

A SEMIOTIC THEORY OF
THEOLOGY AND
PHILOSOPHY

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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

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.

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

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 precategorical 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

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

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 precategorical. The concept of “nature” lies on the volatile cusp between the categorial, where generic categories are framed in language, and the precategorical, 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

orders of the world better. This can only be done in dialogue with the histories of philosophy and theology. On the precategory 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 precategory.

Is there, then, only the mocking “tone” of utter silence when confronting the precategory 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

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 pre-categorial (the pre-semiotic), 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 pre-categorial 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

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

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,

but they will show their force in the unfolding of the inner rhythms of the paradox of the precategory. Yet here the plot thickens, for the term “nature” has almost always functioned as a categorial term in which it is contrasted with something else. In colloquial speech we get such phrases as “wood is natural while Formica is not” or “trees are natural while chrome is not.” In this use, the natural, and hence that which is truly nature in its own form, is untouched by human hands, except in the very limited sense of being shaped for human ends. While trees can be planted and genetically manipulated, they become what they are through processes that are fully natural. Here we see how an honorific use of the term “natural” has clouded the issue and has covered over the fact that Formica and chrome are as much a part of nature as anything that can be pointed to or thought about in any way. An exploding supernova is thus no more or less natural than a purely internal thought of wanting to eat a dish of ice cream. Each is natural in the *way* that it is natural, another implication of ontological parity.

The concept of the “natural” has become almost equivalent to the concept of the “good.” In certain forms of discourse this is appropriate, especially where the current ecological tragedy needs to be brought into focus against the ubiquity of a technology that effaces the very domain that it has plundered. But this use of the term should never be confused with the metaphysical use, which is infinitely generic in scope. In the latter use, although the concept of “use” is pushed to its limits, there is nothing that could in any way be nonnatural. Even the divine, however shaped by a metaphysics, is an order *of* nature, not a creator *ex nihilo*. Creation is a trait within nature, not a trait that could be lifted out of nature as its alleged generative source. Every metaphysical term *other* than the term “nature” must be recognized to have a finite provenance of meaning within certain orders and not others. This may be the hardest lesson to integrate from a radical naturalism that finally wants to let nature *per se* remain free from predicates of any kind. Is this possible? We must be prepared to accept degrees of failure rather than insist on absolute methodological and conceptual purity. Does this mean that we are to abandon the Hegelian dynamics of semiotic cosmology? No. Like astrophysics, which wants to know what happened at the very origins of the universe, *semiotic* cosmology must continue to use the most robust tools at its disposal in order to get closer to what it seeks. Metaphysics thus lives out of its own paradox: a certain confidence in its categorial array combined with an absolute humility that nature gets the final vote and that mystery will envelop even the most complex and judicious

framework. But there are types of envelopment that are internally related to what *is* enveloped. The envelopment of a weak metaphysics teaches us little, while a robust and capacious metaphysics that is, per necessity, encompassed by the ultimate mystery of nature may teach us much.

There is a dialectical compensation always taking place between the stretch of the categorial and the opening power of the pre-categorial. Metaphysics, insofar as it is attuned to this dialectic, will let the mystery of nature continue both to humble and to reinforce its categorial choices. The better of the regional categories will be pulled into larger spheres of relevance by the opening sustained by the mystery of nature, while the weaker categories will be shown their limits. Only the detailed unfolding of a conceptual array will show this process at work. As a preliminary hint, the spirit of Leibniz can be invoked to argue that his concept of the “monad” proves to be rather weak in generic scope, while his concept of “original activity,” held to lie within the heart of the internal self-shaping of the identity of the monad, will have greater evocative and generic power. An emancipatory reenactment of Leibniz will use the stronger category against the weaker and both destructure and reconstruct the monad theory where, and if, needed.

The strategy of emancipatory reenactment combines a judicious (but nonglobal) use of the hermeneutics of suspicion, with a robust architectonic move to find new use for a building material that has not been fully understood or utilized by the original architect.

