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Semiotics of Conscience

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Abstract

This chapter offers a long-overdue semiotic analysis of the phenomenon of conscience. It is remarkable that such an analysis has not yet been attempted, because conscience has always been understood as something like a voice signing, and not just unimportantly, but as the voice of God. One could well have expected that an analysis of conscience would have been first on the semiotician's tick list. Using Martin Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of conscience as a guide, it turns out that a simple Peircean analysis in terms of *representamen*, *object* and *interpretant* is at least a good way of opening the phenomenon up with the semiotician's tools. My conclusions point to the uniqueness of the sign of conscience among all signs. For it is one sign where all three moments—representamen, object and interpretant—are *the very same entity*. Given the existential semiotic reduction—without remainder—of the subject to a structured network of signs, one can then glimpse the extraordinary conclusion that in the phenomenon of conscience we encounter the signing of semiosis itself—the sign of signs. It is no wonder, then, that it has been understood to be the voice of God. I finish by developing the ethical ramifications of my analysis for semiotics.

Keywords: conscience, Heidegger, peirce, *enkratic* principle, existential semiotics

1. Introduction

It is very remarkable that a semiotic analysis of conscience has not yet been attempted. Conscience has always been understood as something like a voice signing—but not just any voice: it has largely been identified with the signing of the voice of God, expressing God's law, intentions, thoughts, etc., or the law of God 'written on our hearts'.¹ One may have thought, therefore, given its potential importance that it would have been first on the semiotician's

¹Romans 2:15.

ticklist for analysis. In fact, quite the reverse appears to have been the case, and even moral philosophers, on whose conceptual territory conscience traditionally has been thought to lie, appear to have left the topic well alone over the last half-century. There has been very little in the way of comprehensive and systematic attempts to elaborate theories of conscience since Heidegger made it central to his existential analysis of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* [1].

This lacuna needs explanation. Langston [2], in his historical survey of theories of conscience, suggests that the turn away from faculty psychology left no room for conscience as a psychical component. But this is unlikely to be a sufficient explanation, because it is not necessary to posit conscience as a faculty, and, certainly, Heidegger's account in no sense at all attributes to the phenomenology of conscience anything like the properties of being a psychical component. I suggest, rather, that theorising about conscience became problematic largely because it had always been understood as a totalising and authoritarian phenomenon that the shift towards disseminated subjectivity, deconstruction of conceptual hierarchies, and suspicion of power relations found almost impossible to accommodate. Scepticism towards the authority of conscience has been compounded in the last decades by the terror wreaked by some claiming to 'follow their consciences'.

It may be thought to be paradoxical that Heidegger's existential epistemology, which roots knowing in *Dasein*'s modes of being, both contains a highly-developed theory of conscience, and at the same time sows the seeds of its conceptual demise. In fact, I will try to show that this paradox points at the heart of a renewed semiotics of conscience.

I will argue that the phenomenon of conscience points us towards the origin of semiosis and thus that a semiotic analysis of the phenomenon gives us insight both into the concept of conscience itself and into fundamental semiotic operations. I will also suggest that the analysis can open the way towards a genuinely ethical or critical theory of signs.

2. Heidegger: conscience as the call of being

Many of the most powerful tools of semiotic analysis derive from structuralist accounts of meaning. Conscience, I suggest, however, is a *sui generis* concept that cannot be embedded within the usual patterns of signification. As such, it lends itself much more appropriately to *phenomenological* rather than structuralist analysis. So I am going to use Heidegger's phenomenological account as a route of access for my own semiotic analysis. This route will make clear precisely why the tools of the structuralist are inapplicable here.

In *Being and Time* [1], first published in 1927, Heidegger makes the concept of conscience a centrally important component of his so-called 'existential analysis of *Dasein*'. I will take the term *Dasein* to refer, perhaps controversially, to the set of ontological preconditions that enable the experience of being as such and thus that enable the sort of experience that, among the animal kingdom, might be thought to be unique to humans: the sort of experience that accompanies *being-a-self*.

