroposemiosis, can create possible *Umwelten*, or, more appropriately, lifeworlds, and thereby open out an unbounded number of semiotic possibilities.

The historical and conceptual analyses are frequently spiced with rich anecdotal accounts. Sebeok, himself a central part of the history of semiotics, recounts his relations with such figures as Cassirer, Jakobson, Morris, Langer, and Maritain. This conveys some of the inner history of American semiotics in a way that might not otherwise be possible. It also sketches in stark outline some of the tensions among the various practitioners of the craft of semiotics.

In tracing out the most recent versions of semiotic theory, Sebeok gives short shrift to the tradition inspired by Lacan, referring derisively to "the cold leftovers of the French psychoanalytic bazaar" (p. 86). On the other hand, he gives very high marks to what he calls the "Dominican vein in semiotics," running from Aquinas, to Poinot, to Maritain, to John Deely. It is a shame that there was not more said about Deely's many contributions to several distinctive branches of semiotic theory, or about the important cross-fertilization between the Dominican and Peircean traditions.

This book is an invaluable historical, conceptual, and anecdotal account of the rise of semiotics in the United States. In addition, it contains an extensive bibliography that enhances its intrinsic value. The style is engaging and exhibits the vast richness of the author's mind.—Robert S. Corrington, *Drew University Theological School*.