

UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING.  
A THEORETICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH TO SEMIOTICS\*

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This is a book that should be read by anyone today seriously interested in semiotics. The issues dealt with are of utmost importance in our world of generalized semiotic indifference and misinformation. It provides a theoretical-philosophical approach to semiotics today comparable in intensity to the historical-philosophical approach to semiotics found in John Deely's *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001). This master work by Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio is worthy of much praise for its ambitious scope and detail; in the limits of this review I will be listing only some of the good that they write; my purpose in a brief compass is to inspire readers to go the book itself, and read it whole. In fact, whatever I say in the manner of particular criticisms must be seen in the light of my general opinion that this work is simply "must reading" for students of semiotics.

The duo of Petrilli and Ponzio are already well-known in the semiotic park as being word-smiths and indefatigable explainers of concepts. Their teaching credentials are excellent. Petrilli, originally from Australia, has published extensively in Italian as well as in English, including articles about Victoria Welby, a figure who provides the major impetus for one of the chapters in this present volume. She has also published on Emmanuel Levinas, Charles Morris, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, and Thomas A. Sebeok, who also figure prominently here in this volume. For many of these authors she would be our first teacher-explainer, since most of us are not familiar with these thinkers. She translates and cogitates on the process of translation, which is an activity I also love to do.<sup>1</sup>

Beaudelaire, Borges, Valéry and Donne figure among the translations that Ponzio, an Italian national, has provided on his own web-site, among the impressive array of publications that this philosopher of language and general linguistics has produced. Lévinas, Mikhail Bakhtin and Rossi-Landi are specialties of his. His latest work, *The Dialogic Nature of Sign*, was released in 2007, concerning dialogue and dialectics, and reflects on how even a single word is in effect an

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\* Review article of *Semiotics Unbounded, Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs*, by Susan Petrilli & Augusto Ponzio, University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2005.

open system of communication, following the thought of Peirce, Bakhtin, Levinas, Rossi-Landi, but also of the medieval logician (and Pope), Peter of Spain.

At the beginning of this review I must ask: is it a fatal flaw not to communicate because the words are inadequate to the thought? No. Is it a fatal flaw to go about searching for, and even to proclaim as true that we have a basis for, moral understanding, when the premisses are false? No, again.

To the first question, the effort to communicate while inventing or misusing words, leads us to the very basis of poetry, which Professor Jean Cohen of the Sorbonne calls “Poéticité”:<sup>2</sup> what makes a poem poetic is its stretching and distortion of language, an example being the “hypocrite lecteur” of Baudelaire, one who reads and distorts the very poetry of the creator (by this he means everybody who reads him), but is accepted by the author as a necessary part of the poetic process (“je vous aime”), because the poem lies dead without being read. We must therefore call this book poetic, inasmuch as it takes language apart, renews it, even leaving the reader at times gasping for breath.

To the second question we have a more important and more ambivalent response. I must dare to suggest that the authors have an inadequate base for their moral conclusions, even while I have no doubt that their efforts are worth following. Other readers may not concur with my suggestions as to what seems lacking along their pathway; but I think no reader will end up doubting that they point in the direction of a better understanding of the requirements, say, of ethics (“semioethics”) today. I am not sure to be able to carry this discussion to its very end, and the authors will probably find many faults in my own argument; but that is what makes for a dialogue that goes forward!

Let us then take a look at the language of the book at hand, as it exemplifies that dialogic process of multi-layered commerce between entities. The book makes the forceful and true argument that every cognizant entity takes its very identity from this commerce with the other. Be it species-specific dialogue (paramecium to other paramecium) based on avoidance, attraction and hunger (either for food or sex), or based on applied indifference,<sup>3</sup> animal language is limited to signs that are misread at peril, either for the organism alone or sometimes even for the species itself. Any language has its rules and meanings. For example, the song of the cricket depends upon the ambient temperature, the physical fitness of the singer as well as the influence of other sounds, because the animal is attuned to its milieu, at one with it to a real extent, so much so that from ancient times crickets have been used as sentinels, inadvertently alerting the human if an intruder comes in through their sudden silence. The cricket sings, not with intention, but from need and genetics. He stops for the same reason. Our use of him is inter-specific language, not

programmed in him, but co-opted for and by us. Or, another example: that of the geese in Rome, whose cries alerted the Vestal Virgins at the Forum of intruders at the gates. Although they squawked mightily at the first invasion of the Gauls in 390 b.c.e., and they were only doing the geesely thing (species-specific), their warning came too late and Rome was sacked, while the Virgins were safe. (On the other hand, the failure of that communication so alarmed the Romans that they built a war-machine unequalled at its time and, for a while, beat back the invader, extended their influence over their enemies, ingesting them, reaching unimagined greatness. Rarely has failure so forcefully led to success.)

