

Transcendental Semiotics I:

Fundamental Issues of a Transcendental Theory of Signs

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Abstract

Transcendental psychology axiomatically assumes the recognition that the divine exists and exerts its relevance in our world. Such effectiveness of the divine in the world can turn out only where signs of divine presence and action can be found. The text sketches out a semiotic approach to a theory mediating between transcendence as a construct and empirical statements in the form of spiritual experiences.

Introduction

A young woman who experienced violence in her childhood, had already manifested mystical dreams in puberty where she, for example, experienced her own death in detail. As a student, she had to make her living by fixing up a house in which she also spent the night. As she should collect and transport building rubble from one room without contaminating other rooms, she became so desperately about her situation that she wanted to die, and when she was awakened at night by a fire next door, she wanted rather burn. However, she felt a strong, concentrated energy but eventually left the house. Entering the construction site early the next morning, the construction waste had been put in sacks, what would have been her duty, without there being a human explanation. She interpreted this as an intervention of a higher power, and had other experiences of a paranormal kind in the future.¹

People have experiences that – at least in their subjective experience – go beyond the scope of what can be explained with our prevailing world view. Part of this experience is now referred to by some as a spiritual experience. This term is borrowed from a particular paradigm that is not shared by others. Paradigms are more than theories; they are

¹ This is an occurrence reported to the author, being slightly alienated for the purpose of anonymisation and demonstration. The author collects spiritual experiences of this and other kinds in German: online at transzendente-psychologie.de/studie.php

systems of theories. When paradigms are seen as entirely incommensurable, that means they are based on very different basic requirements and they cannot in any way be compared or compete with each other. A paradigm cannot be truer than another. They cannot outstrip each other, therefore, but only succeed one another through natural evolution, biological extinction of the followers of one paradigm or becoming so small in number and influence that they give in for a different paradigm. If we do not apply such a radical concept of paradigms, as used by Thomas Kuhn (1962), paradigms are axiomatic systems combining many theories and constructions, which are based on a common philosophical assumption (i.e., its axioms). In contrast to the radical concept of paradigms with the attribute of incommensurability, it could prove to be useful to compare paradigms for their consistency and determine their correlation to reality.

Today there are basically three paradigms available for the explanation of phenomena, known as spiritual experience. The first of these paradigms is by no means the most widespread, if counting the non-academic sectors of the population of Europe and North America or even other parts of the world. But it is the paradigm with the greatest impact, because it clearly dominates the world's universities and from there, media and educated classes are strongly influenced. This paradigm can be described as materialistic, because it claims that only matter and matter analogies (such as electrical energy) are scientifically correct. Thus, the underlying concept of matter (as in the expression matter analogies) is an ideological, not physical one. Rather, it is used in discrimination from terms such as mind or spirit, which therefore do not exist as independent variables. The assumption of the non-existence of mind and transcendence, however, is not given with the physical concept of matter as a description of a part of the total given reality, but is an implicitly ideological or, hopefully, philosophical presupposition. The materialistic paradigm rejects the notion of spiritual experience and explains such phenomena with theory systems such as psychopathology (mental illness appears finally as a neurobiological disorder), non-clinical neuroscience (e.g., as internal products of the CNS) or as pure contingency (if such phenomena cannot otherwise be explained, the so-called contingency serves easily as alternative explanation).

The second paradigm, now gaining more and more adherents, finds itself in content between the materialist and the third paradigm to be discussed later, and tries to formulate a new science. It is based on the results of the established post-Newtonian physics, in part appertaining to the first paradigm (especially quantum theory and string theory). Some authors consider these new scientifically acclaimed findings for such an ideological revolution, that they depart from the old materialist world view and thus do not belong to it, per se. They try to formulate a new world view matching with this and to continue the findings of these disciplines in the direction of this. We can therefore describe these approaches as systems of theories of the New Science paradigm, using the term here in distinction from the often negatively connoted term New Age. At the same time, real, personal and theoretical overlaps between New Age and New Science are of course very

large, as is focused with both terms to a community of persons and theories, seeking a new era of unification of science and transcendent knowledge.

Among the theories of the New Science paradigm, seeking for the explanation of spiritual experience, are those who see spiritual experience as an expression of a quantum physical phenomenon, such as the non-locality of mind (for example, the so-called Generalized Quantum Theory); theories forming an analogy to a physical concept of information (e.g., W. v. Lucadou's Theory of Pragmatic Information); theories that work in terms of physical field theory (R. Sheldrake), and a host of other psychic, consciousness-oriented and other kinds of theoretical approaches (see Kelly et al. 2007). They have in common that they by scientific methodology and theory are trying to explain phenomena that they take seriously on the one hand, while denying on the other hand any transcendental quality. The crucial common feature of these approaches is, therefore, that they replace transcendence through science and explain the numinous mystery of the divine in terms of a new science.

