

CHAPTER I

The paradox of “nature” and psychosemiosis

Meaning is the genus of which conscious meaning is a species. Its specific differences from meaning per se must be shaped and delineated with care. This entails that the concept of consciousness will be rotated through different axes of reflection, each of which will serve to undermine the centrality of the concept in a generic semiotics of meaning. The inversion of the accepted genus/species relation, which affirms that meaning is exclusively within the provenance of consciousness, requires a painstaking search for an adequate language that can reflect a genus (meaning) that is fully encompassing and yet incarnated in specific moments of meaning in specific orders of relevance. The principles of such an inversion are the principles of the semiotics of nature, the most generic perspective from/within which to participate in the panoply of meaning. The fact that such a generic perspective has eluded philosophy and theology is more the function of failed attempts to unfold a nonpolemical understanding of nature than of any structural weakness in the internal equipment of semiotic theory itself. Hence the success of such an enterprise rests on the prior delineations of nature, the most elusive and yet the most essential category within thought itself. On the deepest level, the concept of “nature” functions as both a category and a precategory, but in *very* different respects.

A richer conceptualization of nature puts creative pressure on those specific semiotic theories that reinforce the provincial views of only one sign user in the known universe. Purging any perspective of anthropomorphisms is profoundly difficult. Metaphors elide quickly into the human spheres of relevance and derive their seeming efficacy from this rootedness in the familiar territory of consciousness. There is a warmth in such metaphors and analogies that commends them over and over again. Meaning is reductively seen as that which enhances the sense of self, the sense of centered awareness, and the sense of place in the semiotic world. What is being called for here is a different and more

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radical kind of Copernican revolution than that enacted by Kant, which merely served to relocate (a priori) meaning within the sovereign sphere of the judging self, while failing to locate that self in nature.

This revolution moves from a heliocentric universe to one of rapidly shifting foci that have their own evolutionary and internal principles, come what may for the prospects of the self. Kant's Copernican revolution forced him into a deadly dualism between a Newtonian universe of causal action and a noncausal noumenal (mental) domain of freedom that could find only a bare analogical connection to the kingdom of nature. His nature was thus too small and his self too large. The more radical Copernican revolution will reverse this heliocentric triumphalism for one more somber yet more attuned to the rhythms of the universes of signs, entailing a semiotic cosmology that has a humbled place for the human. This completes the process of the self-limitation of reason set out by Kant in his *Critiques* by devolving consciousness and its capacities into the self-shaping of nature, the ultimate measure of all signification for any order of relevance whatsoever. This devolution is not so much a critique of all pure signs as it is an affirmation of signification in its infinite varieties. Criticism is a subaltern process within the larger enterprise of the movement of categorial encompassing.

Historically this places the current work within the Hegelian aspiration of a dialectic disclosure of the primal structures of the world. Currently, philosophy has falsely let go of the rhythms of the world for the alleged free-space of projection and willful sign manipulation; a species of narcissism. But is this contemporary view an adequate gauge of the powers of a renewed philosophical and theological probing of nature? It is ironic that astronomy and physics have regained a categorial boldness to probe into the origin and destiny of space-time, while philosophy and theology have settled for cold porridge and a mock humility that actually masks a frustrated will to power. It is far more compelling to take some metaphysical hope from the fact that nature's disclosure, in one of its dimensions (energy/matter), is a signpost that other parallel, but not identical, enterprises can also delineate the features of nature. The image of nature is not the patriarchal one of Nietzsche's "coy mistress" so much as it is an infinite vine of growing and dying significations. These significations are: (1) preconscious, (2) conscious, and (3) postconscious, in ways to be unfolded. No given meaning, or vine leaf, would be at all if it were not effective in the larger world of meanings.

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The situation of meaning in the world is far more like that of analyst to analysand than that of would-be seducer to a mocking and reticent conquest. In the former analogy, nature serves as the analyst who opens out the depth-structures of signification, but without guile or intention. The semiotic cosmologist is the analysand whose dreams are rooted in the depth-dreams of nature.