When extended to mankind, however, the specificity of language has of its nature a certain plasticity that allows nearly infinite combinations of all of the above while adding the uncertainty of being understood. Our talk is filled with phatic activity (p. 25), simply to assure ourselves that a) someone is listening, and b) that the other is more or less in tune with the argument. “Friends, Romans, countrymen” is at the same time a call to action (listening), and a contextual, even supra-textual, appeal to a certain understanding, an opening of the other to the content to come through appeal to patriotism, self-interest and yet cooperation. Human language carries information, but also delight and danger. To speak is sometimes to be misunderstood, to hear is sometimes to mistake the message. Words may be cheap, but the cost of uttering them may be one’s very life.

In *Semiotics Unbounded* the authors stretch language to the breaking point with such terms as ‘culturological’ and ‘gnoseological’ (p. 400), or ‘enthymemes of the unsaid’ (p. 463), terms which cry out for more context, for explanation. Along the way, the unknowing reader is baffled sometimes by the proliferation of neologisms and misdirections in the way things are written, so much so that sometimes the landscape appears more unravelled than unbounded. Certainly language here has been often freed from its accustomed bounds.

Consider one example among many. In the discussion of Ross-Landi (p. 275), the following statement is made about semiotics as a critical science of the social programs that regulate sign behavior: “This necessarily involved giving up claims of neutrality, neopositivistically and mistakenly identified with scientificness.” What is the reader who is not familiar with positivism, neopositivism, logical positivism to make of this statement? We are at the outer limits of language. Even if one can guess at the syntax, the meaning is not necessarily obvious. The next statement is: “In light of a detotalizing view of the world and the realization that human behavior is programmed...”, which does nothing to enlighten one on the neopositivistically scientificness of the other sentence. The terms drop from semiotic heaven, and leave us or at least me perplexed. In fact, neither the glossary at the end of the book nor any other specialized glossary can make up

for the lack of a basic grounding in philosophy. However Deely's very rich and informative *Four Ages* mentioned above can make up for any lack and is an important complement to *Semiotics Unbounded*. (Young beginners in undergraduate philosophy, anthropology or communication perhaps should be warned: this book can confound even the seasoned semiotician who does not have an adequate critical and philosophical founding in semiotics; but every reader will still profit from speculations the words will require).

Yet there is no doubt that this volume holds together. It traces the thoughts on semiotics of seven important authors, and helps us to discover the issues that beset them in all their complexity. As a guidebook, it manifests the fruit of many years of thought about these men and women, and a critical understanding of their place in the world-wide awakening to semiotics. The book also points (I believe) to a renewal of *metaphysical* reasoning. I apologize for using the term without defining it in my allotted space, even as our authors have hundreds of such terms that are not in their glossary. Let us go forward.

After the seven treatments of individual authors (among whom Rossi-Landi seemed to me weakest, whilst the treatment of Victoria Lady Welby was brilliant), the authors turn to two other parts, one on sense and sensibility (called "Modeling, Writing, and Otherness"), and a final part, "Predicative Judgement, Argumentation, and Communication", that deals with morality. I pass over (for limits of space) the second part, in order to concentrate my remarks on the final part.

It is with this third part that I take on the difficult task I referred to above. To take Marxist thought as a starting point for a discussion of morality seems to me to truncate, even mutilate, the discussion from its inception. Life, and thus philosophy, does not begin with Marx. And, to be fair, let me state plainly that our authors do not rely entirely, only (in this reviewer's opinion) overly much, on an implicit Marxist base. They state: "However, even before this new discipline [of bioethics] was introduced, ethical problems were part of two totalities that together contributed to the characterization of these problems [of bioethics]: the *semio(bio)sphere*, and today's *global socioeconomic communication-production system*" (p. 536, their italics). Thus we have an ethics based as well on a) the interrelationship of all living things and b) a network of functionality.

I hold, however, that such a grounding betrays a fundamental weakness to any "new" system of ethical reasoning. Ethics is, of course, grounded in relationship, first with the "real world" of man and nature (the word "semio(bio)sphere" is misleading here, because it seems to disregard human intellectual and emotional interaction) and then with the existing methods of communication and action (that the second term — "global socioeconomic communication-production system" — cannot possibly encompass, in spite of its pervasiveness). What is missing

in this discussion, it seemed to me, is any serious consideration of just who and what we are relating to, when “doing” ethics.