Peirce was quite fond of architectural metaphors and analogies, which he used in his technical writings during the period when he was making additions to his house in Milford, Pennsylvania:

When a man is about to build a house, what a power of thinking he has to do before he can safely break ground! With what pains he has to excogitate the precise wants that are to be supplied! What a study to ascertain the most available and suitable materials, to determine the mode of construction to which those materials are best adapted, and to answer a hundred such questions! Now without riding the metaphor too far, I think we may safely say that the studies preliminary to the construction of a great theory should be at least as deliberate and thorough as those that are preliminary to the building of a dwelling house. (1891 *CP* vi.8)

The historical source for these images, well known to Peirce, comes from the final chapters of Kant’s first *Critique*, where the nonexperiential and metaphysical use of reason was cautiously reintroduced into thought in the form of regulative ideals that were necessary for a generic

enframing of self-limiting reason. Yet there are ambiguities hidden in this affirmation of architecture as the primary metaphor or analogy for categorial construction, not to mention the deeper complexities of applying architectural images to the pre-categorical.

Schopenhauer did not give high metaphysical marks to architecture because it failed to illuminate the utterly elusive domain of the will. For him music came closer to expressing the churning and chaotic quality of the knowable thing in itself, precisely because it did not have the static tri-dimensionality of a building: “In the series of arts furnished by me, *architecture* and *music* form the two extremes . . . architecture is in *space* alone, without any reference to time, and music is in *time* alone without any reference to space . . . architecture is frozen music” (Schopenhauer 1844: 453–454). Schopenhauer is both right and wrong in his privileging of music over architecture in the domain of the pre-categorical (his Will). Music obviously has a strong architectonic, while great architectural contrivances are hardly static or atemporal, especially insofar as they gather together the regional contours of their location as part of their means of expression. What the current enterprise thus seeks is a sense of animated architectonic, following Peirce, with a parallel sense of the underlying chaos and sheer heterogeneity of the music-like unconscious of nature. There is an especially cunning way in which a form of ontological priority drives Schopenhauer’s otherwise profound perspective. Since the will to existence is the “really real,” it follows that that art which allegedly comes closest to imitating it is more real than its competitors. Would it not be equally compelling to assert that music is moving architecture? A more judicious approach would describe the various ways in which music and architecture have their own revelatory power of some of the key traits of the world, and that neither alone can somehow get closer to the depth-dimension of nature. In a generic perspective, pragmatic considerations may compel a momentary privileging of one set of correlations over another, but a further conceptual rotation will invert that set for something else. Only the cumulative and continuing series of open-ended correlations will be sufficient to provide the phenomenological data necessary to give flesh to a metaphysical perspective.

For Hegel, dialectic is teleological in that it has an internal tension that is regenerated by the buried goal that is struggling to emerge. His image is that of the fruit that is already contained in the bud and that serves as something like Leibniz’s original activity, giving shape and dynamism to antecedent forms of the consummated moment. From the

perspective of a humbler form of naturalism, where spirit is an order within nature rather than its foundation, there is no grand teleology within nature itself or within the dialectic of the categorial and the precategorial. Beginning points in the dialectic are somewhat arbitrary. If Hegel starts with immediate sense certainty (*Phenomenology of Spirit*) or with the utter simplicity of Being (*Logic*), radical naturalism starts *in medias res* where the ultimate whence and the ultimate whither of nature are clouded in mist. Some of these mists will be cleared away in the dialectic of thought, and some alleged clarities will have to release their internal ambiguities, but the concept of absolute origin, when tied to that of the principle of sufficient reason, must be let go. The categorial gives rise to a larger and more encompassing clearing on the world, rather than unveiling an unambiguous starting point. While anti-foundationalism is eminently fashionable on the contemporary scene, it is imperative that this healthy stance not be allowed to eclipse the necessity of categorial encompassment. The issue is not between “modernist” foundations and a “postmodern” hovering over the abyss, but between an aesthetic solipsism that blocks inquiry and a sensitivity to the self-revealing patterns of the world in its evolutionary semiotic ramifications. The latter prospect is the only one worthy of the name “philosophy,” while the former is a species of asocial criticism (appropriate to a Mandarin class) blind to its own hubris.

What is the nature of the dialectic between these two different aspects of the paradox? How do the categorial and the precategorial interpenetrate if the rights of a generic perspective are to be affirmed against the eternal night of the *via negativa*? The categorial itself exists within a dialectic of the regional and the generic in which categories carry the dual burden of opening out specific ontologies while also containing internal impulses toward a disclosure of *whatever* is. In the heart of *this* dialectic is the hidden presence of the unconscious of nature (the precategorial), which evokes restlessness for any category that remains “satisfied” with its generic scope. In less anthropomorphic terms, the inexhaustible abyss of nature opens up within any category or categorial array to show its radical incompleteness, while also showing its potential promise as a means for rendering the traits of the world more available to the human process.