Nature's dreams are no more arbitrary than our own. Nor are they somehow in the domain of the "unreal," a concept that has no meaning within any perspective that has a more refined sense of the innumerable types and forms of the "real." As formulated by Justus Buchler, the metaphysical tone of this enterprise is one that affirms "ontological parity"; namely, the view that everything whatsoever is real in the way that it is and that it makes no sense to say that something privileged, such as matter, is more real than something else. The opposite view is that of "ontological priority," which asserts, or at least implies, that the paradigmatic order is the measure for the really real. In the current horizon, textuality has assumed the role of the really real and has pushed all other contenders into mere cameo roles on the stage of thought. One of the more successful definitions goes, "The word *text* ... means something very specific. It is, literally, a 'putting together' of signifiers to produce a message, consciously or unconsciously, osmotically or mimetically. The text can be either verbal or nonverbal. In order for a text to signify or to be decoded, one must know the code to which the signifiers belong" (Danesi 1993: 44). As a more generic definition than many, this implied ontological frame at least allows textuality to enter into the unconscious and the nonverbal. But we are left with an uneasiness about the natural locatedness of texts in something pretextual.

And pity the poor referent of the text that is a mere shadow of the lead actor – a kind of frustrated understudy that never gets a chance to strut and fret across the stage of life! And pity the even poorer playwright (nature) that doesn't even get top billing. Diagnosis is called for.

Sweeping pseudo-categories like "modernism" and "postmodernism" reveal little of the historical situation in which thought finds itself. Such alleged historical markers cling to a repressed, but fully operative, Christian eschatology (doctrine of the history of the self-disclosure and consummation of the divine). Consciousness is held to be in the grip of dispensations that come from the mysterious momentum of history, as if history were a kind of cosmic player that is larger in scope and power than nature. Nature is reduced to a stage upon which the external unfolding of the shapes of consciousness get worked out by an inner

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logic known only to the privileged few. The so-called modernist self is enframed by mathematical structures of static space and time and has an unbroken center of awareness that moves outward from a secure and known foundation, while the so-called postmodern self is empty of any traces of internal inertia or resistance that would mark a trajectory in time and space. Yet the question remains: how many members of the human community actually relate to self and world in either of these ways? In what sense is either model of the self rooted in the phenomenological data? In spite of the rhetorical bravado of the postmodern horizon, the travails of the self remain indifferent to these ironically grand historical narratives. The self in its fitful unfolding is neither modernist nor postmodern, but something at once more simple and more tragic.

The simplicity of the self lies in its almost blind movement to gather signs and meanings together around some dimly lit project that is being reshaped by the already attained signs of nature. The tragedy of the self lies in a kind of primal opacity to both its various histories and its ultimate meaning horizon, should one even exist. Nature is the genus of which innumerable histories are subspecies. There is only "one" nature (an inept and too "knowledgeable" a formulation), but uncountable histories. The self moves into and out of histories of varying scope, while it cannot move into or out of nature, for the stated reason that there is nothing whatsoever that is not continuous with at least one other order of relevance "within" nature.

With an astonishing self-delusion, postmodern perspectives have severed all ties from genuine and effective forms of history, while masking the ultimate precategory relation to the innumerable orders of the world. It is as if each so-called historical actor writes his or her own lines as they are spoken, assuming that the cumulative effect, where even desired, amounts to something like a cultural and social narrative. Caution must be exerted with this analogy, however, lest it is assumed that nature is a playwright in the human sense; namely, a person with a specific narrative that only has to be read like the medieval book of nature. Nature *is* like a playwright, in senses to be disclosed later, but only insofar as intentionality and singularity are stripped away by thought.