This, however, is opposed to the third paradigm, the historically oldest of the three. According to today's western classification it is not scientific like the second but philosophical. I call it the religious paradigm, even though this term may appear strange, both for people who reject religion as institution as a whole, as for those who do not accept a common paradigm of all religions. In fact, there are a few common basic requirements guiding the religious perspective on spiritual phenomena, thus distinguishing this view from the two concepts just described. Accordingly, spiritual experience is the product of a process or an agent, which can be discriminated as transcendence from all the ordinary processes of the material, explicable cosmos. This discrimination is again – as in the definition of the materialistic paradigm – not tied to a strictly physical, but a philosophical notion of a material cosmos. At the same time transcendence is determined differently than in the explanations of the second paradigm, which claims that "transcendence is only one not yet adequately described scientific value. There is a scientific explanation for spiritual experience, we could not discover yet, because our current science is thinking too limited". On the other hand, the religious paradigm does not operate or not in analogy with scientific concepts. Rather, it determines transcendence as an autonomous entity beyond scientific laws, as an autonomous sphere in a realm that is far superior to us.

In the religious paradigm, spiritual experience can therefore be understood as a self-expression of this transcendent principle. Whether we regard this principle as a very complex law or mode of being or as a hyper-intelligent person, in any case, experiences of human beings as self-expression of something that they are not (at least not subjective or obvious) take on a structure that we can call a sign. A sign is not the same as communication, although both terms are referring to something similar. Communication is the intended transmission of a message, with the intention of reaching one or several others with it. A sign just means that a message is present, but that nothing is said about an agent who has placed this message intentionally. A message it is in the sense that in the sign a meaning can potentially be seen, although this may not be obvious in any way. A stone by the wayside, possessing no meaning, is in no way a sign. A stone that stands for some-

thing else that it means is, however, an interpretable sign – for example, a landmark. The art dealing with signs is called semiotics. The religious paradigm of explaining spiritual phenomena might thus be called *transcendental* (to transcendence related) *semiotics*. What the traditional religious answers to the question of signs of the divine in the world are will not be discussed here but in a subsequent article. Here it is about the semiotic foundation and the fundamental questions of a transcendental sign theory.

Semiotic foundations

The beginnings of modern semiotics have evolved in parallel in two different places. The French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce found their own approaches to a theory of signs. Saussure's approach is dyadic, i.e., signs are considered from two aspects: as the material form of the sign (Fr. *signifiant* / Engl. signifier) and as the concept meant by it (Fr. *signifié* / Engl. signified). For example, a circular traffic sign with a red circle, filled in white colour, is a signifier for the signified: "Vehicles are not allowed to drive here!". For Saussure the sign always represents a mental meaning, never a "thing in itself". The word "traffic sign" also never represents a real traffic sign, but the concept of traffic signs. Why is that? Characters, such as words, are the physical "vehicle" of thoughts, not of things. "In talking *about* things we have conceptions of them, not the things themselves; and *it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly mean*" (Langer, 1951, 61, quoted in Chandler 2007, 17).

The linguistic character of the Saussurian theory of signs is exhibited in yet two other important principles: the structure theory and the priority of *langue* over *parole*. Since signs represent not only objects, but terms their meaning (the signified) is conceivable not only as an isolated definition, because even the definition needs other terms, being defined by the difference. Thus, signs have to be understood as part of a linguistic structure, determined by the difference that distinguishes them from other signs. So within each context the value (Fr. *valeur*), i.e., the function and localization of a sign, is determined clearly by the system. The words "plant", "flower" and "bloom", for example, are distinguished from each other by different values within the linguistic system. In respect to the world of things, however, the signifiers are arbitrary. Whether one should call a flower "flower" or "fleur", cannot be determined in any way based on the appearance of the real flower. The decision, however, is clear within the linguistic context within which the character "fleur" or "flower" occurs. Signs exist in no natural relationship with the outside world, but only in a structural relationship to a conceptual system, that determines its propositional value. Thus, semiotics also makes epistemological statements: "The arbitrariness of the sign is a radical concept, because it proposes the autonomy of language in relation to reality" (Chandler, 2007, 25).

