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## SOME COMMENTS ON C. W. MORRIS'S "FOUNDATIONS OF THE THEORY OF SIGNS"

Conspicuous among recent studies of interpretation is C. W. Morris's "Foundations of the Theory of Signs."<sup>1</sup> This thoughtful monograph does much to illuminate the questions with which it deals, but the theory outlined in it seems to me nevertheless to suffer from certain serious defects which, in view of the wide but perhaps not always sufficiently critical attention it has attracted, need to be pointed out. In the present paper I shall attempt to do this, and also to indicate the general nature of the rather extensive modifications which seem to me needed to transform the theory into an acceptable one.

1. Morris calls "semiosis" the process in which something functions as "sign," and describes this process as involving four factors. Thus, for example, a dog (the "interpreter") responds by the type of behavior I (the "interpretant") involved in the hunting of chipmunks D (the "designatum") to a certain sound S (the "sign-vehicle"). He then characterizes a sign as follows: "S is a sign of D for I to the degree that I takes account of D in virtue of the presence of S."<sup>2</sup>

It is immediately to be noted, however, that Morris's example and his characterization of a sign do not match. Whereas he states explicitly that I stands for the *interpretant*—namely, in the example, the hunting behavior—he actually in the characterization makes I stand instead for the *interpreter*, namely, the dog. That it stands there for the dog becomes evident if we explicate the characterization in terms of the example, as follows: The sound S is a sign of chipmunks D for I (that is, obviously, for a dog, not for the hunting behavior) to the degree that I (*viz.*, the dog) takes account of chipmunks D (that is, behaves in the manner B called chipmunk-hunting) in virtue of the presence of S. Accordingly, if Morris's characterization of a sign is to fit his example, it must be amended to read: S is a sign of D for (an interpreter) I to the degree that, in virtue of the presence of S, I behaves in a manner B which would be appropriate to the presence of D.

It will be noticed that the vague undefined phrase "takes account of," which Morris uses so much and seems to regard as indispensable or even as basic in an account of semiosis, does not appear in the amended characterization just given. Its disappearance is an automatic result of the fact that now the interpretant, *viz.*, the mode of behavior B, does explicitly appear—as of course it should since Morris rightly regards an interpretant

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<sup>1</sup> *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, vol. I, no. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

as an intrinsic component of semiosis. The elimination thereby of the phrase “takes account of” shows that an interpreter’s “taking account of” something D in virtue of the presence of S (or equivalently, S’s being a sign of D for I) then simply means that the interpreter is caused by S to behave in a manner B which would be appropriate to the presence of D.

2. In this monograph, however, Morris seems never to have decided exactly what he does mean by the “interpretant.” Not only, as just pointed out, does he at some places confuse interpretant with interpreter—that is confuse a mode of behavior with an organism capable of it—but elsewhere he says that “the interpretant of a sign is the *habit* in virtue of which the sign-vehicle can be said to designate certain kinds of objects or situations.”<sup>3</sup> But this is to confuse an interpretant, which is a mode of behavior, with a habit of the interpreter, which is a *connection*, in the interpreter, between a given sign-vehicle and a certain mode of behavior; for a habit has essentially, irreducibly, the “if . . . then . . .” form. An interpreter could be defined, as I have myself proposed elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> as a set or system of habits; but an interpretant is always *the response only*—e.g., the hunting behavior—which functions as the “then” in the “if . . . then . . .” scheme that defines the habit itself.

3. Returning now to the amendment shown to be necessary in Morris’s characterization of semiosis if it is to fit his example, I wish next to point out that, even as amended, that characterization is obviously inadequate unless “behavior” is construed in it broadly enough to include not only bodily responses, whether operatory, orientative, or emotional, but also certain other responses which all persons other than radical behaviorists would call mental not bodily responses—for example, those consisting in the supervention of images, ideas, feelings, or desires, or of attitudes such as belief, disbelief, etc. For if, for example, having awakened in the middle of the night, I hear the sort of crepitant sound ordinarily caused by rain drops on the roof, this sound is then immediately for me a sign that it is raining. But if I thereafter at once go to sleep again, what then, I ask, is the mode of behavior B appropriate to the presence of rain, which the crepitant sound S must have caused in me according to the definition of what it means for S to be for me a sign of rain? I submit that that “mode of behavior” can in this case have consisted only of the mental events called *thinking* of rain and *believing* that it was occurring, for my response to the sound S consisted of nothing but this.

