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The Split-Plane Hypothesis: Animism, Theism and the limit of Signification

We begin our exploration of this unusual territory from within the question of whether there is any such thing as a pure sign. We approach this question by considering an ordinary traffic stop sign. These signs are constructed of metal and/or wood, freestanding on their own posts or attached to other poles, and erected at corners facing an oncoming flow of vehicular traffic. They usually have only two colors, such as red and white, black and white, or yellow and black. In the red and white case, common in the US, the flat dimension is approximately one meter by one meter square, with all four corners cut off to form a regular hexagon. The physical sign is uncontroversial. There is no reason for anyone to contest factual assertions about the materials of which the sign is made, its structure, its process of assembly or its means of installation. The physical sign is a pure sign at the physical pole of signification. This pure sign is the sign as physical substrate of semiosis.

The signifieds of the red and white traffic stop sign, other than the physical, however, are mixed. A stop sign signifies a text; the text is a written law or statute that prescribes the behavior of vehicle drivers, including bicyclists, who approach the corner on which the sign stands. A particular stop sign may also signify a local memory stream. A small child rode a tricycle rapidly off the curb one day into the street and was killed by an oncoming truck. After six months of pressure from local parents for a sign, and pressure from local commuters against a sign, the city erected the stop sign. Additional signifieds could be the memory stream of some commuters that includes rolling through the intersection on the way to work because, at that early hour, almost no cars drive through the intersection on the cross street. Finally, a stop sign signifies a physical gesture for which it stands—stock still at a corner. That gesture is bringing a vehicle to a complete stop before the vehicle crosses the pedestrian crosswalk or enters the intersection. At this point, the physical position of the sign, on the corner at which vehicles are required to stop, and the immobility of the sign, both deploy simile or mimesis to signify the specific

gesture. Specific signifieds of a particular stop sign are mixed, but the sign function of the sign is not. In every semiosis, the sign stands for something other than itself. By abstracting from a multitude of semioses, we obtain a pure sign at the mental pole of signification.

Of what could the purity of the sign at either the physical or the mental pole consist? Let us entertain the options. First, the pure sign at the physical pole consists of one and only one substance and that substance is the simplest in nature. The pure sign at the physical pole would thus be one hydrogen atom. Second, the pure sign at the mental pole refers to nothing, not even itself. Such a sign, purified of all signification, is not even imaginable. It is an empty logical possibility. Third, the pure sign at the mental pole refers only to itself. Such a sign would be a sign of itself; however, it would have to be unique such that no class attributes would have any members other than itself. Again, such a pure sign is imaginable only as an empty logical possibility. Fourth, a pure sign at the mental pole would refer to one and only one thing other than itself. Let us suppose that there were a uniquely occurring compound with only two instances in the entire universe. One instance of that compound could then be taken as standing for both of them. However, no such compound has yet been discovered, so we must count this possibility also as only logical. Fifth, we suppose again about the physical universe that every existing thing is absolutely unique, such that no thing shares any class attributes with any other thing. In this situation, which again receives no confirmation from natural science, no thing would refer to any other thing except at the most abstract possible level at which every existing thing, in its utter uniqueness, would signify the utter uniqueness of every other existing thing.

Sixth, the pure sign at the mental pole refers to a class of things that are absolutely unique in the sense that it is impossible for a normal observer to mistake them for anything other than what they are. The condition of normal observation, however, removes this type of sign from ordinary sensory perception in which norms shift according to lighting, health, age, attitude, perceptual acuity, strength of memory, etc. Normal perception defines a range of possible observations that must be checked and rechecked in order to ensure validity. This condition also requires a differentiation between ordinary conditions and laboratory conditions. Observing

a chemical compound with a spectroscope in a laboratory and there identifying it is quite different than observing a bird in flight in the wild and trying to identify it there. In this sense of the pure sign, its scope is so limited that, while it is physically possible, it has little use in the ordinary world. We all repeatedly mistake one thing for another for a great number of reasons. Correcting this kind of mistake, whether it is in literary criticism, art criticism, remembering telephone numbers or sorting laundry is an ongoing human task that we cannot avoid. Is it, then, humanly possible, to render a coherent meaning for the notion of the pure sign at the mental pole?

