

Deletion or Deployment. Is that any Way to Treat a Sign?

Herbert Hrachovec

May 18, 2008

Edmund Husserl's treatment of signs as derivative from the lived presence of human consciousness¹ has evoked quite divergent critical comments. Two can paradigmatically be singled out. Whereas Jaques Derrida in a Heideggerian move shows the metaphysical assumptions hidden in unmediated presence,² Ernst Tugendhat exchanges Husserl's emphasis on phenomenological explorations of the human mind for the tools of analytical philosophy of language³. Although Derrida and Tugendhat eventually move into very different directions their objections start from similar concerns. Talk about signs is almost incomprehensible unless a certain dualism between something that is employed to indicate, refer to, mean . . . something else is assumed. It can be argued that, consequently, Husserl's attempt to tie such a dichotomy back to the presumably unshrouded clarity of Cartesian consciousness threatens the very idea of signification. According to this consideration semantics cannot be grounded in the noetic realm. „Signs are foreign to this self-presence of consciousness” (SP, 58) since their possibility rests on some systematically antecedent set of differences governing the relations between what is present (the signifier) and what is indicated or expressed by it (the signified). This idea can be expressed not only in the Saussurian terms the early Derrida draws upon, but also by using the distinction between syntax and semantics familiar in analytical philosophy.

The consequent complexity of a sign calls for a careful description of its constitutive elements as well as of the overarching structure that keeps those elements from disintegrating into mere givens, lacking significative value. In outlining these relationships I shall link the terminology of formal semantics to considerations that are closer to the European tradition. The outcome will justify Derrida's observation about „the sign (being) from its origin . . . marked by this will to derivation or effacement.” (SP, 51) Derrida's insight (which coincides with analytic philosophy's insistence on mediation by language) raises the question of how to deal with the permanent unfulfillment such a status inflicts

¹Edmund Husserl *Logical Investigations* v. II. Cf. Investigation 1, sections 5-15 and Investigation 5, section 19

²Jacques Derrida *Speech and Phenomena And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* Evanston 1973. Henceforth cited as SP.

³*Traditional and Analytical Philosophy: Lectures on the Philosophy of Language*. Cambridge 1982.

upon a sign. Husserl's concern with the fulfillment of intentional (semantical) phenomena, however, also deserves to be taken seriously. I will, therefore, develop an account of „the sign“ that retains its metaphysical non-primordiality while accommodating the fact that in describing its successful employment we constantly find ourselves referred back to just the language of originary insight attacked by Derrida. Introducing an illustrative simile and relating its discussion to the traditional distinction between first and second nature I hope to show how the autonomy of intentional and semantical notions can be upheld even as attempts to ground them in some basic intuition or successful employment are conceived as perfectly legitimate. It will become clear in the course of the argument that only by abandoning the rhetoric of exclusiveness can a satisfactory account of the sign be given. In general terms: signs are characteristic examples of transient satisfaction. The fundamental constituents of any semantic theory have to be able to fit smoothly into a pattern of originary relations while preserving the susceptibility to disruption that marks their non-primordiality.

1 Formal Semantics

It can be doubted whether the idea of formal semantics arising from Gottlob Frege's work makes any sense at all. Meaning, as it is ordinarily understood, is clearly distinct from abstract representations of meaningful utterances. To clarify some basic points these constructions may, however, serve as a useful starting point. What is a sign? We already characterized it as something pointing to, or standing for, or representing, something else in an orderly fashion. It seems natural to assume that such relations can be described systematically. „Model theory“ is a completely abstract way of doing this, building up an increasingly complex structure starting with interpretations of signs that are not considered to be complex (elementary things) and moving on to configurations of signs, presenting configurations of things in a formally suitable way.⁴ It is not necessary to go into the details of this approach in order to discuss several presuppositions exhibited by this approach. Let me explain some implications of the underlying picture.

Perhaps the most fundamental assumption is this: something serving as a sign is not regarded simply by itself, as an element of syntax. It is incorporated into a semantical relation that can be understood as directing attention away from the given inscription, drawing it to something else, its semantical value. Such values (entities, relations, truth) are readily defined in formal semantics and as a consequence little emphasis is normally put on the fact that they are constructs of a special kind, not on the same level with syntactic marks. Nevertheless it is commonly conceded that a qualitative jump separates concatenations of inscriptions from the „meanings“ they represent „under an interpretation.“ Theoretical ideality marks the realm of the signified in any semantical theory worth its name.