Of course I may be told that my response did not consist of nothing but

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34, italics mine.

<sup>4</sup> “Synbols, Signs and Signals” *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, vol. IV, no. 2, June, 1939, p. 42.

this—that certain neural changes or perhaps minute muscular tensions, such as would in other circumstances culminate in actions appropriate to the presence of rain, were caused in me at the time by the sound S, and that these, and not any mental events, constituted the behavior—the “taking account of”—called for by the definition. But then I shall reply first that so far as the particular case goes, these minute bodily changes were not observed nor observable by anybody and therefore have in that particular case the status only of suppositions *ad hoc*; that is, of suppositions made solely for the purpose of saving the materialistic metaphysics of behaviorism. Secondly, if I am then told that in other but more or less similar cases, the existence of minute changes (in the given case only postulated) can be demonstrated by means of delicate instruments such perhaps as the plethysmograph or galvanometer, I shall reply that even then Morris's claim that the study of semiosis is possible in terms exclusively behavioristic (i.e., without bringing “private experiences” such as thoughts and other mental events into the story) and *can in such terms be complete*, falls to the ground. For even the most delicately discriminative apparatus cannot distinguish the minute changes which occur in my nervous system or my muscular tensions when the sound S is for me a sign of rain, from those which occur when S is for me instead a sign of sleet. It is true that one can then question me, and that my verbal response will be different in the two cases. But this is beside the point, for the sound S was a sign of rain for me as soon as I heard that sound—to be a sign of rain, it did not have to wait until my later verbal responses to questions. The response by me—without which, according to the definition of a sign, S could not have been for me a sign—had to be one occurring at the time S was functioning for me as a sign. And the only identifiable distinctive response that occurred at that time was the mental, introspectable one consisting of my thinking of rain and believing that what I was thinking of was occurring. *This* response had the status of observed fact, not of hypothesis; on the other hand, that a certain distinctive minute neural change occurs whenever that specific introspectable response occurs, has the status not of observed fact but only of hypothesis, even if of hypothesis probable in some degree.

From these considerations it follows that adoption, as by Morris throughout his monograph, of the ordinary behavioristic standpoint (which conceives “behavior” as bodily response), would—notwithstanding his claim to the contrary—definitely and needlessly restrict the possible scope of the study of signs. That is, the ordinary behavioristic interpretation of the phrase “taking account of” is *not sufficient* for a complete study of semiosis.

On the other hand, Morris's other claim, viz., that (although sufficient) the behavioristic interpretation of “taking account of” is *not necessary*,

is valid only if "behavior" is taken in the sense only of bodily response. But if it is taken in the broader sense I have shown above to be called for—viz., to mean any response, whether bodily or mental—then the phrase "to take account of" has, I would maintain, no correct analysis other than a behavioristic one.

4. We must, however, come back once more to the definition of semiosis, for even with the two amendments to it already shown to be necessary, it still remains open to criticism on several grounds.

For one, no mode of behavior B can be said *simpliciter* to be appropriate to the presence of D, for the relation "appropriate to" is not dyadic but irreducibly tetradic: Behavior B can be said to be appropriate (or likewise, inappropriate) to the presence of D only *for the attainment of purposes of kind P*, and *under circumstances of kind C*. For example, the fact that a certain person, who hears a certain roaring sound, just lights a cigarette is no evidence that this sound is not for him a sign of the approach of a lion, for this behavior would not be inappropriate to the approach of a lion if the person were bent on suicide. On the other hand, even if he has the normal desire for self-preservation, this same behavior would nevertheless be consistent with the sound's being for him a sign of the approach of a lion if the circumstances included steel bars or a moat between him and the source of the sound—or, more exactly, if he *believed* that the circumstances included this, and also *believed* that a lion could not jump over the moat or the bars. Accordingly, if we insist on defining "sign of" as a function of a person's perceptually observable behavior, the definition has to be this:

S is a sign of D for (an interpreter) I to the degree that the presence of S, *conjointly* with purposes of kind P in I *and* with belief by I that the circumstances are of kind C *and* with belief that behavior of kind B in such circumstances would promote these purposes, causes I to behave in manner B. Nothing less than this will do. But although in this definition the person's public behavior is one of the variables of which the status of S as for him "sign of" D is a function, this status is a function *also* of three other variables, all of them mental and therefore private; for belief of something by a person cannot be defined in terms solely of his public behavior, but the definition has to include reference to his purposes; and a person's purposes are directly knowable only by him, through introspection. Other persons can know them, if at all, only indirectly and later, through more or less precarious inferences from his verbal behavior, or from his operatory behavior if he attempts to realize them by means of bodily movements.

