

SIGNS OF UNMEANING

A Response to Sonesson's "What is Cognitive Semiotics?"

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In his brief and dense work, *The Human Use of Signs, Or Elements of Anthroposemiosis* (published in 1994), John Deely writes that the semiotic analysis proper to criticism—as that species-specifically human intellectual activity whereby we exercise a conscious control over objectivity—concerns the integrity of a pattern of significations.¹ The negative duty of the critic, then, is to discern when a pattern of significations lacks such integrity, and articulate this lack to the audience.

With all due respect, it is just such a lack of integrity which is found in Professor Sonesson's presentation, "What is Cognitive Semiotics?" (with no intention of signifying anything concerning his *subjective*, moral integrity). I will restrict the remarks constituting this response to three brief comments.

First, Prof. Sonesson (at 7:15) references vol.4, §3 in the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, with the paraphrase that "to use the term 'sign' for something in fact much more general than the sense this term habitually carries is 'injurious.'" This, however, is a misrepresentation of Peirce's actual words. The passage in question provides a reconsideration of terms used in the well-known 1867 paper, "On a New List of Categories", wherein Peirce had initially named his three categories as Quality, Relation, and Representation. In this reflection, penned c.1906, Peirce writes:²

But I was not then aware that undecomposable relations may necessarily require more subjects than two; for this reason *Reaction* is a better term [for Secondness]. Moreover, I did not then know enough about language to see that to attempt to make the word *representation* serve for an idea so much more general than any it habitually carried, was injudicious. The word *mediation* would be better [for Thirdness]. Quality, reaction, and mediation will do. But for scientific terms, Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, are to be preferred as being entirely new words without any false associations whatever.

Now, it is rather clear to anyone who has read or studied much Peirce, that while signs do indeed partake of the nature of Thirdness, he by no means disavows the use of the term *sign*; and, indeed, *Thirdness* is much more general than *sign*, for which reason, the use of *representation* in place of Thirdness indeed was "injudicious" (with it an open question as to whether that makes it also *injurious*).

¹ Deely 1994: *The Human Use of Signs, Or Elements of Anthroposemiosis*, ¶228: "here it is not a question of the integrity of the inquirer but rather of the integrity of the pattern of significations into which inquiry is made."

² Peirce c.1906: *CP.4.3*.

This misstep in scholarship would not be so problematic did Sonesson not rely upon the implicated diminution of the sign's importance for his claims concerning phenomenology and meaning, to which I will turn in my third comment.

But, before that, my second comment, which concerns the history of semiotics. Throughout his presentation, Sonesson posits semiotics as a "tradition of research"—presumably, of research into signs. This tradition is divided into two "circles"—as occurring before semiotics began its emergence as an explicit discipline: the first circle comprising those thinkers from antiquity through the late Iberian scholastics, and the second, of those Enlightenment authors (broadly construed), from Descartes to Wilhelm Humboldt—which two circles are succeeded by the traditions instituted by Saussure and Peirce. What I would challenge, here, is the posit that the Enlightenment constitutes a genuine contribution to a *doctrina signorum* in any way systematic or essentially (rather than merely incidentally) fruitful. For, certainly, we have Locke's *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* to thank for the term "semiotics" as we now use it.³ But others, such as Condillac—however much they may have written on "signs"—were nevertheless unquestioningly committed to the implicit idealism and nominalism which pervaded the modern era. As Condillac writes, "Whether we raise ourselves, to speak metaphorically, into the heavens or descend into the abyss, we do not go beyond ourselves; and we never perceive anything but our own thought."⁴ While there may be, in the works of such writers, many contributions that benefit semiotics, they do so *in spite* of their principles, and not because of them.

To put this otherwise: the mere fact that these men wrote about signs by no means makes them cognizant of the sign's true nature. That they and their works, as an "Enlightenment tradition of sign studies", lead to Saussure, as Sonesson claims (at 13:42), only reinforces the claim that they depart from the properly proto-semiological tradition stretching from Augustine to Poincaré—that modernity constitutes a tradition that, on the whole, accepts and struggles with a posited chasm between mind and world. But every effort to bridge the chasm of mind and world from the side of nominalism only widens the gap. To retrieve a scholastic realism—as did Peirce—is "postmodern", therefore, in that it moves us beyond this deviant, deficient "Enlightenment tradition".

Third—and here my comment is very brief indeed, given the matter—the attempts which have been made not only by Prof. Sonesson but some others over the recent years to draw a fruitful connection between semiotics and Husserlian phenomenology is mistaken. Peirce himself regarded Husserl as irredeemably psychologistic, despite the lengthy prolegomena refuting psychologism in the *Logische Untersuchungen*. As he writes:⁵

³ The history of which term Deely most thoroughly explicates in 2005: *Why Semiotics?*

⁴ 1746: *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, 11. Other thinkers within this tradition, particularly those on the empiricist side of things, may be subtler than Condillac—such as Herder—and yet their tacit commitment to idealism and nominalism can be noticed if one has the eyes to see (e.g., in Herder's 1772: *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 106-07, where the impressions of sense are as subjectivized as they are in Locke or any other empiricist).

⁵ Peirce c.1906: CP.4.7 – note this passage comes only a few paragraphs after the passage Sonesson earlier misrepresented.

How many writers of our generation (if I must call names, in order to direct the reader to further acquaintance with a generally described character – let it be in this case the distinguished Husserl), after underscored protestations that their discourse shall be of logic exclusively and not by any means of psychology (almost all logicians protest that on file), forthwith become intent upon those elements of the process of thinking which seem to be special to a mind like that of the human race, *as we find it*, to too great neglect of those elements which must belong, as much to any one as to any other mode of embodying the same thought.

Or again:⁶

Those whom we may as roughly call the German school of logicians, meaning such writers as Christoph Sigwar, Wundt, Schuppe, Benno Erdmann, Julius Bergmann, Glogau, Husserl, etc., are engaged upon problems which must be acknowledged to underlie the others, but attack them in a manner which the exact logicians regard as entirely irrelevant, because they make *truth*, which is a matter of fact, to be a matter of a way of thinking or even linguistic expression.

As his own student, Heidegger wrote, “Husserl falls back with his phenomenological description of the phenomena of consciousness into the position of psychologism he had just refuted”.⁷ Succinctly stated, the “meaning” of the *noema* (the *Sinn*) intended in Husserl’s phenomenology, while it may always be “directed at the thing”, the whole analysis of this meaning arises from and is conducted within the psyche of the one intending; one may go “to the things themselves”, but how can one ever be sure that the terminus of such a cognitive relation is, indeed, at the *thing*, and not just one’s conception of the thing?

Now, it is obvious that the complex thought of Husserl deserves more than the short, sharp, and even adumbrated criticisms of others—he deserves to speak for himself, and, indeed, to be criticized in himself. But for the purposes of this response (aimed not at Husserl but at the employment of what is here being called Husserlian phenomenology), I believe Prof. Sonesson’s discarding of “sign” in favor of the Husserlian “meaning”—a product of consciousness, affecting naught but a pretense of “scientific objectivity” just as inapplicable to the world of actual experience as Kant’s—exhibits *why* such a project may be doomed: for *meaning itself* becomes increasingly the *product* of our cognitive actions, rather than the *discovery* which it unveils. Thus, it is a slippery but short slope not merely back into the philosophical modernism of the so-called Enlightenment, but into the even darker recesses of *ultramodernity*.

⁶ 1904: CP.8.189.

⁷ 1969: *Mein Weg in die Phänomenologie*, 83/76.