All of these preconditions are rooted fundamentally in the phenomenon that Heidegger describes under the title of 'care': *Dasein* is a being whose being matters to it, who cares about its being, who

is concerned about how its existence or its life 'goes'. All our experience, according to Heidegger, is wholly determined by this basic characteristic; indeed, it is this characteristic that enables in the first place human experience. If it was not for our care for ourselves, we would have no experience—in the sense we have it—at all; things would not 'show up' for us in the way that they do. Of course, some other form of experience might be possible, the experience associated with the being of nonhuman animals, perhaps, but not that of the distinctively human animal. Things are disclosed to us, according to Heidegger, only within the horizons mapped out by the mattering of our concerns. Only insofar as we are concerned about something for the sake of ourselves can things connected in significance relations to that something first 'show up'. The hammer does not become an object of experience at all until it gets embedded in the relations of use that are organised around those goals of ours that can be accomplished by hammering—building a house, putting up a picture, etc. It may nevertheless be in our visual field—but we do not *see* it, that is, notice it, unless it takes a significance upon itself from the projects that we are committed to for the sake of ourselves. This is not simply to say that there would not be any hammers if we did not need to make them to use as tools to achieve certain projects that we might have. Even if there are hammers all around us, whether they are disclosed in our experience, and the significance that the bear if they are, is determined by the projects that we are engaged with in virtue of the fact that we are concerned about how our existence is going.

Conscience, as Heidegger describes it, turns out to be a 'primordial' result of the phenomenological structure of care. To see how, one needs beforehand Heidegger's concept of *angst*. The primordial anxiety that Heidegger refers to with this term is also a basic function of *Dasein*'s being as care: we are always worried about how our lives are going for ourselves; our existence is given over to us in such a way as to make us responsible for it, whether we like it or not. Anxious about anxiety itself, we 'flee' this ultimate concern into the relative safety and peace of other people's conceptions of what we should do and what values we should hold. To avoid having to take responsibility for ourselves, we 'fall prey' by allowing ourselves to become lost in the public discourse of 'the they'—of others in general. Such anxiety is awakened by the short amount of time we have before our deaths, and thus by the definitiveness of the projects we choose to act upon for defining who we amount to. To escape, we embrace what Heidegger calls an 'inauthentic' mode of being, defining ourselves dishonestly by the categories and values handed to us conveniently by others.

In the clamour of this everyday situation with its gossip and idle chatter, or, in semiotic terms, with its semiotic web of dissimulated and meaningless meanings, conscience is disclosed as an urgent and persistent *call*. Continuing the tradition of interpreting conscience as a voice, Heidegger analyses the phenomenon into three moments: the call (that is, the message), the caller and the one summoned by the call. Heidegger's key claim is that these three moments are all in fact one entity ontologically: *Dasein* as care. He writes: 'the caller is *Dasein* anxious...about its potential... The one summoned is also *Dasein*, called forth to its ownmost potential...And what is called forth by the summons is *Dasein*, out of falling prey to the they...' (p. 277²). And thus: 'The call of conscience...has its ontological possibility in the fact that *Dasein* is care in the ground of its being' (p. 278).

²Pagination here and henceforth is from the German edition (Sein und Zeit. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag; 2001).

The anxiety of care thus cuts both ways, it seems, for Heidegger, pushing us both to fall prey to others, and also to retrieve ourselves for an *authentic* mode of being that grasps clearly the responsibility we bear for ourselves which we are unable genuinely to escape from. The more we cover over our possible authenticity by immersing ourselves in the publicness of others, the 'louder' the call potentially is, since the disjunction between *Dasein's* situation and its potential gets starker.

