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Sign and Evidence

It was Max Scheler who described with the great precision the opposition of *immediate* experience to *symbolized* knowledge. But the problem itself is as old as is the philosophical reflection, because it constitutes the basic question of philosophy. Every analysis referring to the very essence of human cognition has to touch on the question of immediacy and of the role of signs in the whole structure of knowledge. The discussions concerning the relationship between direct and mediate cognition create one of the significant topics in the history of philosophy. And the existing variety of opinions is caused mainly by the diversity of hierarchies of cognitive values.

Scheler's opinion concerning the superior value of direct insight over knowledge mediated through symbols is typical of the phenomenology. And it is worth to mention, that the phenomenological idea about the highest cognitive value of immediate experience is indifferent to the internal split within the phenomenological school between realists, like Scheler and Ingarden, and transcendentalists, like Husserl or Merleau-Ponty.

Scheler differentiates very clearly between intuition and symbolized knowledge. The principal distinction between them consists in the fact that in the direct experience the object is self-given, while in the mediate cognition it is given only through the symbol or sign and does not appear by itself at all. "Something can be self-given only if it is no longer given merely through any sort of symbol; in other words, only if it is not 'meant' as the mere 'fulfillment' of a sign which is previously defined in some way or other."¹ In consequence, Scheler makes the "*self-giveness*" and the "*symbol-giveness*" the main categories of epistemology.

And further, Scheler identifies self-giveness with *evidence* and discloses as the main character of symbolized knowledge the lack of evidence. According to him, the evident cognition is merely that, which presents its object directly, i.e. that, in which its object is self-given.

The very essence of evidence is self-justification. Evident knowledge shows its rightness by itself and it does not need any other form of verification or testifying. Its certitude is absolute and autonomous. Its truth seems necessary. Thus, "evident" means "self-justified".

¹ Max Scheler, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (trans. D.R. Lachterman), Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, p. 143

According to Scheler, the reason for such a peculiar quality of evident cognition lies exactly in its faculty for immediate and complete presentation of the object. The evident cognition is indubitable and infallible, because it grasps the whole object and the entire object is present by itself in the experience. All mediation destroys the evidence.

There is no doubt that for Scheler, as for all other phenomenologists, the distinction between self-given and symbol-given has not only the descriptive meaning but that it has, above all, the evaluative sense. The immediate experience constitutes the perfect knowledge and all mediate cognition is always inferior to it. According to Scheler, the main deficiency of all mediation through symbols is the fact that it gives simultaneously more and less than the object itself. It gives less, because it presents only one part or one aspect of the object. And, on the other hand, it gives more, because it gives us always the object interpreted in some way, the object supplemented, and that way changed, by the sense inculcated upon it. Consequently, for Scheler, mediation means the deformation of cognition, the deviation from the things themselves. It gives less information and worse information than the direct insight.

However, the main task of this paper is different than just the detailed analysis of Scheler's epistemology. I have alluded to his writings only in order to make clear the problem of axiological differences between direct experience and mediate knowledge. The phenomenological conception gives the highest evaluation to immediate cognition. This preference for experience before symbolized knowledge is based on the special idea of hierarchy of cognitive values. That is the hierarchy, in which the highest place is taken by the evidence and by the full, actual presence of object in the acts of consciousness. But phenomenology creates only one among possible solutions of the above mentioned problem. The different type of answer to that question is given by the philosophical theories, which express the extremely opposite evaluation of immediate experience. Those theories criticise mainly the subjective, private nature of intuition and try to find the fundament for the common, intersubjective validity of knowledge. So, from this point of view intersubjectivity seems to be the most important quality of cognition and the highest cognitive value. And consequently, the principal argument against the philosophy of immediate experience is the fact of purely private and inner character of direct insight and the lack of common and external criterion of the rightness of intuitive cognition. Thus, as the complete and actual presence of object in the cognition is the highest ideal for the first type of epistemology, so the expressibility of content and the intersubjective communication of meanings constitutes the ideal for the second type.

The significant and very radical criticism of the first type of epistemology was given by Charles Peirce. And of special importance for philosophy is the fact that Peirce not only rejects the intuitionism as the wrong solution but that he creates, in the opposition to it, the fully developed theory of mediated by symbols knowledge. His semiotics is a philosophy of signs and it provides the method for solving a great deal of epistemological questions.

Peirce's semiotics was originated by his polemics against the Cartesian philosophy. His criticism is very deep and it reaches down to the roots of all intuitionism.