⁴Probably the best introductory account is to be found in G.E.Hughes and M.J.Cresswell *An Introduction to Modal Logic* London 1968.

Now, if we follow our intuition that words have meaning we seem committed to an explanation of where they get it from. There is considerable theoretical disagreement about how to proceed at this point, but one fundamental move cannot be in dispute, since it establishes the semantical enterprise itself, namely starting from a split, introducing two different kinds of entities before proceeding to interrelate them systematically. Formally speaking, variables, constants and terms refer to something; well formed formulae are satisfied by sets, and sentences characterize models. This structural pattern should not distract attention away from the fact that a certain tension between presence (of the signifier) and absence (of the signified) lies at the heart of this analytical account. Can such a gap be allowed to stand at the beginning of a discipline? Mustn't it be retracted immediately because it would be impossible to explain the interrelation of the components of the scheme? Consider formal languages designed to refer to mathematical structures that are supposed to have a certain existence of their own. On the one hand, they are conceptually separated from their reference, on the other hand, exactly the same language of set theory is used to introduce the elements of both the system of signification and of the signified. It is in fact by assuming a common logical structure that the split is made to work as an inducement to bridging the gap. This can be generalized.

A sign enacts an essential distinction of realms, but it cannot function without the possibility of their fusion either. If semantics does not simply occupy itself with empirical investigations it has to reflect on this apparent contradiction. The essentials of this situation are a double perspective and a unifying overview, the relation of the procedure of interpretation on the one hand and its underlying logic on the other. In model theory the interchange between presence and absence that constitutes a signifying unit is couched in prescriptive mathematical meta-language. Thus the difficulty of having to explain how two domains, per definition separate, can function as a whole is avoided. From this perspective they are not at all unrelated to each other, since they form part of a more inclusive pattern, held together by the rigor of a formal discipline. But this explanation obviously fails when metaphysical, epistemological and deconstructionist questions are raised.

2 The use of signs

The most prominent objection against formal semantics is that it rests on an uncritical reification of meaning. As long as a distinction between making noise and making sense is upheld, however, some account of the gap opened up by the deferment accomplished by signs has to be given. A great variety of theories, reaching from cognitive science to hermeneutics, is currently offered to deal with the division and fusion of syntactic and semantic modes of analysis. From information-processing to (post)metaphysical thinking, the characteristics of signs have received wide attention. But there has also been a counter-current, which, starting with Husserl's attempts to ground signification in some prominent features of human consciousness, tries to set aside such an uncomfort-

able dualism. Ordinary reconstructions of our intuitions about meaning seem to produce a very peculiar relation, bridging two incommensurable realms. In Wittgenstein's words: „Naming appears as a strange connection between a word and an object.”⁵ Whatever the results of an empirical investigation into our cognitive capacities might be and however impressive a case could be made for (or against) our civilization's tendency to reify meanings, according to Wittgenstein such a strategy does not address itself to the most elementary question that can be asked concerning a sign, namely why it needs some explanation at all. Why should there be such a puzzling dichotomy calling for mysterious integrative elements in the first place? To quote him again: „The sentence, a peculiar thing!': the sublimation of the whole presentation resides in this. The tendency to assume a pure intermediate being between the sentence-sign and the facts.”⁶

According to the picture of linguistic elements that depicts them as linked up to corresponding elements of the world by a special, epistemologically relevant relation, signs appear as extraordinary constituents of the universe. But once one starts to wonder about signifying entities, there will be constant puzzlement about the unity of the world and man's position within and/or outside the course it takes. This reconstruction of our use of language establishes a fundamental ontological priority of speakers, i.e., beings that are somehow able to create the world of which they are part. This is the predicament non-semantical theories of understanding try to escape from. Wittgenstein, for example, in his later work worries about the legitimacy of the initial astonishment and considers substantialized meanings as consequences of a misguided picture of language. There are no signs to start with, rather contexts of use that serve as complex, multilayered units of communication. Furthermore a basis of unquestioned agreement in behavior has to be assumed before bits of language relating to pieces of the world can even be considered.