It is obvious that, for Saussure, the structure of language is important by itself, not the actual events of language in everyday life. In a famous distinction, he called the first

with the French word *langue* and the language actually spoken *parole*. Later semioticians criticized Saussure's main focus of interest in the *langue* as the ideal type of language and stressed that signs become understandable not only from the context of intra-linguistic rules, but are shaped by individual, subjective factors and interactional and cultural patterns. By now it is entirely clear that "[...] semiotics is not the art of sign systems that are recognized as such, but the science that studies all cultural phenomena as if they were systems of signs – although it is based on the hypothesis that in fact all cultural phenomena are semiotic systems, i.e., that culture is essentially communication [...]"(Eco 1972, 295; translated by me).

The second basic line of semiotics, the philosophy of Charles S. Peirce, defined the sign not dyadic, but triadic, i.e., under three aspects. This specification has been taken up again several times as a semiotic triangle under different names of the "corners" (especially by Ogden and Richards, 1923, and Morris, 1938). For Peirce, the shape of the sign (the signifier of Saussure) is called *representamen*. The Saussurian signified on the other hand, corresponds to what Peirce described as *interpretant* (cf. Chandler 2007). This does not mean the person of the interpreter, but the concept, which gives the sign its meaning, i.e. the interpretation. As the third point, Peirce in contrast to Saussure adds the object to which the interpretant refers. One may imagine that the interpreter comes upon the material form of the sign and, using the interpretant in himself, assigns it to an object. Also for Peirce, the signified, the object, is not necessarily an external thing. It is, according to him, even in most cases a further, inner sign. As a result - similar to Saussure - the meaning of a sign depends on other signs in the mind of the interpreter. Instead of a reciprocal link in terms of a conceptual network, such as today's theories assume, Peirce derives from this a linear, infinite regress, in which more and more signs would have to be used to fathom completely the meaning of a sign (from the meaning of each further explanatory sign).

Peirce's predilection for triads lets him qualify each of the three vertexes of the sign again in triplicate. This is done by using three modalities of being, i.e., quality, actuality and representation, which he calls the firstness, secondness and thirdness. Firstness refers to the fact that in the immediate impression of a quality the so qualified is not yet in relation to something else. In secondness, it is the actually being in relation to a second instance. In thirdness this relation has risen by an interpreting thought into a general mode of being. Peirce divided the representamen into icons (mode of firstness), indices (mode of secondness) and symbols (mode of thirdness). An icon resembles the ascertained object so much that the relationship is immediately obvious. Realistic paintings and cartoons are icons. According to Peirce, indices are signs that have no immediate resemblance to the object, but are neither arbitrary, but connected in a natural way with the object, and refer directly to it. Examples are smoke indicating fire, or skid marks, which indicate a braking car. Symbols are not similar to the referent, so their relationship is arbitrary to this and they therefore cannot be derived, but only be learned. Symbols are therefore part of general representational systems, and to that extent in the modality of thirdness. The signs of language (words, for example) are usually symbols.

Both Saussure and Peirce limited their semiotics to the core of the sign itself and disregarded the sender and the recipient of the sign as well as their social contexts. Broadened by this, semiotics thus becomes a theory of communication processes, that is the intended and targeted transfer of messages from a sender to a receiver embedded in a context. This can thus be understood as both the narrower context of the semiotic system (such as the language for linguistic signs), and the socio-cultural and possibly physical environment of sender and receiver. In this sense, the matching interpretation of the sign by sender and receiver is not always the case and depends, among other things, on their choice of a common context of understanding (Eco 1972, 134f.). In addition, it makes sense to distinguish on the side of the sender (or - more general - the producer) of the sign intended communication from not intended. As well it makes sense to distinguish receivers meant by the sender from those deciphering the message as a third party without being meant.