Seventh, we recall here the final signification of the red and white stop sign that was the physical gesture of making a full stop at an intersection corner. In the clearest possible sense, the stop sign stands for something else. Even though the sign stands immobile at the corner, it is not in its own existential constitution the physical gesture of stopping a vehicle. There is a clear difference in qualities between the sign and the signified. Part of the meaning of the pure sign at the mental pole must then be that the sign can be clearly distinguished from the signified both epistemologically and ontologically, that is, as something known mentally and as something experienced existentially. The weaker either of these distinctions becomes the more likely it is, in any particular case, that we are dealing with a repetition of the signified or of the sign rather than with full semiosis. Of course repetition is a kind of semiosis but it is not robust enough to allow for the myriad semioses that are necessary to negotiate our world in which many differences are clear, distinct and dramatic. Minimally, therefore, we may suggest that signification requires epistemological and ontological difference.

How, then, are we to understand the nature of this difference? This difference must be recordable in some mental act as part of knowledge, belief, opinion, etc., and experientiable in some empirical event as a real part of the universe, whether the subdomain is visual, aural, olfactory or otherwise. We may reinforce this recognition with the observations that we carry not only a dual hemisphere brain but also dual major sense receptors for both vision, hearing and smell and multiple sense areas for taste, pressure, heat, pain and pleasure. In no functional sense are our sensory organs, enteric nervous system or central nervous

system cyclopean. Our biologically evolved organism embodies complexity that is unimaginable without multiple layers, levels, scales, quantities, qualities and degrees of difference. This focus however takes in only the region of sensory energy. Along with this region are the regions of biophotonic/bioluminescent energy, psychic energy (involving such phenomena as hand healing, precognition and telepathy), and spiritual energy (involving visions, mystical experiences, numinous experiences, etc.). The quality of knowledge of energy changes with each change in the type of energy as does the mode of experience of the existing energy. Throughout all types of energy, however, there is a difference between the experiencer as human being and the energy as non-human but humanly accessible. All regions are therefore subject to and subjects of semiosis. Indeed, from the smallest discernible wave/particles to the largest possible structures of matter and space, from the richest sensory experience to the subtlest spiritual experience, our universe shows division and difference on every scale. The divisions, however, are not static but dynamic. Wave/particles come into existence and go out of existence; stars are born and die into diaphanous clouds of dust that dissipate into even emptier configurations of electromagnetic energy and space. Since we find dynamism everywhere in the region of sensory energy, why would we not expect and predict it in the other regions as well?

Indeed, everywhere that human beings have exercised their imaginations to bring into words and images the characteristics of non-sensory energy, they have reproduced the divisions of the sensory world. Gods and demons, saints and sinners, saviors and destroyers, beneficent beings and maleficent beings, friends of humans and enemies of humans abound in all mythical and religious systems. Natural and supernatural realms both present themselves to and through human experience and articulation as dually structured. This fact points in a direction that is of special interest here: the representational capacity of human beings mirrors, reflects and participates in the dual structures of reality. Duality is not simply or merely an invention of the human mind; nor is it either simply or merely an artifact of the human brain. Rather, the brain itself is part of the dual structures of energy. And more than part of it, our brains are the means by which we access those structures and bring them into tangible representations. Semiosis as one thing standing for another is an intrinsic part of

the universe of which we are a part. The complete meaning of something thus encompasses its birth and its death, its bright side and its dark side, its constructivity and its destructivity, its most minute components and its most robust totality. The South Pole is incomprehensible without the North Pole; the desert as a region of great aridity is incomprehensible without the ocean as a region of complete fluidity; positively charged energy is meaningless without negatively charged energy; and, gods without devils are senseless. In every direction of our exploration, therefore, we must encounter dynamic differentiations whose variations in quality and quantity are endless.

If we accept this much, then we may advance a general answer to the question of the limit of semiosis: semiosis is impossible without difference. If no difference exists, then no semiosis is possible. If nothing stands for anything else, if everything is so transparent that no edges, boundaries or limits appear from which to delineate existing things, then no representation is possible. Without representation of some kind, semiosis is impossible. Let us consider this idea through an example. We can imaginatively manipulate Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist composition of 1918, *White On White*. In this image, either in photographic reproduction or in physical presence, Malevich presents us with two white squares, one inscribed at a diagonal tilt inside the other, which stands orthogonally before us. The modulated values of the white surfaces suggest the natural signified of fog or cloud at close range. The industrial signified of smoke in white light also occurs. However, the interior, smaller square lacks strong outline so it is easy, upon scanning, to see both squares as one field of mildly modulated whites and grays. Suppose, for our first manipulation, that we imaginatively paint the smaller square solid black. We may now take either square as signifier for the other in the relationship of opposition, which is a qualitative relationship occasioned by their opposite values and colors. Suppose, secondly, that we lighten the interior square to half the darkness of the previous black. We may say, then, that the smaller square or the larger square signifies a step in value toward each other. The white could be more brilliantly white and the gray could again be solidly black. The dynamism of this semiosis depends on our ability to imagine changes in value along a black/white continuum. Suppose, finally, that we make both squares exactly the same value and color—solid black, brilliant

white or flat gray. What has disappeared, first of all, is any visual means by which to distinguish one square from the other. Since the imaginative surface we are painting is altogether flat, there are no edges to cast shadows around the interior square. All differences have disappeared. What sense can it possibly make, now, in this situation, to look for or to posit semiosis? There is no delimited thing that can stand for another delimited thing. If we suppose that this situation is the entire universe, then nothing stands for anything because there are no differences. Because our universe is uniform in value and color, no distinctions can be made and thus there can be no signifieds or signifiers. Semiosis is impossible.