Thus, conscience, for Heidegger, is not a psychological faculty, added on, by whatever mechanism, to *Dasein's* cognitive architecture to give it a moral compass for navigating a social environment; it is rather a fundamental necessity of its being, of any being that is like it ontologically. If *Dasein* had no conscience, it would have no experience of being at all; it would not be a site of the disclosure of a world. That is not to say that *Dasein* cannot be psychopathic; i.e., can feel no regret and no empathy in its mistreatment of others; but whether it is psychopathic or not, it is concerned for its being, and thus calls itself back from its flight away from its responsibility for itself.

Note that Heidegger is importantly wholly unspecific about the form of life that an authentic mode of being should take; if he were not, he would precisely not be describing an authentic mode of being that is chosen by *Dasein* itself in the full realisation of its responsibility for itself.

(It is worth remarking that the vocabulary of conscience slips out of Heidegger's texts after the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927. A 'call of being' remains, however, a continual refrain throughout his later texts. For illustration, take this powerful but enigmatic passage from his *Letter on Humanism* (first published in 1947): 'The human being is the shepherd of being. Human beings...gain in that they attain the truth of being. They gain the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in being called by being itself into the preservation of being's truth. The call comes as the throw from which the thrownness of *Dasein* derives' [3]. I have argued elsewhere [4] that the motif of the call of being retains all the conceptual import of the analysis of conscience in *Being and Time*, and thus that this figure of thought remains an integral part of Heidegger's thinking throughout his philosophical engagement).

3. The triune sign

In order to submit the concept of conscience to semiotic analysis, I will use Heidegger's phenomenological researches as a guide. Whilst this methodology may still, at this point, appear *ad hoc*, it will quickly become clear how conscience is a *sui generis* semiotic phenomenon that does not stand in the familiar relationships to other signs, and thus cannot straightforwardly be submitted to structuralist methods of analysis.

Peirce distinguished the following three elements of the sign: 1. the representamen—the sign vehicle, or form that the sign takes; 2. the interpretant—the sense conveyed by the sign; 3. the object—the referent that the sign stands for [5]. Applied to the concept of conscience as Heidegger's phenomenological analyses would have it, these distinctions yield:

1. The representamen/sign-vehicle is no word, no gesture, no grapheme. Heidegger rather insists: 'The call is lacking any kind of utterance. It does not even come to words, and yet it is

not at all obscure and indefinite. *Conscience speaks solely and constantly in the mode of silence*' (p. 273). This cannot mean, however, that conscience does not sign. Rather, in apparent contradiction to Hjelmslev's maxim 'there can be no content without an expression, or expressionless content; neither can there be an expression without a content, or content-less expression' [6], silence is its vehicle, its form of expression. Phenomenologically, talking of silence here, is not, of course, to assume that conscience could ever have been conceived by thinkers as making a *noise*. The point rather is to draw attention to the fact that the call of conscience *adds nothing more* to that which is there already as the concerned—that is, caring—being of *Dasein*. I.e., properly speaking, the vehicle of the conscience-sign just is *Dasein* as authentically concerned about its falling prey. It has no more form or content than that.

2. The interpretant/sense conveyed by the silent call of conscience is the inescapability and necessity of *Dasein*'s responsibility for its being about which it is ultimately concerned. The inauthentic mode of disclosure fails, ultimately, to hide this. Inauthenticity is, rather, revealed to be just one more way of taking care, albeit one that precisely tries to shirk its ultimate responsibility. What the sense of conscience thus amounts to, then, is just *Dasein*'s authentic liability.
3. The object/referent that the call of conscience stands for, or refers to, finally, is *Dasein*'s authentic mode of being, in which it takes care of itself in full realisation of its ultimate responsibility for its finite existence. This is the 'thing' to which the call of conscience inexorably draws attention.

In sum, then, for the conscience-sign, the sign vehicle, the sense and the referent of the sign *are all the same thing*: *Dasein* in its authentic mode. The moments of the conscience-sign are ontologically identical. This makes conscience, I suggest, unique among signs, *sui generis*; it is a *triune* sign.