Any ethical system must deal with ontology, the ends and means of things, of actions, of intentions — in other words, of morality. It is not enough to state that relations exist; there must be (and I am using a moral term, not one from physics) a basis for what is good, better, best, worse, worst. And it is just these categories that are ignored in Petrilli and Ponzio’s treatment. Without a thorough discussion of what the Good means in the context of semiotics — whether it has any reference outside of the relationships with environment and politics — we are left with a sterile, and ultimately stifling, ethics.

Referring to semiotics today, the authors state: “it must denounce any threats to life...” (ibid.). Let us look more carefully at this statement, because it sums up the entire latter part of the book. “It” refers to “global semiotics”. Now, to be blunt, global semiotics cannot be the subject of this statement, since it is not an agent but rather a construct, granted of a rather high order, but incapable of performing moral acts. An incorporeal and abstract network is a tool (like an automobile or a chainsaw) that only derives its ontology (utilitarian or according to ‘higher’ goods) through the actions of ourselves, in conjunction with our environment and existing power structures. In itself, semiotics, global or local or even universal, can do nothing except produce relationship.

Let us then replace ‘it’ with ‘we who are in the Umwelt’ (although I suspect the authors will disagree with me, and therefore abstract the ‘we’ from the proposition, rendering it, again, incapable of morality). If we “must” do something, where does the moral suasion of obligation stem from? This is a crucial point, because, although throughout this work there are descriptions and relationships set forth in great detail, there is no discussion of the *basis* of either motivation or value. Without such a discussion, three results seem obvious to me. First, we are ignoring the cacophony of opposing value systems, the plethora of opinions available for even one major political decision, or at best we are powerless to change that decision. (The discussion of the uselessness of the Helsinki Accord to effect any real change, p. 491 ff., is indeed a case in point.) We have, in other words, no ground to stand on when we say one way (“our way”) is better, morally. Secondly, we cannot even know that our way is better, except in some vaguely utilitarian mode, because we have established no principle of action. Thirdly, we are ignoring what may be the most important relationship of all: that we are in relation with, and answerable to, something higher than ourselves. I here would make the leap to God, without proselytizing in any fashion; but I shall come back to this point.

To finish our analysis of the statement that ‘it must denounce any threats to life’, I ask: What

life? and Why life? Has any basis been given in the argument thus far to conclude that life is a value in itself? Not really. And of what, exactly, are we speaking? A “life-force” that leads to a ‘Noosphere’, à la Teilhard de Chardin? Or one of Buddhist origins, a respect for life that posits a positive and ultimately cognitive force of evolutionary import?

Our problem then, is one of openness to something not found either in ourselves (Innenwelt) or in the environment, in the largest sense of the word (Umwelt). If we systematically limit both terms to reject the invisible, spiritual world (leading to God, I contend), we do so at risk of losing all reference points. There is no morality that is not contentious, incoherent and self-defeating, unless we have for it a basis in some kind of universal values that do not depend only upon matter (the physical universe).

Now, I realize that my own questions are not in the scope of this article, nor of the book under review. So perhaps all I am really saying at this point is that we must use our moral abilities to examine the principles for our moral actions, and not simply assume that a commonality of sentiment will carry the day. Spiritual values ought to play a part in what counts for the good, or else the good becomes only what is tautologically existent or useful for this or that group. (And I do not agree with Peirce that the ‘summum bonum’ is “a semiotic process of growth” [p. 543] or the “growth of concrete reasonableness”, since neither can produce a single good act.)

Having placed this problem on the table is not to detract from my debt of thanks to the authors for their provocative and far-reaching treatment of many, perhaps most, of the issues facing semiotics today. Their thesis that semiotics is universal and of vital importance in all aspects of the life of the world is one with which I profoundly agree, one that ought to stretch our minds and spirits to understand better and apply with more rigor the semiotic paradigm to our most pressing problems. A more complete glossary would perhaps be the single tool of greatest value for the reader.

It has been a privilege, a betterment if you will, to have read this book. No single text today gives a larger view of the semiotic landscape and of where work needs to be done as semiotics penetrates ever more deeply into intellectual culture on a global scale. As Deely's work mentioned at the beginning shows us how we got where we are going in this matter of semiotics from a historical-philosophical perspective, so the work of Petrilli and Ponzio show us all the better where from a theoretical-philosophical perspective not only semiotics but us all have still to go from here. This is a book which opens unto the future of semiotic developments, and needs to be read as such.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I suggest another book here, for all of us, and especially for our authors: Hofstadter 1997 — more than eighty translations of a single poem and a cogent discussion of language across cultures.

<sup>2</sup> Monsieur Cohen left us in 1994, but his treatment is still classic for students of poetics, that is, disquisitive rather than scientific language.

<sup>3</sup> These thoughts are from John Deely, Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, 2005; and from Deely 2005, along with personal communication.

## References

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## Bionote

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