The idea of infinite semiosis allows us to approach this limit from another direction. Infinite semiosis involves the elaboration of any particular instance of semiosis into a web whose signifieds expand and multiply as they become signifiers for new semioses that gradually implicate the entire language universe. Inevitably beginning with a moment of a particular, finite language, this process extends by association and translation into all other languages until the entire sphere of human communication connects multidimensionally with itself. This connection is not closure, however; rather, it is an ongoing process of working and reworking semioses through infinite grades, shades and degrees of meaning that deploy the lexicons of all languages in their explication. Carried out long enough, every word would gain multiple connections with every other word so that from anywhere in the net as signifier any other place in the net as signified could be reached. Since this process of one place standing for another could be repeated indefinitely, it leads to infinite semiosis—the limitless standing of one thing for another. But if one thing can stand for any other thing, then all specificity has dissolved and therewith all differences as well. But if all differences dissolve then there is no way to distinguish one thing from another thing. If there is no way to make such distinctions, then it is impossible to recognize one thing as standing for another or representing another. Infinite semiosis brings us to the limit of semiosis: semiosis is impossible without difference.

The limit of semiosis is the limit of signification. Why, in the first place, is signification necessary at all? It is necessary because there is difference. If everything and everyone were utterly and

seamlessly one, then no one thing would not only not have to but also not be able to stand for anything else. The distinctions that arise with existence of any kind would not be, so nothing would stand apart from anything else and thus nothing could stand for anything else. While this reflection could be applied to any realm of our experience, I wish to pursue it here only in relation to our spirituality.

Spirituality is an indirect region as we have experienced it for the last few thousand years. We can, however, hold in the hands of our minds like a full-color, animated diorama the entire event from pre-animistic human experience to our present. In this extended moment, we can inscribe a rhythmic trajectory of increasing and decreasing mediation. Spoken language, carvings on stones and paintings on walls begin the trajectory of mediations. After written language appears, mediation becomes increasingly mental. For example, we see four levels of appearance and reality in Plato's *Republic*, multiple layers of emanation in Plotinos' *Enneads*, and a great variety of mediations in the works of mediaeval theologians. All mediations elaborate differences that both allow and require multiple semioses, from the language of holy texts to the icons of churches to the gestures of worshippers, whether they pray, chant, meditate or dance. Each step and system of mediation connects its user through immanent action to transcendent reality. From this imaginative reconstruction, we may conclude that the general purpose of religion in human life is the preservation, the protection and the promotion of the immanence of transcendence. Religion organizes mediative semioses into recursive layers that fold human consciousness into transcendence like the forged blade of a samurai sword is folded through a thousand annealings into a perfect edge. However, when modern Western humanity again seeks a direct source of light, it focuses on the body as its medium, rather than the mind. Modern science signifies this attempt to decrease mediation through direct physical experience. Earlier in India, though, beginning in writing with Patanjali's treatise on yoga in the 6th c. AD, thinkers there turn to the human body as the vehicle of the unmediated immanence of transcendence. Now, in our own century, we see yogis in the laboratories of American scientists, displaying their control over basic bodily functions such as heartrate, body temperature and startle response. In fact, everywhere we turn in the post-modern world, we encounter efforts

to decrease mediation, decrease indirectness, decrease opacity and increase immediacy, increase directness and increase transparency. It is no accident that these efforts are both global and personal and it is no accident that semiotics is part of these efforts. We present ourselves with a world divided between mortal and immortal, finite and infinite, and human and divine. We present ourselves with an immanent world divided between living and non-living, human and non-human, male and female, mental and physical and then, mental, emotional and physical. We beset ourselves in every direction and on every side with divisions, differences and distinctions. It is therefore no wonder that semiotics has appeared as part of the effort to make transparent the bewildering world of difference in which we have situated ourselves for so long.