Jaques Derrida, as I have indicated, arrives at similar conclusions starting from a critique of Husserl's phenomenology.⁷ But his line of argument is completely different. Realizing that the phenomenological concept of a sign is firmly linked to traditional metaphysical assumptions, he tries to find a way out of the dilemma of this foundationalism. In Derrida's view signs cannot but disturb metaphysical securities by their non-primordially. His philosophical strategy of thinking at the edge of metaphysics, consequently, unlike Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical thinking, demands a more complicated procedure. His efforts divide into establishing a proto-primordial grounding of signification and an overcoming of the established concept of a sign. The claim is that „to restore the original and nonderivative character of signs, in opposition to classical metaphysics, is, by an apparent paradox, at the same time to eliminate a concept of signs whose whole history and meaning belong to the adventure of the metaphysics of presence.” (SP, 51)

Where does that leave us regarding the initial astonishment indicated by

⁵Philosophical Investigations,38

⁶Philosophical Investigations, 94

⁷Newton Garver's *Preface to Speech and Phenomena* is helpful in connecting Derrida's incipient Deconstruction with Analytical Philosophy.

Wittgenstein? Derrida occupies a peculiar position between semantic dualism and its systematic opposite, the dissolution of ordinary signification within the context of the living presence of consciousness or actual use of language. He hints at an ultra-foundational attitude toward the sign, although he recognizes that we would lose our current concept of a sign if we were successful in establishing its proper nature. Something like a primordial *différance* is supposed to ground signs and cannot be understood in established semantical terms. As it unfolds it cancels the „metaphysics of the presence” on which, according to Derrida, the common notion of signification rests. At this systematic juncture analytic philosophy and deconstruction obviously part company in their attempts to clarify the structure of semantics. So where does that leave my argument?

Schematically speaking, the preceding considerations have been drawn in two different directions. On the one hand there is the discovery of a constitutive dualism inherent in every attempt to conceptualize signification, on the other hand there is insistence on a fundamental simplicity of human communication. Very different schools, ranging from transcendental phenomenology to ordinary language analysis regard this unity as anterior to a subsequent split. In taking up the discussion at this point the next section will deal with a traditional concept that receives scant treatment in Derrida’s critique of Husserlian self-giveness of consciousness, namely intentionality. This concept will eventually supply us with a pattern underlying the strangeness of the semantic relation and the intuitive ease of signifying behavior.

3 How can signs fulfill their functions?

Intentionality can be established as a fundamental semantical relation or regarded with suspicion as resulting from an inherently dualistic world-view. The activities of reference, belief, desire and the like are characteristically described as of another kind as what is referred to, believed or desired. This difference poses a constant challenge to philosophical attempts to eliminate the classical epistemological dichotomy. Taking a closer look at so-called intentional phenomena, however, reveals that neither undisturbed belief in their existence, nor unrelenting attempts to remove them from the picture altogether are satisfactory. Commonsense examples of fulfillment, such as discovering a solution to a problem or keeping a promise give a good starting point for showing this.

Two types of situations are relevant in such cases, one marked by an uncertainty, a question, generally speaking by an unresolved tension between constituents of a certain state, the other one suggested by an overcoming of uncertainty, e.g., the determination of an answer or the achievement of satisfaction when a promise is kept. What one finds is a dichotomy that calls for resolution into a state of satisfaction. But how can the question (the expectation, the promise) be present in its fulfillment? These conditions of fit by definition exclude just the unfulfilled features. An answer, once articulated, does not exhibit the question it is an answer to. To solve this problem it is important to realize, by looking at examples like the ones given, how artificially both our previous po-

sitions have been opposed. Utterances are neither simply isolated (and in need of interpretation), nor simply functioning in a satisfying way. We use them in particular circumstances in order to fulfill certain needs. It is loosely said that something answers a question. A more precise way of putting this would be to say that within a certain context something is accepted by someone as an answer. There is a peculiar logic at work here. By relating an unresolved situation to a state of comparative closure an extremely useful move of mastering the world is described. This bears on the process of signification and its fulfillment in unproblematic use.