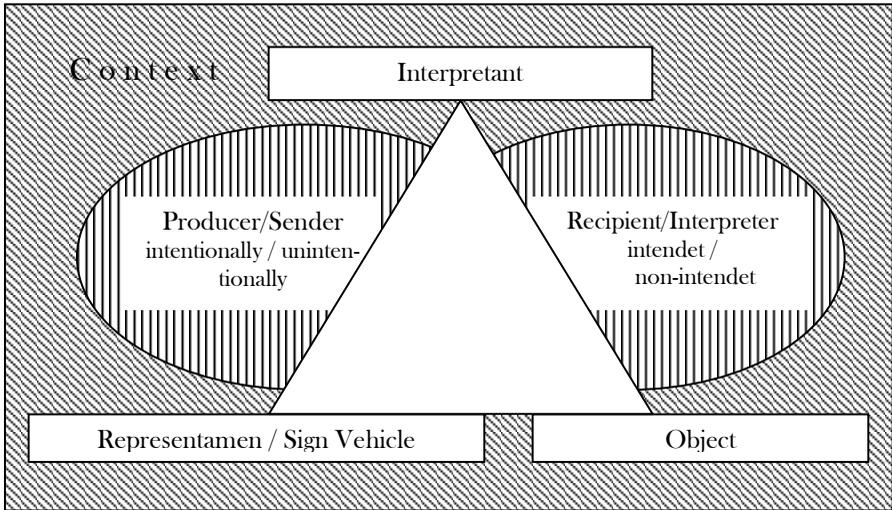


Fig. 1: Extended semiotic model

Comprehensive semiotic considerations therefore associate with a model representing less a triangle than a bat and its subtle symbolism seems to tell us: That we will never know what is going on in the mind of a bat, as Nagel (1974) stated, should not let us fall into despair since we can at least try to interpret it. In the case of the observable behaviour of a bat, anyhow, we have to deal with a sign that knows no intentional sender and no intended recipient. The behaviour of the bat indexically indicates the object that is its

own inner experience. The behaviour is produced by it but not as a sign for us. As an organism, it forms only something as the subject context for the interpretation of the researcher. Although we cannot speak here of a communication with an intentional sender and therefore not of an intended recipient, we should still be interested in the non-intended interpreter, because the attitude, professional formation and personality of the bat researcher will make a difference for the outcome of his interpretation process.

Principles of a transcendental semiotics

Everything is divine - nothing is divine

The reason why we need a spiritual sign theory at all lies in the fact that the numinous, the divine is not a thing in the world. If this were the case, we might point out and say: There it is! This shows why the theological doctrine of the two persons in the one divine man, Jesus of Nazareth, must have a magical effect on faithful Christians: in his person, the divine in all its attributes substantiates in our world. The Father aspect of God however, we nowadays (unlike the Old Testament) understand as not at all concrete. Because the divine is the invisible background of all, it can not be an object in the world that merges into the duality of being and not being, here and there, then and now, I and thou, this and not-this. The Divine as the other side of the concrete is beyond duality. Therefore, it is not detectable by means of dualistic mind and thought patterns. Except for extraordinary states of consciousness it is not accessible to human beings, because our constitution is aligned with a dualistic world view. But if it was not at all accessible, all talk about it would be pointless. We can talk sensibly about pink unicorns when we dive into the fantasy world of a novel, in which certain properties are attributed to pink unicorns, and even more if this fantasy world is shared by a number of people socially – and some will assume that talking of God works in no other way. But there is a meaningful, non-metaphysical discourse on God, based on experience. To equate these experiences with the Divine, on the other hand, would be naive. For all dualistic experience could only refer to something behind the surface, not to the thing itself, not to the god itself, which is larger and more otherworldly than any dualistic experience (and possibly appears directly only in the last mystical experience that goes beyond our intellectual horizon).

The theologian and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1981) saw adjacent to the outside world an interior in it, the side of the spirit that pervades, in his view, all nature. In his thinking there is not a natural phenomenon not being a mental phenomenon as well and therefore being connected to the divine spirit. Therefore, every living being, every natural phenomenon, and even each thing is also a sign of his inner side, of consciousness, and ultimately of God. A doctrine of the divine, seeing pantheistic in all, though has a problem of discrimination. The related intellectual difficulties, to separate numinous from non-numinous qualities, may be one epistemological reason why Christian theologians generally rejected pantheism. However, for a spiritual theory of signs pantheism will not be rejected per se, but pantheism as a methodological requirement.

As such, it would result in a tautology: Because everything is divine, everything must be interpreted spiritually. That may even be true, but methodically it may only be considered at the end of an investigation of the semiotics of a phenomenon, not at the beginning as its condition.

The deictic quality of a sign as an indicator of the divine remains unclear as long as we have no theory about the relationship between the various forms of spiritual experience and the transcendent. Such a theory thus requires the assumption that we are able to find references of the divine in the world (the outer or inner) at all. Therefore, difficulties arise also from the opposite theological assumption that there is no divinity in the world outside of certain manifestations. (This theology possesses of a Protestant-Christian variant, in which only the biblical revelation is valid, and a yogic / Hindu variant, in which only the personal experience of the divine counts, but God outside me does not matter). A religious doctrine that rejects an infusion of the divine in the world per se is analogous to strict atheism, for which there can be no sign of the divine, because there cannot be anything divine.

The fact that we have to distinguish methodically between a representamen as a sign of numinosity and a sign without such a reference character does not mean that we should or could distinguish sacred from secular signs a priori. Basically, everything can become a spiritual symbol. Thus, the inventor of the "jelly babies oracle", Dietmar Bittrich (1998), not only demonstrated that by means of the Barnum effect a real oracle can be imitated reasonably, if not totally convincing. He also demonstrated a perspective found in myth and mystery, i.e., that the medium does not matter: Whether the omen is being sought in nature, a product of culture, or the inner self, in a sacred or secular district is not critical. Everything can be a sign of an underlying deep structure if the other conditions match (Bittrich's oracle is of course not aligned with spiritual conditions).