I conclude that a definition of semiosis in terms solely of public behavior, such as Morris attempts, not only is as he suggests not necessary, but is impossible; and that the definition in such terms, which he proposes, owes

what plausibility it may have only to the fact that most readers tacitly make the required supplementary assumptions as to private states—the purposes and beliefs—of the interpreter. On the other hand, a definition of semiosis framed purely in phenomenological terms—that is, a definition the variables of which do not include the interpreter's public behavior—is possible, and I have attempted elsewhere to furnish it.<sup>5</sup>

5. Attention must next be called to the fact that what Morris calls "indexical signs" and "characterizing signs" are not signs in the sense specified for this term by him—the sense which it has when, for example, one says that a certain sort of squeak is for a dog a sign of a chipmunk.<sup>6</sup> Morris's use of the undefined, vague expression "taking account of" for all cases of semiosis alike is what masks the fact that he employs the word "sign" in two different senses which are not, as he believes them to be, one a species of the other—for example, that a "symbol," (i.e., a non-iconic characterizer) is not a species of "sign" in the sense assigned by him to the latter term.

Consider, for example, the "characterizing sign" consisting of the word "chipmunk," (which is a case of what Morris calls a symbol) and compare the effect upon a man's behavior of the sound of it with the effect of the sort of squeak ordinarily made by a chipmunk. The latter may not in man, as in a dog, cause occurrence of the hunting behavior, since man's purposes concerning chipmunks differ to some extent from those of a dog. But in a man too, some mode of overt behavior—let us call it B—appropriate to his purposes and beliefs concerning chipmunks, is likely to be caused by his hearing of the squeak. Under normal circumstances, orientation at least of his eyes, and perhaps also of some of his operatory mechanisms (e.g., that used for extending food towards the place from which the squeak emanates) will be a part of the behavior B caused in him by the squeak. But the sound of the word "chipmunk"<sup>7</sup> obviously does not have the effect of orienting his eyes towards the place from which it comes, and still less of preparing him to extend food towards the object there, which caused the sound. Or, comparing the two cases introspectively instead of in terms of resulting public behavior, we notice this fundamental difference, that although both the squeak and the word "chipmunk" cause us to think

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<sup>5</sup> "Symbols, Signs and Signals," *loc. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> What Morris calls indexical signs have perhaps more often been called demonstrative or indicative symbols, and what he calls characterizing signs, characterizing or descriptive symbols. Morris, however, uses "symbol" only to mean a characterizing sign which does not resemble the objects it can denote; and uses "icon" to mean a characterizing sign which on the contrary resembles those objects.

<sup>7</sup> I say, of the *word* "chipmunk," not of the *sentence* which the words "A chipmunk!" together with a pointing gesture, would constitute.

of a chipmunk, the squeak causes us in addition *to believe that a chipmunk exists* at the moment at the place where the squeak comes from, whereas the word has no such effect upon us. The squeak is truly, and in the sense specified by Morris, a sign for us of a chipmunk.<sup>8</sup> The word, on the other hand, is a symbol but *not a sign* of a chipmunk. Thus being a symbol is not a case of being a sign. That a sign does, but a characterizing symbol or an icon does not, cause in us belief in the existence of what it causes us to think of—just this is the epistemically highly important difference between characterizing symbols or icons on the one hand, and, on the other, signs. Characterizing symbols and icons are therefore not, as Morris assumes, species of signs in the ordinary sense of the term “sign” which is also the sense defined by him. On the contrary, three sorts of things, viz., (a) signs; (b) characterizing symbols and icons; and also, as we shall see directly, (c) indicative symbols, are three species of one common genus for which no name exists in ordinary language, but which may be called *interpretands*, and in terms of which—not of signs—semiosis in general can be defined in the manner I have described in the paper already referred to.

6. Let us now turn to indicative symbols, or, as Morris calls them, indexical signs. As an illustration of them Morris mentions *pointing*—their essential function being to give some specific direction to our attention. I submit that, again, they are not signs in the sense specified by Morris.