Until thought *finally* frees itself from the subterranean presence of the patriarchal categories of the three Western monotheisms, which only reinforce grand historical narratives and the abjection (unconscious fear, denial, and repression) of nature, any hopes for an emancipated

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and generic perspective will be thwarted. Yet there are universalist momenta within these theologies that provide some hope that a clearing can be found outside of the manic delusions of a grand and consummating history. Philosophy remains in hidden bondage to theology, especially in those places where it has felt itself to be most liberated; namely, when it thinks it has unbound Isaac from the knife threatened from above by Abraham (Genesis 22). The bonds still hold, both in a lingering patriarchal sense of sacrifice, which produces an allegedly emptying self, and in an inverse belief that bonds can be stripped away by a kind of semiotic *jouissance* (an ecstatic freedom from the so-called "name of the Father" as denoted by Julia Kristeva). But these bonds, rarely acknowledged as such, still hold consciousness within itself even when it thinks that it has walked away from the mountain of despair and closure. What if there is a different and more natural starting point, one which asserts that Isaac (philosophy) has unconsciously bound and freed itself over and over again without understanding the cunning which links it to patriarchal forms of theology and its monolithic history of histories? In this rotation of thought toward the experience of the plane, there is no antecedent binding and unbinding, only the more prosaic process of continual transformation within shifting orders that know absolutely nothing of Abraham's knife and its alleged divine compulsion. Mountain-top experiences can prove to be dangerous in more than one way, and must always be looked at with some suspicion. Philosophers from Plato to Heidegger have continued to elevate and make normative experiences that shadow the overwhelming majority of our semiotic transactions. And the patriarchal form of theology rarely ventures into the planes at all, unless in the guise of a mendicant pointing toward the lost paradise above.

Is theology more anthropomorphic than philosophy? No. Yet philosophy continues to borrow much of its power from those human projections that have a privileged place within theories of the divine and its alleged role in history. Changing language games does not necessarily change the depth-grammar which they struggle to show. Talking of the postmodern self is but another surface grammar framing the presumed act of god's liberation of Isaac from death on the paradigmatic peak experience of the mountain. Talking of the resultant free-play of signs within the liberated self is still to talk of an opened clearing provided (only) by the elusive god of history.

Freud's theory of dream interpretation is appropriate in this narrow sphere of depth to surface grammar correlation. The cunning and

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unconscious dream work takes the original depth-narrative, emergent from a wish, and renders it more palatable to the self, but without changing its essence when it goes from its latent to its manifest stage. The latent content here is the already-projected sense of being held by the powers that emerge out of (divine) history rather than nature. The dream work moves this offense to our narcissism into the more flattering view that the self is actually self-liberating and fully autonomous within the flow of history that now carries its innumerable personal signs. The patriarchal drama of a wish for world mastery *or* for blissful semiotic annihilation continues to operate in a hidden way in the surface grammar of the narrative. The self is trapped in the depth-grammar which is denied, while the manifest content of the waking dream becomes detached and allegedly self-grounding.

The so-called postmodern horizon is still deeply ensnared within the monotheistic rage for order and control, even while masking that control through the shifting play of surface grammars. Isaac always carries the scars of his experience no matter how it is retold from the plane of recovery and so-called liberation. His bonds and their unraveling are hidden images that enter into philosophy where and when they are least expected. In a more radical naturalism, bonds are seen for what they are, finite products of a nature that has no divine agent who could command that the self be bound. This anti-naturalist form of the theological narrative is thus a closed feedback loop that only reinforces its own ignorance of the actual rhythms of the real within which awareness unfolds.

For an emancipated philosophy there are no Abrahams and no Isaacs, no men of the mountain who wrestle with a counter-measure that remains hidden in utter darkness. There is no inheritance and no providence, only goods and provisions that remain fitful at best. Mystery does exist, but not within the confines of the patriarchal monotheisms, where all mysteries are self-generated to protect and reinforce antecedent commitments. The true locus of mystery, which has no *locus* at all, is in the depth-dimension of nature as encountered in the paradox of the precategoryal. The concept of “nature” lies on the volatile cusp between the categorial, where generic categories are framed in language, and the precategoryal, where all such categories are pulled back into the abyss that has no contour and no history. The burden of any sustained reflection on this paradox is great. On the categorial side, outmoded or simply impoverished conceptual structures need to be continually reconstructed to accommodate the sheer complexity of the innumerable