His solutions are opposed in an essential way to the idea of evidence. There are at least three main topics of Peirce's theory of signs which are significant from that point of view. First of all, it is the problem of the beginning of cognition: according to the theory of signs there exists no absolute starting point and no final conclusion of knowledge. Every cognition has its antecedents and its results by which it is determined. The pursuit of the indubitable, unshakable fundament of knowledge is not only needless but it is also entirely impossible due to the fact that knowledge has, instead of hierarchical structure, a linear one. No parts of cognition are radically more valuable than others. Secondly, according to Peirce's semiotic epistemology, there exist no simple data which constitute the basic elements of cognition. Knowledge can be neither the mozaic, nor the hierarchical structure made of elementary data, because no single datum has any cognitive sense. There is no separate self-subsistent content. Every meaning coexists with other meanings and only due to them it has its own intellectual or emotional content. The single, separate cognition is impossible, because it would be meaningless. And consequently, each meaning can be grasped exclusively through the other meaning, never directly. Thirdly, the theory of signs overcomes the traditional dualism of subject and object in epistemology. Cognition is no longer interpreted as the dyadic relation but it becomes the triadic representation. Thus, it is not only impossible to have the immediate apprehension of meaning, but also the direct approach to the object is not available. The cognitive reference towards the object is always mediated by some meaning. The object is "meant" in a particular way but never simply felt, so, in consequence, it neither can be free from interpretation, nor fully present.

All those three points need some more specific explication.

Theory of signs detaches very sharply Peirce's philosophy from the Cartesian idea of search for the absolutely certain cognition and from the pursuit of the perfect beginning of knowledge. And that way, detaches it from the contemporary transcendentalism too. Peirce's conception of the new type of epistemology, which is just the theory of signs, is the best proof that he, philosophically, was a genius. His criticism of the theory of nondeceptiveness of inner perception and of the idea of final insights, behind which we cannot go back any further, is not limited simply to the doubt concerning the evidence of such a kind of cognition. That would be only the common critical attitude to intuitionism. But Peirce was much keener. He not only rejects the conception that an *ego* with its *cogitationes* can establish the unshakable grounding for all cognition, as well, as he not only doubts that inner perception can be certain. What he has done is considerably more significant. He shakes the essential idea about the necessity of self-evident and ultimate foundation for knowledge. He denies the rightness of pursuit of the beginning.

Disclosing that every thought is a sign Peirce makes the crucial blow to the idea of pointing back to original primary data of immediate experience. The very essence of sign is that it does not exist separately. To be a sign means to be an element of the whole system of signs, or in other words, as Max Bense¹ calls it, to belong to

¹ Max Bense, *Semiotische Prozesse und Systeme*, Agis-Verlag, Baden-Baden 1975

some repertoire of signs. Sign is a triadic relation, and that means, that it, on the one hand, indicates some self-subsistent object, and on the other hand, is associated with at least one other sign. Thus, a sign is relative in the double sense: first, it is determined by its object, and second, it depends on other signs. Something can be a sign only on the condition that it is interpreted as a sign, i.e., that it has its own interpretant. Interpretant is the third, indispensable element of the triadic relation, called representation. Without it the whole triada vanishes. But the interpretant is a sign too. So consequently, cognition, metatheoretically understood as a representation, is a chain of signs, which has no starting point and no end. Plainly then, for Peirce, a system is logically prior to a single sign. The system constitutes the necessary condition for any particular sign. The importance of such a conception for the philosophy is obvious. It destroys the notion of perfect beginning.

It seems to me very significant that the idea of sign appeared very early in Peirce's writings, while he was being involved in the polemics against the Cartesian philosophy. We could say, that the idea of sign is in Peirce's hands the main weapon versus Descartes. The two early articles "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man" and "Consequences of Four Incapacities" make it sufficiently clear. The category of sign is opposed to the Cartesian methodic doubt and to the search for the absolute certain cognition. Peirce writes: "We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy." (5.265.) And the next problem for him is the following: "We have no power of Intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions. We have no power of thinking without signs." (5.265.) Plainly then, Peirce is fully aware of the philosophical importance of disclosing the concept of sign as the main epistemological category. He uses it in his polemics against intuitionism and wants to change by it the whole realm of the philosophical reflection concerning human cognition.

Theory of signs is the total negation of all immediacy in the cognition. No object can be directly given, it must be always mediated by some meaning. Peirce's differentiation between Immediate and Real Object explains very clearly this cognitive situation. What can be given is only the Immediate Object, defined by Peirce as the object "as it is presented by a sign". In no case the Real Object is present in symbolized cognition. But not only any object is given directly, either any meaning can be grasped immediately. The meaning of sign is presented by its interpretant and we can acquaint of it only this way. So, the understanding of any meaning is through another meaning. And every content has to be mediated by another content.

Plainly then, theory of signs excludes fully from cognition self-giveness. Neither object, nor meaning is self-given. For Peirce, cognition is merely symbol-giveness. Nevertheless, from this point of view, the very special case is created by the iconic sign. Icon is a kind of sign which combines in itself the elements of direct presence with mediate representation. It is a very peculiar mixture of "self-giveness" and "symbol-giveness". But there is no place here for more specific analysis of this particular case.