During the long period of our self-alienation, however, many attempts have been made to recover lost unity. Myth, religion, philosophy and science have all been attempts to uncover, reveal, conceptualize or explain how the world of difference actually, in truth, in reality, in eternity or in its fundamental constitution, is one. Apart from mental and social institutionalizations, many individuals, whether in yoga, Sufism, hesichastic, ascetic and monastic Christianity, or mysticism, have invented and perfected techniques to attain and preserve experiences of unity in which all differences and distinctions dissolve. The tensions between organized religiosity and spiritual technologies have twisted and turned for centuries around the issue of whether or not human beings can, without mediation by protective divine or human beings, experience directly, regularly and perhaps continuously, seamless unity.

This development can be understood historically as a development of the human species as a whole. It is not the province or property of a particular group of people at or for a particular time. It is a movement of human consciousness to which all groups and their organizations of consciousness and spirituality have contributed and continue to contribute. We may rearticulate it through the lens of human choice. From prehistoric times, human beings have been exploring the limits of human consciousness, choice and action. From the earliest art and religion, the possibility that we could enter realms not bounded exclusively or immovably by the senses has appeared in various guises to people everywhere on our planet. In our earliest years as a species, the closer convergence of planes

allowed us to experience the transcendent in manifold immanence as a property of all existing things, living and non-living. As the planes began to diverge, some two to three thousand years ago, humans built on the surpluses provided by agriculture, trade and urbanization to develop new methods to access and reincorporate the transcendent in immanent human life. The energy devoted to this effort has synergized in a variety of ways but the most important has been the development of the individualization of human consciousness. This development has seen the relocation of the privilege of choice from divine beings in mythology, to upperclass human beings in feudalism, which, as a socioeconomic structure, has included the controllers of all organized spiritual and religious traditions. Dissolutions of feudal structures in religion, economy, politics, art and intellectuality have generally marked the beginnings of the most recent relocation of choice to all human beings in the sweeping intensifications of individualism that we understand as modernity and post-modernity. This increasingly powerful individualism, whose sociocultural wave continues to build without yet breaking, has brought with it myriad challenges for all of us, especially that of finding meaning, purpose, health and joy outside the walls of established human social enclaves. Twentieth century innovations in technology, coupled with the extraordinary efforts of many people to wed the universality of eastern practices such as yoga and meditation to the freedom of western secular individualistic consciousness, have empowered more and more people to approach the frontiers of the new spirituality.

We may understand the characteristics of this thoroughly innovative individualism through the lens of the split plane hypothesis. We recall, first, the transformations of opacity and transparency of the squares in *White On White*. As the squares approach each other in value and color, they are increasingly transparent to each other. Their transparency consists in a decrease in barriers to seeing one through the other. Their semiosis moves from a relationship of relative heterogeneity to a relationship of relative homogeneity. As their homogeneity increases, they become one another. As they become one another, they do not and cannot stand for each other because they become and, eventually, in the final complete identity of either brilliant white or dense black, they are one. In the other direction, as the squares move through

increasingly strong differences in value and color, they become invisible through each other. The smaller square completely occludes the portion of the body of the larger square over which the smaller square lays on the visual plane of the painting. Since the larger square can only be seen partially, its entire shape must become an indirect reality. It becomes the signified of the smaller square. Visual opacity introduces visual difference that in turn induces semiosis.

Analogously, as we must reason here because we are dealing with subject-matter that lies beyond either the laboratory or the formal proof, accessible to intuition or spiritual vision but not to symbolic or empirical manipulation, and requiring receptiveness rather than aggressive creation, the planes of energy or reality oscillate through phases of opacity and transparency. Animism represents a phase in which visible and invisible energy cohere in their experiential presence to such a great degree that every opaque, tangible existent is a door to invisible dimensions. Theism represents a phase in which visible and invisible energy diverge to such a great degree that only with sustained mental and physical effort, exemplified by fasting, prayer, chanting, meditation and mortification, can human beings directly experience invisible dimensions as content of intuition and vision. The increasing freedom of the human mind and body implicated in the universal development of individualism corresponds to a new phase in the oscillation of energetic planes to a condition similar to that of animistic and pre-animistic human experience. The signal difference is that human experience can now be encoded extensively in word, image and gesture as reflection of the psyche, personality and sociocultural installation of individual human beings. We no longer need to build walls around our groups in order to keep out threatening differences because we can experience and accept differences within ourselves and within those close to us who may be family, neighborhood or community members. Invisible energy immanent in visible energy is available to all and need not be claimed, protected or secluded by particular individuals or groups in adverse structures and processes that pit some humans against others. As a species, we have the opportunity to synergize the infinite differences and similarities of our experiences on behalf of all of us. Such is our opportunity and our prospect.