

Yiheng Zhao

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The Coming into Being of
the World of Meaning

外语教学与研究出版社
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Introduction: Theory of Meaning, Semiotic Phenomenology, Philosophical Semiotics

The subtitle of this book is “The Coming into Being of the World of Meaning.” What is the “meaning?” What is the “world?” And what is the “world of meaning?” Starting with an introduction to the construction of the world of meaning, I will progressively characterize the “production of meaning”, the “experientialization of meaning,” and the “socialization of meaning,” covering some 30 philosophical topics, including epistemology and cultural studies. It is, however, necessary to clarify some of the terminologies that determine the choice of the title of this book “Philosophical Semiotics.”

1. Theory of Meaning: Among those many disciplines, taking meaning study as their focal subject: analytical philosophy, psychology, epistemology, and cognitive studies, etc., semiotics is supposed to be the one that focuses most intensively on the production, transmission, interpretation, and interaction of meaning, as well as all forms of meaning. The term “theory of meaning,” however, seems to be monopolized by analytical philosophy. Having its popularity in both England and America for over a century, analytical philosophy of language is mainly concerned with the questions of language and logic, in which the theory of meaning actually refers to the study of propositions. While it might be misleading to title this book “theory of meaning,” since its main purpose is to study the meaning of signs in a general sense instead of from a perspective of philosophy of language. This book discusses the “theory of meaning,” which I borrowed from linguistic philosophy by chance, however, from a different perspective. Modern semiotics has already been far away from the study of sentence pattern.

2. Semiotic Phenomenology: This tradition founded by Charles Sanders Peirce, who also termed it phenomenology, or sometimes “phaneroscopy” to avoid the repetition of the “Hegelian” terminology. He nevertheless used the term “phenomenology” in most of his manuscripts. Peirce’s Phenomenology lays a philosophical

foundation for semiotics, building up quite a particular system of phenomenology with its specificity, as he situated the phenomenological problems within the scope of semiotics.¹ Peirce made it clear: “So far as I have developed this science of phaneroscopy, it is occupied with the formal elements of the phaneron.”² Peirce’s phenomenology is a formal theory of meaning.

What Peirce didn’t know is that his contemporary Husserl had already developed a more complete phenomenological system, who he didn’t hear about until much later in his life and whose name was only mentioned twice in his notes.³ Peirce’s phenomenology is the basis of his semiotic system whose focal points are different from Husserl’s Phenomenology. The discussion of the theory of meaning unfolds in the book in line with Peirce’s thought.

Since Peirce, a number of researchers have devoted themselves to establishing a Peircian-Husserlian “Semiotic Phenomenology.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as one of the pioneers, proposed the “Existential Semiotics” after World War II.⁴ Heidegger and Derrida should also be recognized that the former’s existentialism breaks a new path in the phenomenological tradition by emphasizing the question of meaning, and the later interrogates Husserl’s theory of signs in his *Voice and Phenomenon: Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology*. In recent years, despite the efforts of many researchers such as Richard L. Lanigan,⁵ Goran Sonesson⁶ or Carlo Sini,⁷ who have tried to establish a discipline of Semiotic Phenomenology, a clear and systematic formulation of the Semiotic Phenomenology has yet not been achieved.

I agree with Peirce on considering semiotic phenomenology as the founding theory of semiotics. While based on the present semiotic instead of phenomenological studies, I mean to review and enrich Peirce’s study of semiotic phenomenology, with no ambition to rewrite phenomenology and no intention to refute Husserl. Although some of the points proposed in this book are divergent from Husserl’s phenomenology, it would only be a matter of different domains of discourse.

¹ Nathan Houser. “Peirce, Phenomenology, and Semiotics,” in *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*, Ed. By Paul Cobley. London: Routledge, 2010: 89–100.

² Charles Sanders Peirce. *Collected Papers*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958, Vol.1: 284.

³ H. Spiegelberg said that Peirce “is well familiar with Husserl’s Logics” (see H. Spiegelberg. *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (2nd Edition). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965.) without providing further references. On Peirce’s side, he only mentions the name of Husserl twice in his notes, without any quotation of Husserl’s works. See Charles Sanders Peirce. *Collected Papers*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1931–1958, Vol. 4: 7; Vol. 8: 189.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Signs*. Trans. with an Introduction by Richard C. Mcleary. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

⁵ Richard L. Lanigan. “The Self in Semiotic Phenomenology.” *The American Journal of Semiotics* Issue 1/4(2000): 91–111.

⁶ Goran Sonesson. “From the Meaning of Embodiment to the Embodiment of Meaning: A Study in Phenomenological Semiotics,” in *Body, Language and Mind*, (eds) Tom Ziemke & Jordan Zlatev. Berlin: Mouton de Guyter, 2007: 85–127.

⁷ Carlo Sini. *Ethics of Writing*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009.

3. Philosophical Semiotics: Thinking twice about the title of this book, I decided to call it “Philosophical Semiotics” instead of “Semiotic Phenomenology,” which can be justified by the following reasons: the first reason is to avoid the possible controversy with the mainstream phenomenology as mentioned above. Philosophical semiotics does not put itself in opposition to phenomenology, some of whose methods of analysis and terms instead are close to the latter. The book also borrows some ideas from certain phenomenologists, but remains on a different way of semiotic reasoning and preoccupation. For example, the two have very different starting point for distinguishing between the thing and the sign: philosophical semiotics is interested in the production of meaning while the phenomenology is concerned with consciousness. Since we do not aim to construct a phenomenological theory, we prefer not to mix them up.

