

SIGNS AND POTENTIALITY

Even though limits of space prevent a fully developed presentation of a major project, I believe the occasion is suitable for one. Rather than giving a scrutinizing and detailed discussion of some narrower issue then, I have chosen a compromise and will delineate in general terms a problem which I consider to be of consequential import for the ontology of the sign. This paper will constitute prolegomena to a much broader discussion and a more detailed study of the concept of potentiality in relation to sign and semiosis.

There are two reasons why the question of potentiality needs to be brought up. On the one hand, the view of signs and, consequently, of semiosis in terms of potentiality opposes a tendency to see the sign as primarily a material entity, the tendency operative particularly in the so-called social semiotics or in semiotic research with a materialist or Marxist orientation (e.g. Voloshinov 1973; Hodge and Kress 1988). Reducing the sign to matter, or even assuming or imposing on the signifier (representamen) the necessity of material existence, not only excludes from the semiotic universe the whole imperium of non-material signs but also either reduces semiosis to a single level or is not able to account theoretically for any multilevel and more complex semiotic processes.

The other reason is that the concept of potentiality itself needs reformulation with regard to the sign. Aristotle's discussion in *Metaphysics* concerns potentiality of things and objects; semiotic potentiality demands a broader apparatus, specific - in parts at least - to itself. Also, what becomes conspicuous with regard to signification is that actuality and potentiality cannot be seen as two poles (cf. Aristotle 1968: 188), two realms of tantamount and analogous nature. The binary and equivalent distinction between actuality and potentiality is one of the most misleading dichotomies. In fact, potentialities are many, actuality is one.

The significance of potentiality in semiosis becomes particularly conspicuous in the work of Charles Peirce, and especially in his system of categories, two of which - Firstness and Thirdness - encompass various modes of the phenomenon. Writes Peirce: "Let us not put the cart before the horse, nor the evolved actuality before the possibility as if the latter *involved* what it only *evolves*." Peirce's categorical system,

however, is of necessity schematic – its aim was not to multiply but to reduce – and only delineates the borders of two realms of non-actuality. These two realms, however – let us call them tentatively “indeterminate possibility” and “determinate potentiality”¹ – can be subject to multifarious internal differentiation. Rather than seeing “determinate potentiality” and “indeterminate possibility” as a binary opposition of two undifferentiated fields (cf. Kruse 1990: 222), we should construe them as extremes of a certain range or scale: their place is not in opposition to one another but within the same broad **spectrum** of principally homologous phenomena. From a different angle, such spectral character of the whole reality has been analyzed and formalized in the works of Max Bense, Elisabeth Walther, and other members of the Stuttgart circle (e.g. Bense 1983, 1986; Walther 1979).

The depiction of potentiality as a diverse spectrum rather than as a monolithic entity belongs to the crucial points that I want to make in this paper. Before we discuss that question in greater detail, however, some clarification and some distinctions have to be made within the concept of potentiality itself.

A certain “connotative” prejudice which often bears upon the understanding of the concept is that potentiality implies passivity on the part of the thing or sign involved: the thing or sign remains in a state of “lethargy”, inactivity, and a change is brought about by a factor external to it. Construed in this manner, “potentiality” suggests non-occurrence, a mere possibility which consists entirely in absence.

Contrary to this frequently held view, the condition for potentiality is an active participation of a thing or sign in a relation, even though that relation may be a “negative” or an incomplete one because one of its elements is missing. This necessarily missing element is the state of affairs (or a certain state of an object) that would be obtained if the potential were to be fulfilled. The relation essential to the concept of potentiality, then, is a relation of a triple nature: it occurs between the present element (a thing, a state of affairs, or a sign) and the open nod of the absent element (we could call it **zero element** or **target state**): the present (sign or thing) must be actively ready to reach beyond itself, while the absent element (or rather an optional range of such elements) must be in some degree predictable. What accounts for the predictability, is the third component of the relation: a system of rules, habits, or to use a Peircean term, a Quasi-mind.

1 Kruse (1990) uses these two terms to define conditions for signification.

In brief then, we could define potentiality, particularly with regard to semiotic phenomena, as a complex relation which is a resultant of three factors: (a) the qualitative constitution of the present element (the potential exactly "within" the thing), (b) the absence of another element (or state of affairs), which is a target state with a certain (varying) degree of predictability, and (c) a system, or habit, or quasi-mind which "enables" the relation between the present and the absent, and makes predictability possible.