Furthermore, theory of signs denies the idea of elementary, simple data constitut-

ing the indubitable foundation for cognition. The exclusive ground for symbolized cognition can be created by the symbolized cognition too. Every sign finds its own ground in the sign of which it is the interpretant and it creates by itself the basis for another sign, its own interpretant. There are no simple data, which themselves do not need to be grounded on the former cognition, and, on the other hand, are able to create the absolute foundation for perfect knowledge. Theory of signs declares the continuity of cognition and opposes to the idea of reducing cognition to its elements. The idea of continuity means that no cognition is self-evident, because it is always founded on another cognition, which too is rooted in some other one and so ad infinitum. Peirce defines intuition as "*a cognition not determined by a previous cognition of the same object*" (5.213.) and denies its existence. Plainly then, it is the theory of signs which takes very seriously the idea of grounding the knowledge and, consequently, creates the proper tools for its analysis. And the first step for this semiotical analysis of cognition is to overcome the idea of the self-evidence of primary data.

And finally, theory of signs rejects the traditional dualism of epistemology, i.e. dualism between subject and object. The genuine cognitive relation is not dyadic, but a triadic one. That thesis changes not only the position of object, which, as it was mentioned before, is no longer available for direct perception, but modifies the situation of subject too. The main goal of subject becomes the understanding of signs and their systems; *ego* is in the position of interpreter rather than the creator of cognition. Cognition as a system of signs exists outside of consciousness and is selfsubsistent to it. Subject as interpreter, instead of creator, as it is in the transcendental philosophy, is confronted by the diversity of signs and it has to comprehend their meanings and their objective references. Symbolical cognition is by its genuine essence the interpretation. It starts never in emptiness but always takes for granted all previous prejudices. Moreover, it does not go back and try to escape its background, on the contrary, it goes forward, perpetually creating new signs and new meanings. Interpretation is the process having neither beginning, nor end. Due to the transformation of the dyadic cognitive relation into the triadic representation Peirce was able to overcome psychologism, as well, as transcendentalism. Likewise, the definition of knowledge in the terms of representation makes possible the identification of the metatheoretical analysis of cognition with the theory of signs. For Peirce, sign is the basic epistemological category and the inquiry into the sign universum constitutes the essence of theory of knowledge.

The genuine philosophical reflection on the nature of cognition is always motivated by the search for perfect knowledge. So, all epistemology essentially includes as its part the evaluative approach to the different types of cognition. As it was mentioned before, for Scheler, the distinction between self-given and symbol-given had not only the descriptive meaning but it has, above all, the evaluative sense. This same attitude is typical of Peirce too. For him, symbolized knowledge exclusively constitutes the valuable cognition. He appreciates mediate cognition and despises direct intuition. He even refuses to call immediate experience by the name of cognition. Plainly then, his theory of signs is originated by his evaluative approach to cognition, by his particular axiology of cognitive values.

The reconstruction of the hidden axiology of Peirce's semiotics is only partially simple and easy. However, at least some points are unquestionable. First of all, beyond a doubt is Peirce's refutation of evidence. According to him, evidence is not that quality of knowledge which belongs in the realm of cognitive values. He rejects evidence in its Cartesian sense, as the clearness and distinctness of conceiving. And he rejects also evidence in its phenomenological meaning, as the complete and actual presence of object in cognition. Generally speaking, theory of signs excludes evidence as a possible valuable quality of knowledge. In the universum of signs there is no place for self-justification. No sign can be self-evident, because, *ex definitione*, it depends on other signs.

But different problem is created by the category of certitude. Peirce's opinion on this topic is more complicated. It is well known that he rejects in a very radical way the ideal of indubitable knowledge and that he describes his conception as fallibilism. Nevertheless it does not mean that Peirce neglects certitude as a cognitive value. The search for certain knowledge is the significant motive for him, as it is for all philosophers, and his criticism is focussed only on the wrong idea of certitude and on the wrong manner of establishing it. The best proof of the above thesis is his theory of signs.

According to Peirce, there is only the one proper way to perfect knowledge and that is the development of the sign-analysis. Semiotics, for him, is the metaknowledge theory which discloses the very essence and genuine structure of cognition and that way creates the basis for the new method of analysis. Moreover, this semiotical analysis makes possible the perfect cognition. Due to the analysis of signs we can know what kind of information we receive by the particular sign, how broad and how sure is the cognition carried by it. Consequently, of special importance is Peirce's classification of signs¹. It discloses the inner structure of the sign universum and gives the guidance through it.

What Peirce means by the perfect knowledge that must be the subject of separate inquiry. At any rate, it is obvious that it is not the absolutely unshakable cognition. However, it leaves no doubt that semiotics is the method for elucidating and correcting human knowledge. Semiotics, is, for Peirce, the pursuit of certitude, even if he is not looking for the absolute indubitability.

So, opposing to the Cartesian idea of grounding knowledge on the evident experience, Peirce does not give up the general idea of the foundation for perfect knowledge. Rejecting the ideal of evidence and the method of pointing back to primary data, he discloses the new type of epistemology, i.e. the semiotical analysis, which is the method of obtaining the best of possible cognition.

¹ Elisabeth Walther, „Die Haupteinteilungen der Zeichen von C.S. Peirce“, *Semiosis*, Heft 3/76

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