Working definition of a spiritual sign

Based on the above-discussed three paradigms of spiritual experience, we can distinguish three spheres of phenomena in which a human experience can be located. We cannot assume that we will ever be able to distinguish whether these are ontological or epistemological spheres. On the contrary, in view of our present, since Kant often replicated state of knowledge about the entanglement of human understanding and experience with the non-objective, only apparently object-like outer world, we might suspect that a clear distinction of spheres of pure being and those of human knowledge does not exist. However, we may define the sphere of the materialist paradigm as the "immanent world" because it is the side commonly accessible to us as human beings. The explanations for this world are represented adequately by today's natural and cultural sciences. The exterior to us in this paradigm is considered as matter and as a transformation form of matter, namely, physical energy. The inside of us is seen in this paradigm as a functional form of matter / energy, namely, as a function of neural mechanisms.

The second paradigm is located in an intermediate area between the first and the third paradigm. The explanations in this area make use of psychic theories and other theories strictly rejected by the first paradigm like the morphogenetic fields theory or biophoton theory. The distinguishing mark of this sphere is that it is located clearly beyond the materialistic world and thus not the common experience of all living human persons. The experience at this level is regarded as extraordinary and strange. However, it is experience that may be explained by extended scientific approaches. Therefore, the boundary between this and the first sphere is fluid and depends on the dominant theory of explaining the world and its exclusion conditions. On this level, which we can refer to as the "intermediate zone", the external reality is taken into account theoretically by the concept of energy, but even more by the concept of non-local information. Our inner side is explained in the same way belonging to the same non-substance. Therefore, our inner mental life and the material world around us in this sphere are not separable. They are intertwined.

The third paradigm refers to a sphere beyond the first level and, theoretically, beyond the second, although a clear distinction between these two is as difficult as between the first and second. What we have called the religious paradigm refers to a sphere that we call the transcendent world. The theoretical approaches in this area are primarily interested in the mind / spirit and its functions and effects. Spirit as a concept is different from the concept of information in the "intermediate world" because there information is still attributed with a physical location. Spirit can include, for example, pure consciousness, which contains no information (there is probably no duality in pure consciousness, i.e., no binary codes which are the matrix of information). Yet, here too applies: "As within, so without", which means that the external world in this sphere appears as well as of purely spiritual nature as the inner world.

	Sphere	Paradigm	Main Theory for the Outside	Main Theory for the Inside
1.	Immanent	materialistic	matter / energy	neuronal information
2.	Intermediate	new physics	(non-local) information	(non-local) information
3.	Transcendent	religion	manifest mind	pure mind

Tab. 1: Three spheres

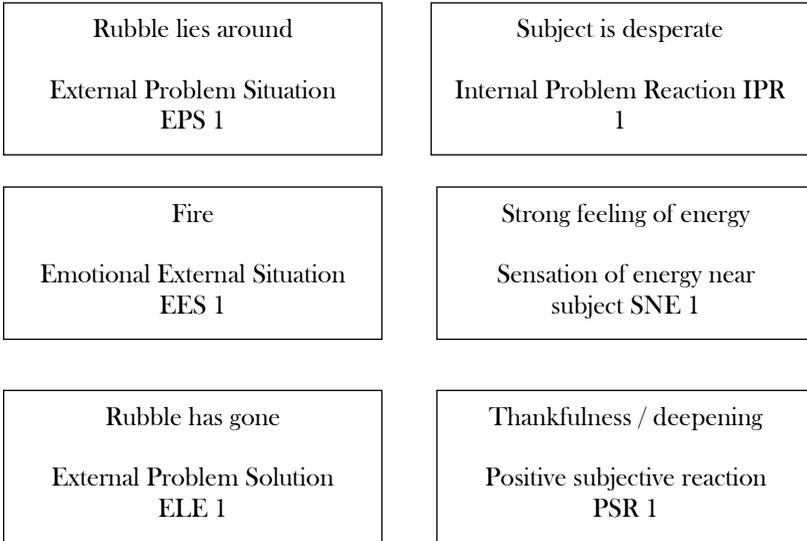
We want to venture now formulating our first principle of transcendental semiotics and refrain from regarding any experience, for which we cannot assume the primary or final validity of the levels one and two, as a sign of the religious sphere. In other words, we only want to classify such an experience as a spiritual experience, which allows the alloca-