The above delineation of what constitutes potentiality seems to hold for diverse phenomena, and can be regarded as a general definition. However, in order to relate the question of potentiality to sign and semiosis in a more precise manner, certain distinctions have to be introduced within that general concept. The basic distinction is that between what we may call **ontic** and **cognitive** potentiality. The former encompasses phenomena where the target state of affairs - whether determined by final causation or not - concerns a change in the mode of being or qualitative constitution of an object, in a manner which is not relative to any mind, or even to the existence of a mind (cf. Rescher 1975: 192-219). Here, the system governing the change is the broadly understood habit of nature (in the Peircean sense). An example of this kind of potentiality is the possible (and highly predictable) change of an acorn into oak, of an embryo into a human being etc., or with a much lesser degree of predictability, a change of a block of marble into a sculpture (analogous, *mutatis mutandis*, to "pure" interpretability; see further discussion). **Cognitive** potentiality, on the other hand, involves phenomena relative to the mind: not necessarily to any particular, individual, and actually existing mind, but to mind construed as a condition for existence or occurrence.²

The latter kind of potentiality, the cognitive one, must again be seen as consisting of two different types. The first kind encompasses the potentiality of becoming an entity, which is partly entailed in and partly imparted by the mind to an undifferentiated material or conceptual substance (on the level of conceptuality cf. Saussure's "floating realm of thought" or "indefinite plane of jumbled ideas", or Hjelmslev's "purport" (Saussure 1959; Hjelmslev 1963). We do not notice those phenomena in the obviousness of our everyday semioses because of the anesthetizing familiarity of the cultural "habit" which we share with our community. However, each actual cognition of an object is in fact a **re-cognition**, it

² Rescher (1975), for example, considers all possibilities as mind-correlative. If that view were to be accepted in its entirety, then the distinction between ontic and cognitive potentiality would have to be reworked and reformulated.

is a repeated and invidently recurring interpretation: an act of interpretation which practices and perpetuates the cultural convention (habit). At a certain moment of the history of conceptuality (and of semiotic systems) – before a given object or concept attained an individual status of an entity – it had to be isolated, through the semiotic process of naming, from the homogenous undifferentiated substance of the world, and set off against that homogeneity. In this sense, the mind has exerted its stigma upon an object and has become its part; the mind permeates the object. Any culturally established and recognizable object is a totality produced by inference: in its fundamental and primary being, each object must be a sign of itself.

Yet this first type, although primarily cognitive in character – because it fundamentally depends on human perception and conceptual apparatus – involves also an element of ontic determination in the sense that cognition and perception themselves are to a degree conditioned by reality. This conditioning and determination consists in the power of the yet linguistically undifferentiated substance of external reality or of conceptuality to impose itself as a distinguishable object or concept or, we could say, it consists in the power of reality to initiate the cultural process of naming and reifying (cf. also, in a different context, Peirce's insistence on the fact that it is the **object** that determines the sign to its representation).

The other type in this dichotomous division occurs when – once having become an object and having entered the repertory of cultural entities – the object now attains a new kind of potentiality: that of a sign, i.e. the ability or power of signifying beyond itself, of signifying the other. Again, however, a further dichotomous division imposes itself here. Within the significatory potentiality of the sign we have to distinguish between its two different aspects. On the one hand, the sign displays the power to signify something different from itself, to carry a meaning or to refer to an object or, in brief, to be interpretable as something. Yet, in order to be specifically *interpretable-as-something* (i.e. as having this or that meaning), the sign must first of all be self-reflexive, must be *interpretable-as-sign*, i.e., it must point to itself as a sign, must first of all announce that it is a sign. **Interpretability**, then – this characteristically semiotic kind of potentiality – may be seen as comprising two different aspects: "**pure**" **interpretability** and **interpretability-as**.