A classic instance of the latter dialectic is in the role that the concept of “matter” has played in the history of naturalism. No single term has done as much damage to the aspirations of a healthy naturalism as this one, precisely because it privileges the alleged trait ontology of one order

and makes it normative for any other order that might contend for inclusion in the grand inventory of thought. The facile equation of materialism and naturalism has historical roots that must be dug out and exposed to the light of a more circumspect vision. The role that the precategory plays here is internally related to the role that categorial reconstruction plays on the “other” side of the paradox. The precategory presence within materialism, insofar as it is allowed to enter into the rhythm of thought, shows that *no* trait, no matter how foundational, or how powerful in an explanatory scheme, can envelop that which has no outer boundary. Within the momentum of the categorial, innumerable orders keep intruding *their* defiant trait structures into the phenomenology of materialism, thus encircling and humbling its claims at every turn. Nature has no single universal trait or order of orders than can be enveloping in every sense.

The Hegelian dialectic gives way to something that seems more erratic, more chaotic, as it wends its way into and out of categorial structures and the precategory abyss that both humbles and empowers thought. Heidegger’s image of the *Holzwege*, of forest paths that often end nowhere, is too extreme, for it privileges questioning over architectonic, but it captures some of the flavor of an enterprise that moves outward from a shifting center toward an elusive whence and whither that are felt, but never fully known. A better image is that of a series of sign-posts on the foot hills and the plains that have a cumulative directionality for thought but do not add up to a grand sign of all signs. Many of these sign-posts are as ancient as the world itself, while many seem to evaporate with the burning off of the morning mists. But the enduring sign-posts form the living skeletal structure for the sign-using communities that the self inhabits and have proven their worth over time and within the context of often fierce evolutionary struggle. A less naturalistic expression of this is found in Wittgenstein: “a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom” (Wittgenstein 1953: 80). In the current perspective, the word “custom” would be replaced by the phrase “evolutionary habit.”

The well-worn image of the hermeneutic circle captures part of the dialectic of thought as it struggles against its own sheer drift and opacity; that is, its native tendency toward an unhealthy and habit-filled provincialism. There is an obvious sense in which philosophical reflection requires a semiotic surplus value beyond instrumental uses of reason. Yet this sense must be augmented by a complementary realization that the quest for the generic has its own depth-logic tied to evolutionary

ramification of available orders of interaction. To frame and experience larger horizons of meaning is to free the organism for a more flexible and capacious configuration of its worlds. Animals inhabit a species-specific *umwelt* (a translucent but largely closed meaning horizon), while the human process can enter into a more transparent self-critical *Lebenswelt* (a life world that is a categorial clearing with shifting parameters). Habit and opacity often devolve a life world into a mere animal environment, or to something at least partially analogous, and this inertial momentum is part of the process denoted by the theological term “estrangement,” which entails the loss of depth-meaning and a luminous semiotic center, however shifting.

The hermeneutic circle has two components; that of the regional/generic tension within the categorial and that of the tension between the categorial and the precategorial. In either case the statistical probability is that closure will envelop the frozen outward movement of the dialectic. A meaning horizon is never an intentional object. It is the enabling condition for the self/world transaction. Yet a transformation of the dialectic of thought can open out the circumference of the horizon even as, per definition, the horizon recedes from view. The traits of the horizon can be *elliptically* encountered in several ways: (a) When it encounters an alien horizon and is compelled to modify its contour, (b) When it “feels” the seismic tremors that come from its own internal contradictions, (c) When it waxes or wanes according to the health of its “carrier,” and (d) When melancholy or ecstasy transfigures its inner momentum in a totalizing way. Each must be explicated in turn. A horizon is usually unaware that it *is* a horizon. This is part of the logic of the human process, not a failure per se. When a meaning horizon encounters an alien horizon, its internal sign systems collide with sign series not of its own making. They are alien to its own enframing of semiotic possibilities and actualities. From the perspective of the self, its horizon *is* world, not a way of encountering something other. Intersubjectivity is marked by social contrast in which at least one regnant sign system is felt to be partially or totally incompatible with another that invades it from a place just beyond the reach of the originating horizon. The not-horizon suddenly constricts the allegedly generic reach of the first horizon, compelling a sense of finitude that is often deeply humbling to the self that blindly maintained the horizon = world equation. What is to be done? The alien sign series can be abjected and thrown back into the night time of the semiotic unconscious, or they can be translated into more palatable forms (through the mechanisms of pro-

jection and misreading), or they can be allowed to augment the scope and reach of the original horizon. The last possibility does not entail assent, only recognition of the new sign system on roughly its own terms. The struggle among these three possibilities represents the heart beat of the moral life.