It might be riposted that in this case it cannot be a sign at all, at least not in the traditional sense because a sign, at the very least, must refer to something other than itself. But this would be a difficult view to sustain: not only is it self-evident that in conscience something is given to understand, hence signified, and thus that there must be some semiosis going on; also, it appears plausible—as I have attempted to show—to separate out in the analysis of conscience the different moments corresponding to Peirce's triadic analysis of the sign. A semiotic analysis of conscience is possible. Thus, a better conclusion would seem to be that we have here a case of a liminal sign, a sign at the boundary of semiosis, a sign from the point at which semiosis begins or ends. A sign that stands right on the boundary of the 'unlimited semiosis' that weaves the semiosphere.³ Conscience, I suggest, is a special sort of sign, but a sign nonetheless.

³Lotmann coins this very useful term in his [7], defining it as 'the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist'. He conceives it as the set of structural preconditions of any semiotic operation at all: 'only the existence of such a universe-the semiosphere-makes the specific signatory act real.'

Interpreting conscience in this way, however, does draw into question Saussure's principle of the arbitrariness of the sign [8]. Once the signified and the signifier are united in the way indicated, there is no room for any arbitrariness in the representation of the sign: the call of conscience cannot in principle take any form other than that which it in fact takes. Again, however, this need not be propounded as a counterexample, so much as a limiting case. The conscience-sign is just especially dense, a sort of black hole of semiosis. On a Peircean taxonomy it could possibly be construed as a special sort of *indexical* sign, indexicals being, for Peirce, those signs that support a wholly non-arbitrary and thus natural or direct connection between the representamen and the object, and thus 'direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion' [9]. The immediacy of 'blind compulsion' perhaps captures well the irresistible urgency of the summons of conscience. But unlike other indexicals, in the conscience-sign, not only is there such a direct relation between the representamen and the object as to be a relation of identity, the interpretant is also ontologically identical to its representamen and object. That it is semiotically *sui generis* is, I think, a more convincing conclusion.

It is also worth highlighting that in this account of conscience the emitter and the interpreter of the call are one and the same, too—albeit, for Heidegger, the same entity in different modes: 'the caller is *Dasein* anxious...about its potential... The one summoned is also *Dasein*, called forth to its ownmost potential' (p. 277).

4. Semiosis: a con-science analysis

Now since the unusual is often what best shows us what is usual, just as pathologies illuminate functional health, it is worth attempting to see what the possibility of the sort of sign that I have roughly suggested conscience to be indicates about the processes of semiosis and meaning in general.

In the first place, it is important to distinguish what could be termed internalist and externalist theories of conscience. An externalist theory would be one in which the originator of the conscience-sign would be something ontologically separate from the interpreter. Cardinal John Henry Newman's claim that conscience is the 'voice of God' [10] would be an example of the commitments of such a theory. On an account like this, conscience is interpreted by the agent to which the voice is addressed, but the voice itself originates from 'outside' the agent, in this case, in the agency of God. On Erich Fromm's two consciences theory, on the other hand, the authoritarian conscience derives from the external persona of the authority figure, and the humanistic conscience derives from humans' internal capacity for love, freedom and flourishing [11]. So this would be an example of a theory of conscience that is both internalist and externalist in different respects. For a purely semiotic account, however, this distinction is irrelevant, since we have only to do with the significance of the sign itself and its interpretation rather than the provenance or emission of it.