When, for instance, we point and say “nothing is there,” neither the pointing nor the word “there” is a sign of anything in the sense of “sign” described by Morris, in which the squeak is a sign of a chipmunk. To say that the pointing is in *this* sense a sign of a certain place would mean that in response to the pointing we behave in the manner which, for our purposes and under the circumstances, would be appropriate specifically to the place itself which is pointed to. But there is no such thing as a mode of behavior appropriate or inappropriate, for given purposes under given circumstances, to one but not to another *place as such*, i.e., to the place itself as distinguished from the sort of thing that may happen to occupy it; for places *qua* places are completely indifferent: the intrinsic nature of one is exactly the same as that of any other. On the other hand, behavior appropriate to the particular nature of what occupies a given place (if anything does) is caused in us not by the pointing itself, i.e., not by the “indexical sign,” but by whatever we observe at the place pointed to *after* the pointing has oriented us to that place. For what is pointed to is always essentially and strictly a *place*; and only accidentally and elliptically a *thing*—viz., such a thing, if any at all, as happens to be at the place pointed to.

<sup>8</sup> Whether it is in addition a *reliable* sign of one is another question.

Morris says that the designatum of a pointing at any given time is what, at the time, is pointed at. But *before* the pointing can designate any "what," it must first have indicated for us the "where" at which this "what" is observable. The indicative function of an "indexical sign" being thus necessarily antecedent to such designative function as it may acquire, its indicative function cannot possibly be defined, as Morris attempts to do, in terms of its designative function. This entails that an "indexical sign," *as such*, has no designatum. What it essentially has is an indicatum; and an indicatum is not a kind of designatum. That a "where" is not any sort of a "what" is a fact often overlooked but of truly basic importance for the theory of knowledge.

It may be further remarked that if a pointing were the sign of a place in the sense of "sign" in which the squeak is a sign of a chipmunk, what it would do would be to cause us both to think of a kind of place and to believe that that kind of place exists. But the pointing does not, and for two reasons cannot, cause in us anything of the sort.

One of them is that places as such do not have kinds: no place stands to any other as species to genus; nor can any place be said to have or to lack cases or members, and therefore no place is a class or kind. This differentiates indicative symbols not only from signs but also from characterizing symbols and icons, for to orient our attention to some "where," irrespective of what may or may not exist there, is something radically different from making us think of—preparing our attention for—some "what" irrespective of where it may or may not exist (which is what a characterizing symbol does). Therefore once more, an indicative symbol, as such, has no designatum, for a designatum is defined by Morris as "a kind of object or class of objects" (p. 5), and, as just pointed out, no place is a class or a kind.

The second reason why a pointing cannot be the sign of a place is that, with regard to a place, the question whether one is caused to believe that it exists, or the question whether it exists, is absurd. For "to exist" is to occupy some place and what occupies a place cannot itself be a place. Or if we prefer to say, in terms of logic, that "to exist" means to have cases or members, the question whether a place exists is again absurd since a place is not a class and cannot have or lack cases.

7. A word may next be said concerning Morris's statement that no "metaphysical realm of 'subsistence'" need be introduced to reconcile the fact that every sign must have a designatum with the fact that not every sign refers to an actual existent object. He reconciles the two by saying that a designatum "is not a thing, but a kind of object or a class of objects" (p. 5), and that a class may have no members.

But the question presents itself, what sort of being has a memberless

class itself. Morris, apparently, would not say that it "exists," for existents seem to be for him individual objects themselves as distinguished from the classes of which they are members. I hold no brief for the term "subsistence" whether tagged or not with the invidious epithet "meta-physical"; but I believe that those who use the term "subsistence" intend it as name of the very sort of being which a memberless class, or any class as distinguished from the members of it, or any kind of object as distinguished from the objects of that kind, possesses. Morris thus seems to reject the name "subsistence" but to keep the very realm of entities called subsistent by the writers who use the term.

8. Some comments may now be added concerning what Morris calls the dimensions of semiosis. He distinguishes three. Syntactics is the study of "the formal relation of signs to one another" (p. 6). Semantics studies "the relation of signs to their designata and so to the objects which they may or do denote" (p. 21). And pragmatics deals with "the relation of signs to their interpreters" (p. 30).

In these characterizations, Morris uses "sign" in the arbitrarily inclusive way already criticized, which makes the word mean not only what is meant when one says that something is a sign of something else, but also makes the word apply to characterizing symbols and indicative symbols, which are not signs at all in that sense—the only sense, let it be remembered, defined by Morris. But even if one were to adopt Morris's use of "sign," his characterization in terms of it of the dimensions of semiosis would be open to certain objections.

