SIGN AND VALUE: THE AUTHORITY OF AUTHORITY

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The tyrant of Syracuse--any dictator for that mat-
ter--once decided that two plus two equals five. He
called in the official engraver and ordered him to carve
this truth in marble. Then he ordered his servants to
place the slab in the center of the city. The citizens
passed by, looked; some sighed but all, naturally,
agreed; a few couldn't care less. One day--so it was
rumored later on--a group of young people passed by the
marble, read its contents, and started to laugh. They
were immediately thrown into prison. Time went by. One
day, while inspecting the city, the tyrant spotted the
marble and said, "How can you accept that 'two plus two
equals five'?" He called in another engraver to carve
his latest truth: Five plus five equals eleven. The
slab was put in the place of the old one. Again, citi-
zens looked, sighed, accepted; some couldn't care less;
and another group laughed at it. This time, they were
brought before the dictator. "Oh my dear people, what's
wrong with you? Why did you laugh? Do you want to go
back to the days when two plus two equaled five?"
    We deal here with the following semiotic situation:
Something--the tyrant's statement--supposed to represent
the truth to which an entire city should adhere is sub-
mitted to the community in order to become a sign.
Those who interpreted--citizens sighing and acquiescing
or laughing--become part of the sign. The first group
gives in to the sign's authority; the second disputes
it. Authority derives from the identified source (the
tyrant's social and political position, power), from the
act of encoding (engraving in marble), from public re-
cognition of the engraver's art, from the material used,
from central placement, and, considering what happened
to the ones who laughed, from the way non-conformist in-
terpretation is dis-allowed. Non-conformist interpreta-
tion constitutes the sign through a semiosis that is
critical of both the truth of a statement and the mean-
ing of its display. In the second part of the anecdote,
the semiosis of authority becomes even more evident.
Once our intention to interpret something as sign is de-
clared, the meaning of the sign appears to us as though

it were not the interface between us and the sign but an independently constituted entity deriving from either the sign (what I call the container model) or from us (what I call the trigger model). The same holds true for what is called value. Let me not repeat here the arguments on the semiotic nature of value (Nadin, 1978). But we allow value, more than sign, to dominate us, ignoring the fact that it is our interpretation which engraves values in marble.

The main argument of this paper is that the attitude described above is the result of the centuries-long domination of dualistic ideology. Our way of thinking, our interpretive skill, our social and political lives are all results of a two-valued logic in which something determines something else, something dominates while the dominated either obeys or criticizes. When Łukasiewicz founded a three-valued logic, he made evident the need to free our way of thinking, acting, and interpreting from the domination of dualistic ideology. By no coincidence, his contribution is contemporary with scientific, political, aesthetic, and other events that were also non-dualistic. In more recent years, fuzzy logic (as conceived by Zadeh) has broadened the opening made by Łukasiewicz's tri-valent logic. Emancipation from the domination of dualism in the meanwhile took place in such traditional domains as religion, ethics, and aesthetics, being also manifested in politics, economics, law, etc. This means that we learned to pay attention to the continuum that unites the poles of dualism and which was ignored for a very long time. I already presented the arguments originating in Peirce's semiotics that make clear why synechism is an integral part of his sign theory (Nadin, 1983). In several contexts, I also insisted on Peirce's understanding of semiotics as the logic of vagueness. This time, I would like to take a closer look at what are traditionally called semiotic functions and, starting from Mukařovsky's dualistic model, try to derive a new model that is consonant with our general tendency to free ourselves from the intellectual terror of dualism.

Mukařovsky--whom I place with other structuralists in the pre-semiotic stage--basically built his model of functions on the old object-subject distinction. The types of functions distinguished in his theory are confusing. Panofsky proved that the entire domain of the aesthetic is a symbolic one. To consider the theoretic function an immediate function, after we learned of the mediated condition of theory, would mean to accept a primitive epistemological conception.

Dominant component	Type of Function	
	Immediate	Semiotic
Object	Practical	Symbolic
Subject	Theoretical	Aesthetic

Figure 1. Presemiotic conception of functions (Mukařovsky).

Whenever we try to apply this model, we generate the same dualistic thinking that led to the attitude we tend to have towards signs and towards value in particular. Either the authority of the subject or that of the objects takes the appearance of the authority of the sign. As such, signs, and value, tend to be one more instance in the generic process of human alienation. Be it the dualism of idealistic philosophies, of Marxism, of religion, or of logic, there is no such thing as a better dualism. While so many doubt that semiotics has any relevance as a theory or practical tool, semiotics as the logic of vagueness is actually the breakthrough, after millennia, in a culture built on implicit recognition of dual values. The change I suggest evidences the process through which signs are identified (the constitutive process and the attached hermeneutic function), through which signs are used in various activities (the cognitive function, the heuristic function, the expressive function, etc.).

Dominant component	Type of Function		
	Immediate	Dynamic	Final
Object	Practical	Symbolic	Denotative
Representamen	Representational	Communicational	Expressive
Interpretant	Theoretical	Aesthetic	Connotative

Figure 2. Semiotic functions.

Improving Mukařovsky's function typology without changing its basic errors suggests the need to consider the sign as relation and function.

	Representation	Communication	Signification
Object	Referential	Informational	Ontological
Representamen	Aesthetic	Symbolic	Theoretical
Interpretant	Hermeneutic	Cognitive	Axiologic

Figure 3. Relation and function.

These functions should be understood in their unity, in
their interrelation within the continuum of sign prag-
matics. The problem of whether "two plus two equals
five" or "five plus five equals eleven" is trivial in
arithmetic terms. Once engraved in marble and submitted
as a social rule, it moves from the domain of arithmetic
to that of semiotics; it is supposed to fulfill func-
tions beyond and above the cognitive. To obey (not in-
terpret) a sign, no matter which, is to obey the author-
ity of dualism. To interpret sign segments or configur-
ations, no matter if such sequences or configurations
pertain to scientific representation, expression of
thought, art, politics or everything else, is to become
part of the infinite sign process, an instant of semi-
osis.

Representamen	Representation
Object (Immediate)	Identification
Object (Dynamic)	Differentiation
Interpretant (Immediate)	Association
Interpretant (Mediated)	Understanding
Interpretant (Final)	Interpretation

Figure 4. Function in the context of semiosis.

The context of semiosis is that in which the sign's
pragmatic dimension is accomplished (cf. Peirce's defi-
nition of pragmati(ci)sm.

Two test embryos were left in an Australian clinic by a couple wanting children. The genetic code engraved in the embryo indexically identifies the parents. The couple died in an airplane crash. The issue now is whether the embryos, if born by another woman, should be heirs to the deceased couple's multi-million dollar fortune. If the parents were less well-off and the matter had not turned into a prime time TV issue, it would still be a semiotically loaded problem. Do indexical signs placed in an environment of predominantly symbolic interpretations change their nature? In Syracuse, some people agreed that "two plus two equals five." Some went to jail for publicly disagreeing. Times changed; "Five plus five equals eleven" became the new rule. Today we engrave in whatever is available: semiotic theories, test tube embryos, political manifestos, a multiplicity of codes in the minds of our students. And while disputing the authority of authority, we keep repeating those lines of the fictitious Syracusian tyrant: "Oh my dear people! What's wrong with you? Why do you laugh? Do you want to go back to the time when two plus two equaled five?" The journey to freedom from the tyranny of dualism is longer than we thought. Let's recall the Chinese saying: A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. I call this step semiotics.

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