Suppose that Heidegger is right about the phenomenology of conscience as we outlined it above. In that case, it would appear that the conscience-sign arises at the intersection between two 'modes of disclosure': inauthentic and authentic being. In each of these modes, things, all

things, are disclosed as determined in a particular way—either by the publicness of the ‘they’, or by *Dasein*’s ‘ownmost’ potential; that is, things take on a particular significance or meaning depending on how *Dasein*’s care for itself is manifesting itself. But as the two fundamental modes of disclosure, this must mean that *semiosis in general* is a function of *Dasein*’s concern for itself; i.e., significance as such is a particular and general result of the projects, cares, concerns, inclinations, motivations—and all those psychological phenomena that can go under the rubric of *desire* in its widest sense—that *Dasein* manifests. Derrida moots such a view in the opening section of *Of Grammatology* [12], despite his insistence that the structures of language are basic to meaning. Language acts as a repository of meaning, certainly, but it is not more, on this view, than a *medium* of the origination of meaning—not the originator itself. Heidegger saw the same thing: ‘In this way language is the language of being, as clouds are the clouds of the sky. With its saying, thinking lays inconspicuous furrows in language. They are still more inconspicuous than the furrows that the farmer, slow of step, draws through the field’ [13]. Language, even in its widest sense of semiosis in general, is not ontologically prior to meaning and signification; it is rather the system or expression of significance and meaning that itself is grounded in human concern for self. It is the latter that first makes possible humans’ particularly human experience. The cares that humans have and the projects grounded therein thus first make semiosis possible, and sustain it. Language merely records its particular configurations for posterity.

On this view, Saussure’s proposal of a general theory of signs [14], then, would amount to a semiotic equivalent of Heidegger’s phenomenological ‘existential analyses’. Here, Heidegger interprets the ‘world’ of *Dasein*’s experience in terms of the networks of meaning generated by *Dasein*’s concerned projection onto future possibilities of action, projections which express its concern for itself. For example, the thing becomes significant as a hammer only within the context of the potential hammering-uses with which *Dasein* might concern itself: putting up a house for shelter, putting up a work of art to appreciate, etc. Wholly independent of these sorts of concern, the thing cannot *be* a hammer at all. The linguistic sign ‘hammer’ functions, on the other hand, merely as the fixer, not the determiner, of this web of potentialities, enabling the communication, by conventional codes, between *Daseins* of the hammer’s significance to its concerned being-in-the-world.

The two fundamental modes of disclosure—authenticity and inauthenticity—amount thus to two basic determinations of the semiosphere as a whole: authentic and inauthentic semiosphere. If conscience is the sign that discloses to inauthentic *Dasein* the mode of being of authenticity, then we are warranted in drawing the following stark conclusion: *conscience is the signing of semiosis as such, the sign of signs*. It reveals the entirety of the semiosphere as determined inauthentically or authentically. It would be for this reason that it is a sign *sui generis*; it stands above and apart from the semiosphere as the sign which represents the semiosphere itself to concerned thinking and communication, thus imbuing it with an overarching meaning. It is the vertical limit, the stopping point, so to speak, of ‘unlimited semiosis’ that is only unlimited ‘horizontally’. There is a sense then, insofar as it *transcends* the signing-process whilst signing itself, that it is analogous to the *voice of God*, at least to the extent that it performs the function of ultimately determining the semiosphere’s overriding meaning. Just as the concept of the voice of a transcendent God is oxymoronic, so the sign of conscience is both sign and beyond signification as its ultimate arbiter.

The same conclusion can be reached from a different direction. Our semiotic deployment of Heidegger's insights produced the result that *Dasein* in its authentic mode is the representamen, the object and the interpretant of conscience all at once. But given our phenomenological interpretation of semiosis in terms of *Dasein*'s concerned disclosure, and given the existential semiotic reduction—without remainder—of the subject to a structured network of signs (Duits, Tarasti et al. [15, 16], but also Derrida, Barthes, etc.), there is nothing else for conscience to sign but the semiosphere as such. *Dasein* can be construed as reducible without remainder to the possible structures that conform the semiosphere. Thus, the authentic *Dasein* signified in conscience is not ontologically distinguishable from the structures that conform authentic semiotic disclosure. Conscience must be construed to signify the semiosphere such as it authentically is.

5. Towards ethical semiosis

In this final part, I want to point towards what I take to be the possibility of a genuinely ethically engaged semiotics that is rooted in this conclusion. The hope is that this would amount adequately to a *critical semiotics*, a semiotics with the conceptual resources to justify claims critical of systems of signs, of processes of semiosis, of individual signs and of the semiosphere as such, and thus to point towards better semiotic alternatives.