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orders of the world better. This can only be done in dialogue with the histories of philosophy and theology. On the pre-categorical side, which has no *side* at all, language is left in suspension yet continually drawn into a dialectic with the categorial. This paradox has presented itself to thought over and over again, but has rarely attained a level of self-transparency concerning the enabling fore-structure of the categorial. Honorific and inflated theological categories are usually imported into the paradox in order to render it more innocuous, even when the rhetorical machinery of a perspective moves in the opposite direction. Heidegger's astonishing failure to honor his own intent in this regard is the most dramatic and sustained in the contemporary period, precisely when his delineations of *Sein* or *Seyn* bring in the third bridging term between Being and the thing in being through such politically charged images as the gods or the escort who announces the appropriating and gathering event that ironically blunts the sheer magnitude of the paradox of nature's self-fissure into the categorial and the pre-categorical.

Is there, then, only the mocking "tone" of utter silence when confronting the pre-categorical aspect of nature, or is there some way of bringing it into the provenance of thought that does not violate its own fore-structure? Is the shift to a kind of liturgical or poetic language appropriate, so that the nature of assertion is broken open by a preassertive giving of language? Or is this movement to and within the poetic a mask for a deeper poverty of thought? What about following the early Wittgenstein and pushing assertive language to its outer limits so that something not said (*gesagt*) can show (*zeigen*) itself; or in yet another strategy, making a frontal assault with analogical bridges that push the missing fourth term forward in a direct way; or, in perhaps the most daring strategy of all, following the Zen master and simply pointing toward suchness, thus rendering any linguistic enterprise or prolegomenon worthless?

In the current enterprise all such strategies are rejected so that thought can reassert itself on the categorial side, reawakening Hegel's enterprise through an *emancipatory reenactment* of the sheer breadth of his conceptual strategy, while burrowing down into the self-fissuring within nature through robust categorial structures that have proven their worth in exhibiting the manifest orders of the world. Poetic contrivance has its own astonishing lucidity and mystery, but represents a kind of fool's gold to philosophy, a glittering presence that says far too little while seeming to say just the right amount at the right time. Analogical bridges are club-footed at best, merely stretching lazy connections that

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limp toward an elusive goal. The Wittgensteinian approach, in spite of a compelling crystalline clarity, represents the most extreme form of fatigue of all, a kind of letting go of the “strenuousness of the concept” so that a but partially paid-for mystery can envelop language and leave it suspended in its own rotations. The Zen approach leaves the categorial side completely unattended, and makes any prospect of a semiotic cosmology impossible. This last alternative represents anything other than fatigue, but does isolate the sign-using self from those forms of natural and cultural signs that are always and everywhere compelling in their own evolutionary terms. The self must traffic in the categorial (the domain of signs) and the precategorial (the presemiotic), regardless of the prospect of an ultimate Zen-like escape hatch.

Let us be clear why this generic enterprise is held to have a burdensome dimension. There are two aspects that compel thought to its edges and which, each in its own way, require a kind of resourcefulness that must make do with natural language rather than with a technical language such as mathematics. It may seem that an analysis or description of the categorial is easier in all respects than an effort to open up the precategorial through language. But this optimism vanishes once the very first conceptual moves are made and the sheer regionality of language shows itself. Wittgenstein was not completely wrong in his so-called “later” philosophy when he engaged in a phenomenology of finite life-forms and their attendant language games. His sensitivity to disanalogy represents a cautionary note that must often be sounded within any generic probing of the traits of the world. Yet even within the confines of his methodological and metaphysical pluralism there are hidden generic moves that operate behind the scenes in a variety of ways. Like Heidegger he argues that language is revelatory of structures not of its own making. Language discloses regional ontologies that are normative and even humbling for philosophy.

It is impossible to avoid the paradox of importing or implying generic moves even when the concepts of difference or regionality are privileged. Language is itself caught in this bifurcation insofar as it has terms that seem generic yet admit of their opposite, such as that primal pairing of “being” and “nonbeing.” Regional terms such as “textuality” have their own generic intent insofar as they are implicitly held to cover anything whatsoever in whatever way it is manifest to the self who is *also* defined as a text in its own right. Few things are more embarrassing within philosophy than watching a self-styled regional perspective struggle to mask its own hidden Napoleonic ambitions behind a rhetoric

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that serves the needs of a political agenda while utterly failing to deliver self-conscious categories that do unveil the structures and traits of nature. How many of the champions of difference over and against identity understand that they have already met their Waterloo, long before the rhetorical splendor of their linguistic charge was displayed on the battlefield?