Achieving satisfaction is not adequately described as making one final move toward an aim. It involves a qualitative change in the description of the whole enterprise. Here we can begin to see why fulfillment of intentional attitudes might (precariously) hold semantics together. In some sense, ordinary meaningful behavior must be described by excluding reference to possible disturbances. Nevertheless the complexity of the overall situation can only be captured if the second descriptive approach, pointing at the lack of fit, is included. Fulfillment cannot be conceptualized as a result only, it has to be seen as fulfillment of something and by this very feature relates back to the state of unfulfillment. In proceeding from an explicitly objectified semantical situation toward its resolution the problematic dichotomy can be eliminated but the resulting one-dimensional account of successful communication loses its punch if it is divorced from this genesis. Pure satisfaction is a phantom.

Fulfillment of intentional structures, seen in this way, is a concept referring to both a process of satisfaction and its result, weaving together situations characterized by a lack of fulfillment and by the lack of this lack. It is crucial that when some want changes into accomplishment the whole apparatus employed to describe the respective situations is completely reshuffled, provoking claims of radical incommensurability. As long as signifiers can be viewed in isolation their correlates in the realm of sense are also bound to appear as single entities, causing the problem of commerce between signifier and signified. Lack of satisfaction produces the construct of something capable of satisfying this state. But it is exactly because of this that the constructed entity cannot fulfill its task of satisfaction as if it were a missing piece of equipment fitting into a predesigned slot. Its *raison d'être* is to indicate the incompleteness of the situation by its absence, it cannot simply be added to it like another of its elements.

Thus fulfillment, seen as a process, relates two qualitatively different types of situations. Obviously, introducing a one-to-one correlation between its respective constituents will not work here. This is why the apparatus of formal semantics is of no use in clarifying the situation. Establishing a metaphysical link between the signified and the signifier likewise is a misguided way of grasping what happens when the patterns of description switch. Thus Derrida is right against Husserl insofar as he stresses the uneliminable strangeness within this relation. But he misses Husserl's legitimate concern with intuitive closure. Talk about satisfaction amounts to a decision to see those patterns in the light of each other and more precisely to regard a lack of disruption as a state internally connected with a particular disruption and its removal. Only by resorting to

the analysis of a preceding problem and the logical space it opens up can some features of a state of the world be recognized as solutions. Taken by themselves they remain mute, just as a question without the prospect of an answer is mere rhetoric. Various philosophers have attacked the inclination to be inside and outside of a particular language-game at the same time. Such tendencies can certainly be a source of confusion, but, if my remarks on fulfillment are correct, we cannot dismiss them out of hand. The course of investigation suggesting itself here, rather, is to find out more about this simultaneity.

4 First Nature, Second Nature

Let me explore the tension between abstraction and involvement, starting with an example of harmless dualism. Someone owns a very old record player and has never heard of anything more refined than mono recordings, even though half his records are produced for stereo listening. He has to be taught the difference between mono and stereo, and only by being shown how a stereo system works will he be able to discover that his own collection consists of two significantly different types of records. In other words, only the proper use of a particular apparatus can bring out experiential distinctions. It is virtually meaningless to claim that they are present per se, without the availability of a certain corpus of knowledge and techniques. We can construct certain machines that enable us to subdivide one type of sound-event into two sub-types, depending on the information upon which the record-player operates. The content of such an acoustical event, consequently, is relative to the interests and devices of those trying to extract the information from a given source. Everyday life characteristically consists in such multi-layered situations. A wealth of data is ordinarily invested into the constitution of objects of our acquaintance but there is no ultimate test that could ascertain how many levels of analysis there are and no guarantees that newly found features will fit together nicely with the ones already known. Signs figure within this same experience. They cannot simply be picked out as self-sufficient elements of the world (if there are any) just like stereo records are not recognizable without a special differentiating device. Earlier on I described the semantical stance as imposition of a duality of views on given data. This is nicely mirrored in my propaedeutic simile, stereo sound splitting the flow of impulses from the original source and processing it through a second channel.