There is a continual abjection of internal contradiction. Each horizon has a mechanism for submerging semiotic impossibles within its depths so that they are not forced into the sphere of moral conflict. The classic and perennial form of this contradiction is the tension between public and private moral values. Need they always be in consort, and if so, in what ways? Can certain forms of contradiction actually empower the creation of great human products, such as aesthetic contrivances or political actions? Can there even be a moral life without internal horizontal contradictions that compel continuing adjustments and reconfigurations? Is it not possible that great theological or philosophical systems could only come into being because of overdetermined motives and contradictions crying out for amelioration? In this sense, the greater the horizontal/internal contradiction, the greater the prospects for great gains or great tears within the social fabric. Part of the wisdom of horizontal growth in this second sense would be to encounter fully the semiotic earthquakes that ripple through the seeming wholeness of the meaning horizon that otherwise walks confidently on smooth and stable ground.

No horizon is free floating. It is always incarnate in an organism that traffics in sign series that have neither absolute beginnings nor absolute endings. The tension is straightforward; finite meaning horizons have infinite content, but only in the special sense that further interpretations and unfolding are always possible. Each horizon is held into the world by a being that is vulnerable to vast forces of entropy and decay. The analogy is to bacteria and viruses that buffet the organism at every turn. There are horizontal bacteria and viruses that sap the strength of the meaning field, just as there are defensive systems that can expunge these same semiotic interlopers. It does not help to envision horizons as products of consciousness, as if they were somehow extruded outward by this “nothingness” called awareness. A horizon is actually in the space between self and world, making each transparent, but in different respects. When one of the relata, the self, is under assault, the other relatum, the world, is partially closed off. When the relation is reversed, as when worldly possibilities become restricted, the self may also experience a loss of its horizontal prospects, say, for example, in imprisonment.

In both cases, there is a transaction in the “between” that sustains the waxing or waning, or the waxing in some respects and waning in others. The only absolute waning is death, although there may be another structure of horizontality beyond bodily annihilation.

Melancholy and ecstasy are the two most extreme and foundational moods of the horizon-bound self. Melancholy emerges when the horizon shrinks back from its generic prospects and longs for some “lost object” (perhaps in the psychoanalytic sense of the maternal), while becoming disenamored of semiotic plenitude. Ecstasy emerges when this same momentum radically inverts itself to give birth to a lightning-like clearing in which the shell of melancholy is shattered into quickly forgotten fragments. This inner dynamism lies at the heart of the religious life, which, contra Kant, is more fundamental to horizontal structures than the ethical. A fuller treatment of this dialectic must be postponed until more primary delineations are made.

All of the four forms of horizontal encounter, the invasion of the *external* other, the pressure of internal contradiction (the *internal* other), the health of the carrier, and the fierce dialectic of melancholy and ecstasy, often find themselves entangled with one or more of the other forms of engagement. A profound religious crisis, in which the issue of worldhood (that is, the “sum” of the orders of the world) becomes thematic, involves a sustained interpenetration of all forms of horizontal transfiguration. This is not so much a patriarchal mountain-top experience as it is a shattering of the depths of semiosis from a place that has no location whatsoever. As this process is described, both sides of the great abyss within nature will be brought into play.

Horizons can never be exhausted by their occupants, even when, during those rare moments of existential lucidity, they are finally seen *as* horizons. Horizontality is broken open by the four forms described. There can be a concatenated effect when one form, by a fierce inner logic, breaks into another and compels it toward its own depth-logic. If this process continues through the four possibilities, and drives each to its own depths in turn, then the self is brought into the unique position of living on the volcanic crest where the categorial and the precategorial come into the sphere of human awareness. The volcanic cone provides a receding and open clearing within which the magma traverses the domain of the great between; namely, from the forever hidden recesses of the unconscious (better, underconscious [Coleridge 1811]) of nature, to the fitful light of the categorial (where horizons are articulated and potentially shared). The magma remains unshaped until its power and

energy are stilled by the loss of semiotic heat and momentum that makes horizontal encounter possible.