Military metaphors represent the height of the “incorrect” in our era, even though as gentle a soul as Kant used them to great effect in his first *Critique*. Kant’s language can often be as muscular as that of William James, as when Kant argues: “it [metaphysics] is rather a battlefield, and indeed one that appears to be especially determined for testing one’s powers in mock combat; on this battlefield no combatant has ever gained the least bit of ground, nor has any been able to base any lasting possession on his victory” (Cambridge edition Bxv). Kant’s intent is to develop a military strategy that will radically shift the scene of battle to one in which he has the high ground of the *synthetic a priori* which will remain safe from any fusillades of the empirical or phenomenal forces of his opponents. It would be naive to assume that he didn’t take this image of a philosophical war of attrition to heart. Add to this his repeated images of the law court in which the stern judge brings nonexperiential uses of reason to book for misdeeds against the heart and soul, and it is easy to see that Kant saw himself as playing for very high stakes indeed.

For good or ill, philosophers rarely take prisoners, and assume that their own categorial array is exhaustive of whatever is. To admit this in public would be the epitome of indiscretion, yet such a belief animates the enterprise and its practitioners. To put the point in the form of an only half-humorous question: can there be more than one philosopher? In a sense there cannot be. Yet there are innumerable ways in which even a perspective that openly wants to be generic and capacious can become permeable to other horizons and other forms of linguistic contrivance that have their own, not necessary merely subaltern, power. Each philosophical perspective is generic in its own way, and there are no good arguments for proceeding as if this were not so. Unconsciousness is a sin in therapy and in philosophy, precisely where the unconscious aspect gains power and disrupts otherwise healthy features of the self and its perspective(s). By the same token what were thought to be generic categories were often regional or even tribal in dangerous ways. For example, the Western concept of “ego,” held to be a centered identity at the heart of the field of consciousness, may be a regional concept that is neither generic nor normative for all members of the

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species. And even the seemingly innocent concept of "species" may contain destructive seeds insofar as it may entail a predicate cluster that effaces key features of the human process.

The answer to the difficulty posed by the first part of thought's dilemma, namely, the inevitable tension between the generic and the regional in language, is clear. The philosophical use of language must be as conscious as possible of the generic momentum within regional language, while also showing how each generic move can mask regional and tribal structures that blunt the momentum of thought. Dewey put it most succinctly when he wrote of metaphysics, the heart of philosophy, as dealing with the "generic traits of existence." The point is to frame a metaphysics well and to work and rework each linguistic contrivance so that it is not asked to carry a load it is not suited for, if such be the case, or to let a given linguistic array unfold its own internal power without hindrance from hidden political agendas. There is no such thing as the "end of metaphysics," only more or less adequate categorial frameworks that have varying degrees of opening power to disclose the traits of the world on roughly their own terms.

NATURE, ARCHITECTONIC, AND HORIZONS

A semiotic cosmology must be developed within the framework of a radical naturalism that honors the utter ubiquity of nature and its lack of any "outside" contour or shape. The discipline of semiotics is primarily concerned with the structure and dynamics of signification as manifest in any order whatsoever. The discipline of metaphysics is concerned with a slightly larger use of categories to evoke, describe, and show the innumerable ties between signification and nature. The two disciplines need each other if each is to fulfill its own self-chosen tasks. To talk of signification is ultimately to talk of the enabling context of signs and their involvements, while to talk of nature is to talk of nature as signifying, although it is much more than the "sum" of actual and possible forms of signification. The latter clause points to the other side of the categorial and precategorial paradox of thought.

If the domain of the categorial deals with concepts that admit of their opposites, such as the arch pairing of "being" and "nonbeing," then the realm of the precategorial deals with the one and only term that has no opposite. That term is "nature." There is no such thing as the nonnatural, nor is there anything that can even be envisioned as outside of that which has no outside. These assertions are rather stark at this juncture,