Syntactics, for example, which Morris more specifically describes as "the consideration of signs and sign combinations in so far as they are subject to syntactical rules," i.e., to formation and transformation rules (p. 14), is much rather *any set of things* in so far as they are made subject to such rules. Indeed he himself implies just this when defining a "language" a few lines before. Thus, it is wholly irrelevant to syntactics as such whether the things, which are made subject to formation and transformation rules, are or are not themselves signs (or even symbols) independently of those rules. Syntactics as such has anything at all to do with signs or symbols only in so far as the syntactical rules themselves make certain of the things subjected to them signify certain others *of these very things*. For example, so far as syntactics itself is concerned, nothing whatever depends on whether, in such an expression as  $pq \supset p$ ,  $p$  and  $q$  symbolize propositions, or perhaps potatoes and cabbage, or *nothing at all*. All that is required of the entities with which syntactics is concerned is that they be capable of being subjected, by stipulations, to formation and transformation rules. Entities which are capable of this may be called

*discursive entities*.<sup>9</sup> We may then say that syntactics is to be defined not as the study of the relation of *signs* to other signs (nor of symbols to other symbols) but as the study of the relations simply of discursive entities to other discursive entities, in so far as these relations are generated by stipulated rules of formation and transformation.

9. As regards semantics, it was pointed out above that indices as such (indicative symbols) have *indicata* but not *designata* in the sense specified for this term by Morris. I submit, however, that study of the relation of indices to *indicata* is a proper part of semantics. Therefore semantics in turn cannot be defined as Morris proposes, *viz.*, as the study merely of the relation of "signs" to their *designata* and so to the objects which they may or may not denote. Rather, it is the study of *verbo-real* and of *rei-verbal* interpretation.<sup>10</sup>

10. As regards pragmatics, I submit that, in the light of Morris's own distinction between signs and sign-vehicles, and of the criticisms offered above of his account of the nature of signs and their alleged species, no clear meaning remains specified for the term "pragmatics" when it is defined, as he defines it, as the study of the relations of signs to their interpreters. The term is apparently chosen to the end of absorbing, as a branch of *semeiology*, discussions of the relations between an organism and its biological and social environment, as by Dewey and Mead. But then, for this purpose, the term has to apply to not one but several rather heterogeneous things, and the definition Morris gives of it is therefore systematic only in appearance. I shall not attempt to say in what way or ways "pragmatics" would have to be defined in order to cover those biological and social studies. I shall instead only call attention to and define systematically two fields of study which in any case are distinct both from syntactics and from semantics, but which are nevertheless likewise branches of *semeiology*.

One of them is the study of *signals*. A signal is a deliberate utterance (within what the utterer believes to be the field of attention of another person) of something the perceiving of which the utterer believes will cause in the other person a certain idea—or, as the case may be, a certain belief, or a certain feeling, or a certain attempt—which the utterer desires to cause in the other person. Utterance, of course, need not be vocal,

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<sup>9</sup> In the paper already cited, I have listed their essential characteristics. The entities which are used as words, or as heraldic, astronomical, mathematical, logical, and other symbols, are the most familiar and important among discursive entities; but even chessmen would, under certain circumstances, be discursive entities.

<sup>10</sup> The term "verbal" being here taken broadly, as synonymous with "discursive," and "real" as synonymous with "non-discursive."

but may equally be graphic, gestural, or other; and the other person may be even one's own future self.

The study of signals may appropriately be called *semaphorics*, and may be defined as dealing with the relations between utterers and interpreters of signals, in so far as these relations arise out of their status as such utterers and interpreters.

11. The remaining branch of semeiology to be distinguished is the study of rei-real interpretation; that is, of interpretation in cases where neither the interpretand nor the interpretant is a discursive entity. If we allow ourselves in this connection to take the word "word" in a broad sense making it synonymous with "discursive entity," then rei-real interpretation may be described as "alectic" or "alogic," i.e., wordless. Accordingly, to distinguish from syntactics, semantics, and semaphorics, the branch of semeiology which studies alectic interpretation, we may call it for short *alectics*. The term, however, is of course by itself too broad, and must be understood as tacitly restricted by the agreement that a branch of semeiology is what it is being employed to name.

There remain questions concerning the benefits and the evils, whether individual or social, and whether biological or psychological, which accrue to human beings from their capacity to interpret and to create symbols, signs, and signals. I shall not ask whether the name "pragmatics" would be appropriate or not for these questions. I wish only to point out that in any case they belong not to semeiology itself but rather to axiology: they are questions concerning the values of semiosis, not concerning its nature or its kinds.

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