The second reason seems even more important because our objective is to try to discover the philosophical foundation of semiotics. Since always considered as a methodology, semiotics is even nicknamed “mathematics in human sciences” because of its strong operability. Human culture is a set of meanings of signs, and semiotics is a discipline of meaning studies. It is therefore not surprising that semiotics has become a general methodology for the studies of human culture. Umberto Eco had already rightly pointed out that the application of semiotics to other disciplines cannot be always successful.⁸ In fact, phenomenology has not been always effective when applied to various disciplines, because phenomenology does not focus on the formal rules governing all the activities of meaning as semiotics does. Whereas all acts of meaning cannot avoid formal problems.

The overarching questions I seek to address over the course of the study: Could semiotics deal with the philosophical questions of “metaphysics?” Could it differentiate the a priori from experience, intuition from understanding? I regard that the foundation of semiotics is based on a series of philosophical questions. I intentionally introduced earlier in my book *Semiotics: Principles and Problems* certain philosophical discussions, such as the cultural markedness, the subject and the self, the motor and the brake of historical evolution, etc., which will be more systematically studied in this book. Being a doctrine of activities of meaning, it is necessary for semiotics to answer some fundamental questions of philosophy, although not once and for all.

As a Chinese scholar, we could no doubt contribute some unique ideas to philosophical semiotics. Since pre-Qin dynasty, we have seen rich thoughts of philosophical semiotics,⁹ for example, in the *Book of Changes*, the nominalist theory of the Motse, the theory of the School of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, the doctrine of Zen, and the “Philosophy of Mind” (xinxue 心学) of Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yang-ming. The historical development of the Chinese thoughts of philosophical semiotics tightly intertwines with all the fundamental questions on how consciousness generates meaning confronted with the world.

⁸ Umberto Eco. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.

⁹ Zhu Dong. *Semiotic Thinking in Pre-Qin Philosophy*. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 2014.

If we see few publications in philosophical semiotics today,¹⁰ it is because, in this aspect, the semiotics movement's efforts are not acknowledged as its methodology. Fortunately, the history of semiotics and philosophy do not stop at our generation, and our successors will accomplish what we have not done.

Before getting to the first chapter, I would like to highlight one more essential problem—the perceived “things” can be roughly classified into three categories:

The first, often referred to as “entities,” concerns not only “object,” but also events, namely the change of the state of objects;

The second corresponds to the represented and mediated texts;

The third is other-consciousness, either the consciousness of others, or that of other living beings or artificial intelligence, including objectified self-consciousness.

These three “things” form the categories of objects of meaning, while each school takes a different position on how to interpret their meanings. The traditional phenomenology considers only the second category (representation) as signs, while the traditional semiotics admits only materially mediated signs, skeptical about the “mental image” without a material form. The numerous debates on the consciousness of “other living beings or artificial intelligence” have been increasingly heated in recent years. Animals might be the potential carriers of consciousness, the present studies on which, however, have been scattered. If animals, to a certain degree, share some of the meaning capacities of human, it would definitely prove that these human abilities are innate instead of being acquired. Artificial intelligence is now a developing source of consciousness, the prospects of which we are eagerly awaiting. In this book, we prefer to limit the debates to the relationship between human consciousness and the world for fear that our subject matters are aimlessly dispersed. Thus, in most chapters we will be obliged to define “consciousness” as “human consciousness,” while the consciousness of other living beings or artificial intelligence will be referred to when necessary.

Philosophical semiotics considers the three things confronted by consciousness as signs because they are all keeping with the definition “a perception understood as carrying meaning.”¹¹ It will be seen, however, that the line between those three objects are blurred: in formal intuition, the object cannot be distinguished from the sign; in the analysis of experience and communal experience, the text is not able to distinguish itself clearly from the consciousness of others; in the complex construction of the world of meaning, the object, the text, the experience and the community constitute the essential condition for the being of the subject's consciousness. Indeed, philosophical semiotics is not only the methodology of the form of meaning, but also the ontology of meaning.

A general conclusion can be made: phenomenology is interested in consciousness, semiotics in meaning, while philosophical semiotics in the relation between consciousness and meaning, or in other words, meaning in consciousness or

¹⁰ John Deeply. *The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics*. St. Augustine's Press, 2003: 1.

¹¹ Zhao Yiheng. *Semiotics: Principles & Problems* (3rd Edition). Nanking: Nanking University Press, 2015: 1.

consciousness in meaning. In some discussions, “philosophical semiotics” is considered to be synonymous with “semiotic phenomenology.” I will sometimes use the term “semiotic philosophy” to highlight the relationship between my study and the mainstream phenomenology. The reason why this book is given the title “Philosophical Semiotics” instead of “Semiotic Philosophy” is that I do not have the ambition to deal with all the philosophical subjects, but only focus on some aspects that haven’t been touched upon so far in semiotic field.

Nevertheless, whatever the issue we are dealing with, meaning and consciousness remain the two central concepts of this book, and the a priori and experience, individual and community, are the two main coordinates. This book will concern with the semiotics on the different aspects of “meaning world” of human.

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Part I
The World of Meaning