tion to the third level. What I mean by primary or final validity, I have explained elsewhere (Harnack, 2011). In a nutshell: If I recognize in the rational discourse of an ideal observer, unbiased in respect to the three paradigms, that the arguments available after a simple examination argue for one of the three paradigms, then that assignment will be indicated as the primarily valid. If I get in the course of a hermeneutic-spiral testing process to the final opinion that it is a correct assignment to this level, then that assignment shall be ultimately valid, knowing that the process of a hermeneutic knowledge progression is of course completed only preliminary. It is necessary to distinguish between an experience, a person and individual characteristics. For example, the experience of an obviously psychotic person belongs primarily to the first sphere. At the same time in this experience or in their previous biography elements could be found, which are less satisfactorily explained by the psychosis than by statements from the second or third paradigm.

Distinction between deep and surface structure

Spiritual experiences are like communication in an unknown language we must learn to decipher. Their complexity has proportions known to chaos theory. If one were to derive a correct interpretation of all relevant factors, we needed a computer fed with one or two dozen factors, each with about 5-50 values. Most of these factors, however, we could not determine with certainty. We therefore depend on an interpretation of hermeneutics, a deep structure derived from a surface structure. Ferdinand de Saussure's analysis of language structures was the beginning of a study of underlying structures not only in language itself, but also in cultural sign systems. The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss was the leading representative of this cultural structuralism. According to Levi-Strauss (1977), structures can be represented especially in the form of binary furcations. In fact, terms in most cases are far more complex than just spanned in a dichotomous space. Thus, the (non-)colour black not only by its contrary opposite "white", but only by the opposition to all other colours is defined precisely (in other words: the definition "black is that which is not white" would be incorrect). The concept analysis of dichotomies in no way prevents that we identify more complex relationships. The adversarial concept couples "married" and "not married" are useful in any case for a logical analysis, because a third does not exist.

In a structural analysis of spiritual experiences, also typical dichotomous structure elements are apparent such as the positioning of the experience in inner vs. outer or its assessment in positive vs. negative. The linguistic elements are replaced in the analysis of spiritual experience by elements lying in the deep layer of its narrative structure: In our example from the beginning, elements of biographical history (difficult childhood, early extraordinary experiences) can be distinguished from categorical elements of the actual situation. These elements in turn are dividable into three groups:



The categorical elements are linked by process elements: the inner problem reaction follows the outer problem situation. The emotionally disturbing event occurs synchronously with the energy experience closed to the subject. The solution happens after the events described previously. The positive reaction is a result of the solution.

$$(EPS1 \Rightarrow IPR1) \quad (EES1 \ || \ SNE1) \rightarrow \quad (ELE1 \Rightarrow PSR1)$$

The narrative, however, gets a spiritual interpretation by a nexus of the three blocks in form of quasi-causal conditions, possibly assuming a transcendental agent (TZA):

$$(EPS1 \Rightarrow IPR1) \Rightarrow \quad TZA \quad \Rightarrow \quad (EES1 \ || \ SNE1) \Rightarrow \quad (ELE1 \Rightarrow PSR1)$$

We here also notice vacancies, gaps of our knowledge, which can be closed only by comparison with many other events: why is the miraculous salvation happening now and not during the traumatic childhood? Is there a one-way time sequence or does the gratitude act in the opposite temporal direction activating the experience? Does it, or the spiritual deepening that the subject experiences, work in the usual temporal direction activating subsequent paranormal experiences?

The dialogical structure of spiritual experience

What applies for semiotics in general, is especially true for spiritual signs: not only the interpretation of the sign is interactive in nature, but the sign itself is communication, that is, the result of a dialogue. This is most obvious where the initiative of a person is answered by the transcendent, as in prayer. Perhaps it is not invocation as the verbalization of needs but the internal state of individual praying that favours a numinous response. Thus, the statement of the theistic traditions that the thanksgiving prayer was superior to the invocation because it brings closer to God, could be regarded as a form of a more complete dialogue, in which the prayer is an "emotionally shorter link" to the communication partner. The *mindset* of the prayer can be seen as the transmitting station to be focussed on the invisible communication partner in order to reach it. If the person praying is only concerned with himself, this communication does not work.

In other cases, it is the transcendent itself that reaches the person. In this case, the dialogic element appears in the willingness and predisposition of the person to be a good receiver. Or it presents itself in whether s/he is willing to grow through the experience, to deepen it and thus to find new healing experience - or whether s/he in contrast gets in conflict with the experience and aggravates negative "communication" in the form of a positively reinforced feedback circuit. Thus, the dialogue principle in the deepest sense is the supposition that spiritual experiences are always communications of an Ego with an Over-Self, i.e., of a personal level with a transpersonal. Spiritual experiences never happen without coloration by the person of the experiencer. Sender and receiver are structurally or emotionally entangled instances and the dialogue principle means the transactional, i.e., mutual conditionality of the result, which is the sign itself.