In order to give a clearer and more systematic picture of the taxonomy proposed above, let us reiterate the internal distinctions within the concept of potentiality. Potentiality, as a general phenomenon, is of

two types: **ontic** (not relative to the mind, e.g. the change of acorn to oak) and **cognitive** (relative to the mind). Cognitive potentiality, in turn, comprises two further types: **objectual** (the potential change of undifferentiated substance into culturally definable object) and **semiotic potentiality** or better **interpretability**, which itself is of two kinds: "**pure**" **interpretability** (the very signifying potential) and **interpretability-as** (signifying something).

Having introduced the necessary distinctions into the concept of potentiality, we may now more clearly delineate the concept of **interpretability** (or sign's interpretive potentiality) **construed as spectrum**. The discussion is also aimed, albeit indirectly, at a general interpretation of potentiality as a modality of spectral character.

If we were to draw a spectral scale or line representing semiotic potentiality, one of its extremes would be defined by "pure" interpretability: the utmost point of total openness, in which an object is already capable of being interpreted, already capable of reaching beyond itself - that is, already potentially a sign - but without any definite **specifications** imposed yet by a cultural system of interpretive rules. Yet even at this point of total openness, the "pure" interpretability of the object is not at all pure - unless we consider it in isolation which we cannot do because it is already a potential sign and must therefore be seen against the background or within the differentiating context of the sign universe. The object/sign enters into relations with that universe, which then, by a complex network of unavoidable analogies or differences, endows it with predispositions to be able to signify certain things more than others. Even though at this stage of becoming a signifying entity the object can potentially be appropriated by any meaning configuration (or vice versa, it can itself produce any meaning), yet its full potentiality is already self-limiting because - as a sign - it comes into existence within the perspective of the whole semiotic space. Even total openness already attracts limitations. These limitations, as we said, have only the form of predispositions, and can be overpowered: the object/sign can be forced to mean against its predilection. Yet the fact remains that what (metaphorically, we should say) is called "indeterminate possibility", is of itself an impossible concept if applied to anything else than an absolute cultural void.

If total openness (or rather **almost** total openness), constitutes one end of the spectrum of potentiality, the other end ("end" again as a metaphor) is constituted by univocality. Here, we shall find petrified cultural signs whose significations have been deprived of ambiguity within their

sub-systems or sub-universes (e.g. letters in the alphabet, the sun, phallus, etc.). Here too, however, extends the space of the **almost**: the "myth robbery" never really ceases to work, and all such univocal significations can always be appropriated, annexed, invaded by other parts or fragments of the sign universe, by other sub-systems or sub-universes, thus actually losing their univocality or, as we should rather say, their **almost** univocality.

Between these two elusive and of themselves imprecise (or even self-defeating) extremities the whole scale of signifiatory potentiality stretches out to encompass all existing signs, and welcomes all those not yet existent. Any object of any ontological status has its place on the scale of potential signification, and no object can escape that potentiality.³

In view of the fact that the semiotic universe undergoes changes, it would be naive to consider the place of a sign on a potentiality (interpretability) spectrum as fixed. Theoretically, any alteration in the sign universe has an effect, even though of the minutest thinkable sort, upon all other signs. In practice, however, only changes in those sections and elements of the universe which are in semiotic proximity to the sign in question, and thus in a direct significant relation with it, will affect the sign. A complex analysis would be required to determine such a field (or fields) of **semiotic proximity** for a particular sign, an analysis which would also have to consider those alterations which do not directly affect the sign and which are remote from it, but may either accumulate or indirectly exert an impact on the sign by way of domino principle. An immense network of those types of changes continually enters countless relations and interacts within the semiotic cosmos. The result of the permanent flux is that each sign moves, or may move, on its potentiality spectrum either towards greater openness and susceptibility to be appropriated by various subsystems or towards greater closure, when certain interpretive potentialities are reduced or annihilated. Spectral potentiality is never constant for any sign: at each moment of its history it is decided and determined by the movements of its context.

3 Even though we are primarily concerned with questions of cognition (cognitive potentiality, interpretability), it seems that a similar kind of analysis (and of the spectral model) can be applied to ontic potentiality. For example, the potential change of acorn to oak occupies the position of (almost) univocality, while a potential change of a block of marble into a sculpture forms the other extreme, that of almost total openness. However, while a sign may travel back and forth on the spectrum, these are rather fixed. The spectral model for ontic modality requires a separate discussion.

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