The lesson suggested by this example is as follows. A sign is something that can be seen as just another piece of nature and, with the help of certain conceptual devices, as embodiment of some particular transcendence of supposedly „natural“ interactions – namely lawlike causal processes or pragmatic communicative discourse. To see this more clearly, let us look again at the case of the record-player. A crucial distinction has to be observed here. Stereo can be opposed to mono but both stereo and mono are modes of reproduction of some previously given acoustical signal. The original sound underlying the record obviously is neither mono nor stereo. In reproducing it we use a given set of possibilities that implies and/or excludes others, all of them, however,

remaining on this side of the representational divide. Stereo might invariably sound „better” to the well-informed listener but this does not affect the point that there are distinct uses for either of both reproductive modes. (This is why more sophisticated audio-equipment usually includes a mono-button.) Both recording-techniques are, in a systematic sense, equi-distant from the original source. This does not entail, however, that their difference in reproductive quality cannot be put to use according to changing requirements. Now it seems to me that naturalistic and semantical descriptions of human behavior can also be regarded along those lines. Taken as descriptions both share the same methodological status, neither being an a priori more accurate rendering of a certain phenomenon than the other. Only by specifying the circumstances we set up a situation in which either mode of description is superior. Sound events are neither inherently mono nor stereo but there can be an overwhelming case for preferring stereo reproduction against mono. Employment of the dualism inherent in intentional ascription can likewise be the best strategy available to make sense of the data. Claiming that semantical features of the world must be derivable from causal or pragmatic ones can then be compared to saying that stereo sound derives from basically mono acoustical sources.

Let us discuss this less picturesquely in the setting of our considerations about fulfillment as resolution of the semantical dichotomy. The general point is that there is not one exclusive way to describe how signs actually function. Simply substituting the semantical scheme in favor of a non-dualistic one, the other one – or else remaining within the dichotomy, crossing from explicit to implicit intentionality, both are easy ways out. This leaves us with the task of specifying the particular way in which fulfillment as non-dichotomic state of affairs is affected by intentionality. As it turns out it can be posited on either side of the semantic tension. Talk about an unmediated fit between signifiatory elements can be taken either as naturalistic or as a very special semantical description. One pertinent way of expressing the distinction is to say that operational signs are often regarded as „first” nature whereas their particularity only shows under the light of what has traditionally been called „second nature”, a combination of features of naturalistic interaction and fulfillment of meaning. Second nature is the quasi-causal set of historically acquired dispositions posited, among other reasons, to capture the law-like quality of sign-governed behavior. Social compliance with signs is not present in conceptualizations of nature pure and simple. Second nature seems supervenient on nature in the literal sense and thus is open to well-known reductionist complaints. Is it just an invention useful to lay claim to a specially invented, dubious territory of humanistic fancy?

Why should we employ representational categories when meaningful behavior seems to lack explicit intentional features most of the time? Its characteristics can, on the contrary, often be convincingly described within the mechanical paradigm. Why take the trouble of introducing second nature? The answer turns on the degree of complexity and interference of simultaneous, mutually exclusive, perspectives one is prepared to countenance. The concept serves to introduce an additional coherence into the constitution of hermeneutical phe-

nomena, namely the historical dimension of communicating, failing to communicate, and reopening communication by means of signs. To explain how it is possible that something disclosed to us in an intentional mode and seen as fulfillment of – hence elimination of – this very mode is the same thing, we must be able to come up with a story connecting sentences in the intentional idiom with standard assertions from which reference to intentional states has been dropped. It calls for an elucidation using different approaches much more flexible than their contraposition suggests. Assimilating second to first nature, on the other hand, amounts to opting against the delicate conceptual balance that allows us to treat fulfillment of the semantical quest as something distinct from a pre-semantical „fullness” of interactions. The question comes to whether semantics has its own distinctive foundation or whether it is forced to search for it within the confines of another paradigm. It follows that, if the former is conceded, the relation of first to second nature has to remain an open question. Attempts to address it have to include provisions not only for the stability but also for the possible disruption of the signifying process. Lack of the first requirement disqualifies something as adequate description, lack of the second falls short of characterizing signs at least if they are understood as figuring in two distinct sets of circumstances capable of being integrated into unproblematic procedures, and yet readable as contingent resolutions of previously open configurations.

5 Multiple Simultaneous Descriptions

Starting from the controversy about Husserl’s anchoring signs in the primordial realm of Cartesian consciousness, the preceding discussion has advanced to show how intuitions concerning their ultimate deriveability and ultimate underivability may be reconciled. In its course we have touched upon three possible foundational accounts: naturalism, autonomy of dualism and a kind of naturalism on the second level, embedded in use. Those alternatives are commonly regarded as mutually exclusive, competing approaches. But adherence to just one of those frames misses the essential complexity of the phenomenon we have been investigating. Such a story has to be built on the interplay between the various modes of reference. It would lose its points if only one would be allowed.