Meaningfulness

Spiritual experiences are distinguished from other forms of experience by the fact that they seem to have a deep meaningfulness, even if the meaning of the event is not clear and understandable. Spiritual experience does not seem arbitrary, unreasonable or aimless, for the experiencer, even if outsiders may see it that way, but it is often experienced as a targeted message. Even if we do not see an intelligent being as the originator, for the experiencer, it seems often that an intelligent force is at work which does something. This is not only because many people can not perceive those messages / spiritual experiences as something they themselves determine in a certain way. It is also because a numen, a divine will or a law with a certain aim seems to hide behind. Often the event drives the person almost inevitably to an upside orientation, for example, to abandon one's usual life in order to dedicate oneself to a spiritual path.

Exclusivity and intersubjective comparability

Spiritual experiences may contain exclusivity in that they always happen to a person for whom this experience is significant in a particular way. They thus often appear as meant to that person exclusively - and often the insides gained hereby cannot be transferred to other people. At the same time spiritual experiences have structural elements in common that make them comparable to the experiences of other people. Like no love affair is totally similar to another and yet common patterns between relations can be identified, so spiritual experiences are quite intersubjectively testable by various criteria and comparable with other experiences of the same type. It makes no sense to interpret an experience as a spiritual one without being able to test it intersubjectively in a context of other similar experiences. Every judgement about the affiliation of an object to a category requires the knowledge of other concepts that form the environment of the related object, as well as other similar terms, filling similar positions within the semantic network to itself. So whether a certain experience, say, the vision of a demon, is a pathological or a spiritual experience, depends on factors within the sign complex, but also on knowledge gained by the accordance with other, similar cases indicating that a sign of this kind usually show characteristics making it a spiritual sign or not.

Fundamental questions of a transcendental semiotics

Spiritual experiences appear to those who experience or witness them like the entering of an unknown dimension of reality in our well-ordered world. The subjective experience of mystical certainty of the divine, the incredible rescue from danger, the apparition from another world are like exclamation marks with one common message: Do not settle for simple explanations! If we want to understand these subjectively remarkable events deeper, we must see them as signs still waiting for their decryption. What questions must we address to these signs to understand them better? Let us consider them analogous to the discovery of unknown glyphs on rock walls, like the symbols of the Mayas, whose decipherment was possible for the first time since the 1970's.

Those who see the almost square logos on a Guatemalan or Mexican rock will - like some early explorers - perhaps simply misunderstand them as decoration. In a similar way, to many of today's so-called scientists seems what people experience in near-death-experiences as a mere embroidery of our brain to make bearable the last minutes of our life - as if these final neuronal decoration makes sense in the selection process being passed on genetically, and so could be derived from a biological advantage! Similarly, at the end of the 19th century researchers wonder, why a culture in the rain forest of Guatemala should have decorated rock faces for aesthetic purposes with graphics, and start to understand them as characters, as signs to which a meaning can be assigned. Understanding spiritual experiences as signs does not necessarily mean to suppose an author in the manner of a person who sends the signal so that it is read by the recipient. We can look

behind a spiritual sign and find a non-intentional producer like an impersonal process at work. Likewise, it is possible that the recipient is not personally „meant“.

In the case of the Maya glyphs, for the researchers it was perfectly clear that they were not meant as recipients of the characters. This did not diminish their interest in deciphering them, for the meaning of the glyphs could reveal something about their author. So we can understand spiritual experience as a sign whose meaning lies not only in the statement about an external situation, but that centrally reveals something about its transcendent origin. This applies even if the origin is not imagined as equipped with the attributes of a person. Characters, which have as such a meaning in themselves, but do not stem from a person, are indexical or iconic (but not symbolic) in nature: the reflection of a tree in water or smoke as a sign of fire are impersonal originated characters.