The underconscious of nature is the ultimate shaking event within each and every of the four forms of horizontal transformation. The *how* of this process is especially elusive, but philosophy is not left mute by the prospect of probing into the various axes of intersection that occur on the cusp between the world and the underconscious of nature. The logic is becoming clearer: whenever there is a generic move within the categorial, there is a hidden (but partially knowable) goad from the underconscious of nature that provides the “heat” for loosening up horizontal constriction. From a radicalized theological perspective this can be seen as a form of natural grace, a concept which is beyond good and evil as its moral upshot may be genuinely ambiguous from the standpoint of human goods and values. To put the point as sharply as possible: grace gives the space for horizons; it does not guarantee them salvation from their own opacity and entropy. Each of the four forms of the *how* of the hermeneutic circle must now be rotated once again through a different axis of thought.

When a prethematic horizon encounters an external other, namely, a horizon that seems to invade it from a point that recedes in mist, it receives a shock to its own imperial intent. The very difference between horizon and world, not to mention the difference between self and horizon, is suddenly thrust upon awareness with great force (assuming that the sign series involved have intrinsic vector powers). The unconscious rhythms of the prethematic give way to the partially thematic. The first horizon is seized by its finitude, even while swimming always and everywhere in infinite sign series not of its own making. In Freudian terms there is a child-like omnipotence of thought that is rudely awakened by the competing, not to mention threatening, horizon. It is rarely understood that the inner logic of prethematic horizons allows for the delusion of semiotic omnipotence in the form “I, the horizon, am the world and all therein contained.”

What happens when this unconscious bid for omnipotence and omniscience is undercut by an infuriating counter-claim from the external other? As noted, several responses are possible. Yet there is another turn in the depth-logic that unfolds at this juncture. The underconscious of nature (different in scope and its *how* from the unconscious of the self) transfigures the logic of finitude so that both horizons are brought into a pulsating space of betweenness in which their respective sign series hover, however briefly, over an abyss that cannot be filled in by the

omnipotence of thought. The opening wedge of this transformation is brought about by social contrast in which a “smaller” form of the space of betweenness is created by that which is not a sign or sign series. A nascent self is negated in its horizontal momentum by another self (with its contrary momentum), and this sets up the classic self/other dialectic that only intensifies with growth. In the fullest sense, betweenness is a presemiotic momentum that enables the underconscious of nature to emerge in varying ways and with diverse forms of decentering and recentering. The first horizon is decentered and shown that it does not rest on itself, while the second horizon, insofar as it is brought into this process by its occupant, experiences its own version of the decentering/recentering dialectic. This is a presemiotic momentum with direct semiotic implications.

The underconscious of nature works in a similar way to transfigure the internal other that is experienced through painful contradictions among various sign series. It is not so much that the underconscious has a grand synthesis “in mind” (if it is a mind at all), so much as that “it” goads contradiction into an intensification of nascent possibilities of greater encompassment. Each sign series has its own provenance of power and meaning and is jealous of its semiotic stock. Contradictions are tolerated so long as the offending contraries remain in the unconscious of the self, where they seem to do no damage (a delusion). By a cunning that remains partially wrapped in mystery, the underconscious of nature propels the unconscious contraries into consciousness so that their energy is intensified and their competing claims abruptly presented to the often stunned self. They must be either dealt with or repressed back into the internal abyss from which they have come. The energy consumption is greater in the latter maneuver (which is not always a conscious choice), which means that the integrating skills of the self are weakened in the long run.

Insofar as the underconscious of nature has something remotely analogous to teleology, it is in the compensatory momentum in which contraries are heightened and rendered at least partially conscious. The act of integration, however, remains in the hands of nature’s estranged foundling, the self. The internal other can, under the right conditions, become part of the cumulative directionality of the self, and the dynamism of the contraries can goad the horizon of the self into products and actions that enhance its own scope and the scope and richness of its surrounding communities.

Horizons are incarnate. In the known semiotic universe such incarna-