The normativity of conscience, I suggest, binds *Dasein* in two distinguishable aspects: as *interpreter* and as *agent*.

5.1. *Qua* interpreter

In the first place, it is important to be clear about the nature of the normative demand that conscience makes. Heidegger, as we have seen, construes it as a 'summons' to the authentic mode of disclosure. A summons, in the usual sense, has judicial power behind it; in this case, however, rather than being summoned to face judgement, the summons constitutes the judgement. But what is the justification for the summons? What is its warrant? Why should *Dasein* obey? The answer for Heidegger is that *Dasein*'s being as *care for itself* cannot but both summon and heed the summons; it cannot ultimately tolerate its lostness in the 'they'. Its call is warranted because *Dasein* of necessity accepts the presupposition on which it is based: that *Dasein* cares about its existence. But such a conception runs into obvious difficulties connected to the rigor of this binary opposition authentic/inauthentic. For example, what if *Dasein* authentically decides—that is, decides with the finitude and facticity of its life wholly disclosed to it—to lose itself in the 'they'? What should we call *Dasein* then—authentic or inauthentic? Or authentically inauthentic? Secondly, if the warrant of the call of conscience is constituted by *Dasein*'s concern for itself, then does not *Dasein* have to be already in the mode of being of authenticity in order that the call be made? For if *Dasein* were wholly inauthentic it would be no longer concerned with its being as such.⁴ Is it the case, then, that *Dasein* is

⁴Stephen Mulhall pursues this point in detail in his [17].

authentic as such? But then Heidegger insists that inauthenticity is the mode of being that *Dasein* inhabits always already and for the most part. Must it not be the case then, that *Dasein* is better understood as being in both modes simultaneously? A better picture, I suggest, might see authenticity and inauthenticity not as two exclusive modes, but as two poles of a continuum on which the more *Dasein*'s semiosphere is configured in accordance with *Dasein*'s ultimate projects, the closer *Dasein* is to authenticity—ultimate projects being those aspects of *Dasein*'s motivational set that are conformed in full realisation of its being-towards-death. In this way, *Dasein*, as concerned being-a-self, would continually be summoned towards the 'outer layers' and a 'greater perspective' of semiotic disclosure. And this summons would be conscience. The significances of any 'inner' layer would be able to be criticised from the perspective of a more authentic 'outer' layer; criticised, in the light of *Dasein*'s self-concern, in terms of their justifiability.

An example would help here. Suppose, perhaps heeding Barthes' analysis in *The Fashion System*, I am enthralled by fashionable clothes [18]. There is no doubt that such clothes and the various forms of media, publication and celebrity concerned with them constitute an intricate semiotic web. Nonetheless, allowing my purchasing power, my sense of self-identity, the comfort—both physical and emotional—I feel in the presence of others, etc., to be so thoroughly determined by this semiosis might be something that, from a more fundamental perspective on the possibilities of my life, I may object to. On the other hand, I might not; I might decide, from an authentic perspective, that the fashion system is what I want to devote my life wholeheartedly to. In any case, the possibility of criticism is opened up. Beneath entire systems of meaning, individual signs may be subject to criticism from the same account. Suppose I construe myself authentically as post-gender, or as post-nationality, etc. I may find wholly unhelpful and to be avoided the application of the signs 'male' and 'female', the adjective 'English', etc. I may want to resist carving the world up in this way. And this may be true both in regard to myself and in regard to others. I may take signs such as 'Jew' or 'Muslim' to connote in my culture in a way incompatible with a more authentic perspective on human being that I endeavour to maintain.