In the case of the Maya glyphs, however, it was symbolic characters, not only icons after the iconic principle of similarity. They are based on a complex algorithm for the assignment of meaning that had to be understood in order to get to the interpretant, and thus the object. If we, for the sake of clarity and specificity, want to understand the interpretant as the process and algorithm of interpretation (and not just as the meaning itself), then Mayan researchers had to find a proper interpretational system as interpretant. This consisted in several steps: First, the idea had to be abandoned the Maya glyphs were pure pictograms (i.e., pictures expressing ideas). In fact, they proved to be such pictograms whose phonetic value formed also the corresponding phonetic sign (such as using the picture for "bar" at the same time for the spelling of the syllable [bar]). Moreover, the context of the correct interpretation had to be limited: The deciphering really started when the Maya researcher Tatiana Proskouriakoff abandoned the assumption they were religious or astronomical records, and interpreted the inscriptions correctly as ruler biographies. Finally, after many other intermediate steps (such as finding the correct reading direction), the complexity of the many additional rules of spelling had to be penetrated: So some characters, to make matters worse, are ligatures of two characters, etc.

Accordingly, in the case of spiritual experience we may have to give it up to find a single system of interpretation. Like the Maya glyphs are pictographs and syllable signs together, and many additional rules and exceptions are required for their interpretation, so spiritual experiences could effort different patterns of interpretation with different application rules. If the experience leaves the experiencer in a calm and peaceful relation with the Divine, Ignatius of Loyola says, that is the Spirit of God. Otherwise, it is that of the devil. And like the Mayan glyphs revealed its meaning only in context, so the near-death experience of a Christian meeting Christ, and a Buddhist meeting a Buddha can be interpreted within the context in which it stands only, without that this hides the reference to the source or the meant object, that may be the same in both cases.

Obviously, we have to address the following questions to a spiritual experience in the sense of a sign:

1) With respect to the sender: Can we say something about the source, the producer, from which the character (the experience) originated? What says the sign about its nature and character?

Thus people who make spiritual experiences, sometimes have the impression that they seem to come from a transcendent source of highest nature, they appear like experiences from the ultimate realm of being. Other experiences seem to originate from entities or realms beyond this, but below the divine level, possibly even originating from negative-minded powers. Or the experiencer is, at least partially, simultaneously involved in the production of the sign (whether by his spiritual practice, whether by his personality traits). Here, too, the distinction between intentional and unintentional senders makes sense. Intentional senders of spiritual messages seem as if they want to say something. Most spiritual experiences are seen as intentionally if they cause superior developments of the experiencer and other positive events. Unintentional are producers certainly, if they can be interpreted neither personal nor directed at an aim, such as states of consciousness that bring certain experiences with them.

2) With respect to the recipient: In what way is the recipient involved in the interpretation of the message? Is he part of the meaning or relatively independent of it?

Some recipients may feel directly addressed by a message. Others will regard their spiritual experience with trained meditative distance. Still others cannot separate themselves between their own personal interests and the spiritual experience. Experts are interpreters of the experience of others and thus non-intended recipients, and the nature of their expert knowledge in turn influences the interpretation.

3) Regarding the type of sign vehicle (representamen): What media are involved, which transmission channels, which physical implementation is involved?

Experiences interpreted as a sign can take place in the subject's psychological interior of experience and perception (internal signs). They can also take place on the outside of perception (external sensorial signs), in or around the body of the subject (physical signs) or in the outside of the physical world (external-material signs). Even one's own actions (actional signs) or internal changes of the subject can appear to be inspired spiritual experiences (personal signs).

4) Regarding the relationship of the representamen to the object: Is it a sign of symbolic, iconic or indexical quality, i.e.: Does it provide coded information in the sense of a surface structure of an underlying deep structure (symbolic)? Does it refer in single relation only to what it is (iconic)? Or does it show in binary relation that something exists and in what way it does, something transcendent or a transcendental person (indexical)?

Thus, only some spiritual experiences are symbolic (the content of verbally received messages, the content of dreams, oracles). Many are iconic: the vision of a Christ figure refers foremost to Christ, not to an additional, not implicated message (unless the experiencer employs an interpretant, giving the vision an additional meaning and thus making it a symbol). Some spiritual experiences, however, such as the complete *samadhi*, the *unio*

mystica, are either monadic or even trans-semiotic since they do not mean anything, but just exist.

5) *Regarding the interpretant: What interpretant system does the person receiving the sign use for interpretation? What systems could be used in addition?*

6) *With respect to the object: Which external, internal, or transcendental object is meant?*

Some dreams and oracles refer to events or other people, while other symbols mean the experiencer or a state: a dream of blooming flowers might refer to the spiritual opening of a part of the dreamer. Some characters, however, contain no "meant" outside the representamen or producer (an angel, standing in a corner of the room may simply refer to his own existence).

7) *With regard to the context: What is the impact of situational and trans-situational social and physical context on the formation and interpretation of the sign?*

Without a theory of the deep structure, the semiotic system and localisation of spiritual experiences in the threefold space of world, intermediate sphere, and superior sphere, the narrative of spiritual experience ultimately will not be interpretable.

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