As a typical example take the situation one finds oneself in when trying to reduce the intrinsic dualism of representation to some unmediated connective state of the world. There are, as I have pointed out, in principle two ways to go: first and second nature, both removing the challenge of dualism, though by very different means. The choice is between abolishing the category of intentionality or tracing its fulfillment. But why should one suppose that the same choice is adequate on all occasions? Cries of pain and utterances communicating intellectual achievements require different treatment. There are situations calling for the abandonment of dualistic complications and others that need to be considered in the light of the difficulties they induce. Wittgenstein’s puzzlement about the „strangeness” of the naming relation is probably best put to

rest by focussing on the fact that we ordinarily succeed in referring. But this does not exclude the possibility that we find ourselves stuck with the problem of reference whenever a well-established praxis of relating to some segment of our world breaks down.

Because of the linear order in which the three possible positions have been presented one might be tempted to conclude that a hidden dialectic is at work here. But, taking contextuality seriously, it is impossible to come up with general rules that could determine such a process. It is often difficult to decide whether the successful use of a sign should be seen as a matter of instinct or training. Naturalistic reduction of semantics and its assimilation to pragmatics are difficult to distinguish once the representational point of view is bracketed. First nature fuses with second nature as signs turn into one feature of a universal, vaguely causal framework. I do not possess an a priori program telling me in advance which option has to be taken. At this point the meta-theoretical problem looms large. Which picture should guide us in deciding the basic shape investigations about meaning should take? Or can we opt for a variety of pictures? Would this simply amount to giving in to relativism?

Obviously one cannot start a promising research project on the meta-level. But occasionally it is helpful to take a step back and review the overall situation. My proposal is to treat the semantical stance as an irreducible stage in the process I have been indicating. The existence of such processes cannot be demonstrated to a hypothetical outsider without getting him or her to agree upon some suitable ontological frame, but this dilemma is common to all the approaches mentioned. How, then, can the various stages be combined into one picture, keeping in mind that they follow entirely different descriptive patterns? Basically, I think, by granting that developments of any kind (think of the arrival of high fidelity) involve internally coordinated switches of perspective. There is no Hegelian Logic of History, but there are all kinds of expectations disappointed and fulfilled. Only by keeping the descriptive apparatus flexible justice can be done to them. It is neither entirely by chance nor by systematic a priori correlation within a singular pattern that a gestalt-switch can take place. On such occasions two patterns can profitably be employed simultaneously in an ad hoc fashion that is nevertheless born out by some set of data. (An underlying sensory stimulation has for example been arranged to give rise to entirely different interpretations.) Multiple readings of such information are not arbitrary even though they contain an amount of conventionalized subjective experience. In fact we are perfectly accustomed to live with simultaneous, mutually exclusive meanings; architects using elevators as decorative elements and children regarding toys as friends are just two examples. Considering a sign as causal factor, bearer of meaning and as a social construct is no more mysterious than regarding a sweater as protection against cold weather, as a gift and as a symbol of a certain life-style.

A signpost, as Wittgenstein describes it, sometimes leaves doubts regarding the direction in which it points, but sometimes it does not. This remark does not sound very profound, yet in an inauspicious way it contains all the problems about fulfillment I have been discussing. There is no guarantee that doubts will

not turn the seemingly automatic process of following a direction into an open question. Conversely, in terms of the resulting question, there is no explanation of how it is eventually settled. Instinctively we want a theory covering both the reliability of well-established procedures and their potential to go awry. One way to respond to this challenge is to take signs as causal instruments and explain their failing statistically, introducing additional parameters where ever needed to assimilate them to more conventional scientific mechanisms. This paper has defended another methodological option: regarding signs as something that can mislead in the sense of incorporating possible doubt about their particular function into their definition. The plasticity of signs emphasized by semantic theory derives from disentangling second from first nature, setting up and bridging the gap between them. Signs carry expectations, expectations risk disappointment, possible disappointment can be built into understanding. Nature will never again be what she seemed before she was recognized as partly man-made. Discussions surrounding semantical concepts are determined by this hidden fact. Bringing it into the open amounts to turning this lack of reliability into an asset of language-using animals.