5.2. *Qua agent*

So much for the normativity of *Dasein* insofar as it interprets and discloses. *Qua agent*, *Dasein* must also heed the summons. Lacan [19] uses the term '*objet petit a*' to refer to the object of desire that is so 'scopically' basic such as to constitute the subject as such. Without wishing to do too much violence, either to Lacan's concepts or to Heidegger's, I think that this concept can be usefully imported into a discussion of the ethics of authenticity. The Heideggerian conscience—just like Lacanian psychoanalysis—is really telling us never to give up on our ultimate desire, to be resolute in our projection onto the possibilities of being that are chosen in the light of authenticity. This is the existential imperative, the *enkratic* principle. The *objet petit a*, the telos of such ultimate projects, configures the semiosphere as the lack around which it is arranged. Conscience thus calls for a particular semiotic configuration that it is up to us to realise as embodied *agents* in a factual world. I.e., the disclosure that the call of conscience is calling forth is one that our actions are required to realise, as the means to our ultimate *teloi*.

In the language of practical reasoning—more familiar to moral philosophers—, conscience, on the analysis I have proposed, summons us *qua* agents to do *that which we take ourselves to have overriding reason to do*. Our ultimate desires, configured psychoanalysis tells us, around the ultimate ends of our subjectivity, ground reasons for acting in ways to attain or realise those ends. On this broadly instrumentalist account of practical reason, the more fundamental a desire is, the more overriding the reasons it grounds. The *objet petit a*, as the end of our ultimate desire, thus provides us with reasons for action that override all other reasons for action that we might have. Whilst what we take ourselves to have reason to do might not be the same as what we actually have reason to do (this is the thrust of the ferocious contemporary debate between ‘externalism’ and ‘internalism’ about practical reason in moral philosophy), conscience, as the call resulting from the *internal* configuration of subjectivity, takes no notice of this: it calls us to do what *we take ourselves* to have overriding reason to do.

5.3. The everyday notion of conscience

It may be rejoined that the analysis of conscience we have given misses many of the phenomenological facts that are captured by the ordinary or everyday notion of conscience. It may be said that, no matter for what has been given so far, a semiotics of conscience must also capture the notions of guilt, of bad conscience, of the generally moral nature of conscience, as well as the fact that the call of conscience seems to sound only with regard to *specific deeds*—not all the time, or continually, as the analysis we have presented so far might seem to indicate. Certainly, a semiotic account of these everyday features of the notion of conscience needs to be given if our analysis is to be considered in any way comprehensive. Again, we can follow Heidegger’s lead here; he clearly distinguishes the existential interpretation of conscience from its ‘vulgar’ interpretation.

There are two ways in which the everyday notion of conscience and the existential interpretation might be related. On the one hand, one could argue that there is in fact more than one type of conscience—a plurality of consciences. Or, alternatively, one might argue that the everyday interpretation is the inauthentic disclosure of the existential call of conscience. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is the latter that Heidegger proposes.

On this account, everyday, or inauthentic, *Dasein* misconstrues or misinterprets the conscience-sign. Our semiotic tools give us a new way of characterising this mistake that *Dasein* makes. For the everyday notion of conscience:

1. The representamen/sign-vehicle is a specific utterance: ‘You should not have done that!’ Its specificity does not mean that it actually comes to language and breaks the mode of silence; rather its specificity serves to conceal what is authentically disclosed in conscience, namely, *Dasein* as authentically concerned. *Dasein* is thus misled to focus, using language familiar from the later Heidegger, on beings, things, rather than on its being as such.
2. The sense/interpretant is the *badness* or *wrongness* of the deed that was done, the sense that *Dasein* has been *immoral*, and done something *impermissible*. *Dasein* ought not to have done it.

Thus *Dasein*'s responsibility is alluded to, but not in the sense of its responsibility for its being as such, but rather, merely, in the sense of its responsibility for a particular being—the deed that it ought not to have done.

3. The object/referent is *Dasein*'s impermissible deed itself, whatever it might have been. This is what the everyday conscience-sign is drawing *Dasein*'s attention back to.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from this analysis of the everyday conscience-sign. In the first place, it is clear how significant the misunderstanding of the conscience-sign of inauthentic *Dasein* is. It is significant enough for it to totally dissimulate the original sense of conscience and thus conceal the urgency of retrieving itself from the 'they'. Structurally, this dissimulation operates by breaking up the original ontological unity of the semiotic moments of the conscience-sign. In its everyday version, the semiotic moments are differentiated such that the sign becomes *just one sign among others*, a standard Peircean symbol, rather than *sui generis* and triune. Its special particularity and urgency is thereby lost. In Heideggerian language, being as such is concealed in favour of the disclosure of particular beings. Given the semiotic account above, it could be added: semiosis as such is concealed in favour of particular semiotic events. Thus the proper significance of the conscience-sign collapses. Calling it the 'voice of God' only serves to compound, rather than to overturn, the dissimulation.

This is not a random misfortune for *Dasein*, argues Heidegger. Rather, it is one way that *Dasein* copes with the anxiety it experiences about its responsibility for itself. Its responsibility for its being as such is dissimulated to resemble a liability for a mere deed, which is at least superficially comforting for *Dasein*. The conscience-sign is deliberately, if not consciously, misunderstood—a misunderstanding which is just another way of *Dasein* caring for itself. *Dasein* cleverly, if unknowingly, figures out a way of avoiding having to heed the conscience-sign as it authentically signs.

Given the moral connotations of the everyday conscience-sign, the foregoing analysis warrants a comment on the status that should be afforded to moral thinking. Suppose the *enkratic* principle as outlined above conflicts with the demands of morality as ordinarily understood—i.e., suppose, for any given agent, that the former prescribes one action, whilst the latter prescribes another, and the given agent cannot pursue both. What should the agent choose? Whilst we may not be in a position to answer this question decisively, it can at least be pointed out that the normativity of the call of conscience *subtends* the normativity of ordinary morality, since whilst the agent may have good reason to adhere to the demands of ordinary morality, whatever they may be in any given situation, the agent has, on the account above, an *overriding* reason to adhere to the prescriptions of its ultimate concerns. In other words, it will always be more *rational* for the agent to heed the authentic call of conscience above considerations of ordinary morality if there is ever a contradiction between the two. The *enkratic* principle is thus more fundamentally binding than any ordinary moral principle could be. Indeed, on this account, ordinary morality might tend to appear, as Heidegger thought, as a dissimulation of the authentic normativity of existence.

6. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the semiotic analysis of the conscience-sign has revealed its uniqueness and importance amongst signs. This has made the lacuna of it being ignored hitherto by semioticians all the more striking and curious. Heidegger, of course, traced this sort of ignorance in every instance back to the inevitable inauthenticity of everyday thinking, even of the most rigorous philosophical thinking. It has also disclosed fertile paths for new research:

It indicates that the source of semiosis as such is our concern for ourselves. Daniel Chandler begins his well-known introductory text on semiotics with the words ‘We seem as a species to be driven by a desire to make meanings’ [20]. And this is characteristic of what could be construed to be the semioticians most basic mistake: it is not that we desire to make meanings; rather, *we desire—and that creates meanings*. Concern is the origin of semiosis. Elsewhere, I have tried to reduce semiotic configurations down to their original starting points in the teleological schemes that are grounded by such concern [21].

It also opens up the possibility of an ethically engaged semiotics that can propound fundamental normative justifications. Indeed, once conscience has been legitimately construed as the signing of signification as a whole, it is not clear how semiotics can avoid becoming ethical—in the sense of critical. That it has endeavoured, by and large, to remain purely ‘theoretical’, practically neutral, is, on this account, not a strength but a weakness. Understanding that processes of semiosis are always rooted in concern for self and that concern for self has essentially a normative dimension or aspect compels a way of thinking about semiotics that is inherently critical. In this case, the semiotic analysis of conscience has the potential to reorientate fundamentally semiotics research.

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