Interpretation and Traditions
An intersection for semiotics, phenomenology, and Thomism

My topic in this article develops from themes I have advanced or at least suggested in both *Ens Primum Cognitum in Thomas Aquinas and the Tradition* and *The Intersection of Semiotics and Phenomenology*, but focuses on one in particular: namely, why people are so quick to develop and obstinate in maintaining bad intellectual positions—not in terms of the historical causes which have contributed to the state of bad thinking prevalent today, but in terms of the cognitive capacities themselves; that is, what happens in the person as cognitive agent when falsehoods are adopted and subsequently protected. Because falsity occurs only with composition and division, I think it fair to characterize this difficulty as one of interpretation. To lay out what exactly the difficulty is, and how it occurs, I want to draw on the traditions of Thomism, phenomenology, and semiotics, and in three steps: first, by looking at the process of interpretation; second, by examining two different modes in which interpretation occurs; and third, by considering interpretation in light of the philosophical movement of resolution, which I think a unique glory of Thomistic thought.

I. Introduction: three traditions and three meanings

Before going on to the main topic, however, I think four brief comments for the sake of context will be helpful.

First: when I say “semiotics”, I mean two things at once. On the one hand, I mean the tradition, following Charles Peirce, in studying the action of signs. This tradition is immature and faces many struggles, particularly against the parallel nominalist tradition of semiology. The true semiotic tradition, as it exists

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today, shows promise but remains fragile and is threatened by a new pattern of scientism inimical to the thought of Peirce himself.

On the other hand, by “semiotics”, I mean the specific use for which Peirce himself reserved the term: namely, as a synonym with “logic” understood broadly, and as the normative science of truth. In other words, semiotics for Peirce was that study by means of which, through understanding the nature and function of signs, we can discern the norms for truth: how it appears, what it governs, and so on.

Second: when I say “phenomenology”, I am using this in a very restricted sense; perhaps even idiosyncratically restricted. That is, I mean phenomenology as a method and not as a science, which is to say: phenomenology as Heidegger conceived it, or, rather, as I interpret Heidegger to have conceived it. This method consists in a recursive, three-step process—“destruction”, “construction”, and “reduction”, which I’ll discuss a little today.

Third: when I say Thomism, what I mean should be no surprise to anyone here; but to be clear, what I believe most essential to the tradition is adherence to the metaphysical principles of Thomas Aquinas and which seeks resolution of all inquiry not only to a first principle of intelligible coherence, but also to the supreme principle of all existence, God. While there are undoubtedly inconsistencies from individual to individual, I believe a general agreement upon these principles is the basic condition for someone being considered a Thomist.

Fourth and finally, I want to say a word or three about meaning: when we speak of “meaning”, typically we intend one or more of three possible senses: first, we intend the intelligibility of some being independent of what anyone might think about it; second, we intend the referential, that is, meaning as it comes to exist in the relationship between any two things, at least one of which is a cognitive agent, such that what a dove means to a human is not the same as what it means to a dog, and a crucifix has a different meaning for a Catholic than it does for a Buddhist; and third, we intend the importance or purpose of an object, as when we ask someone why an item is meaningful for someone. Respectively, I call these the intelligible sense, the referential sense, and the teleological sense of meaning; and notably, they are all, somehow or another, interconnected.

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3 1903c: “An Outline Classification of the Sciences”, EP.2.260: “[Logic] has three branches: (1) Speculative Grammar, or the general theory of the nature and meanings of signs, whether they be icons, indices or symbols; (2) Critic [also called formal logic], which classifies arguments and determines the validity and degree of force of each kind; (3) Methodeutic [also called speculative rhetoric], which studies the methods that ought to be pursued in the investigation, in the exposition, and in the application of truth. Each division depends on that which proceeds it.” The notion of a “speculative grammar” is one which Peirce derives from Thomas of Erfurt, whose c.1300 Grammatica speculativa he (as did many—including Heidegger—until Martin Grabmann corrected the record in 1922) mistook as being the work of Scotus. Cf. McGrath 2006: The Early Heidegger & Medieval Philosophy, 88-119.

4 1903a: “The Three Normative Sciences”, EP.2.199: “Logic classifies arguments, and in doing so recognizes different kinds of truth.”; 1903c: EP.2.260: “Normative Science has three widely separated divisions: (i) Esthetics; (ii) Ethics; (iii) Logic... All thought being performed by signs, Logic may be regarded as the science of the general laws of signs.” Cf. 1906: “The Basis of Pragmaticism in the Normative Sciences” EP.2.376-79.

5 Heidegger 1927b: Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie, 29-32/21-23.

6 There is a correspondence between the intelligible and referential senses and the German words Sinn and Bedeutung—not, however, as Frege famously used them, but rather reversed, the sense in which Heidegger used them. Where Frege interpreted Bedeutung to imply that which is pointed at, Heidegger interpreted it to be the pointing itself. This can be seen particularly in sections 15, 16, and 17 of 1927a: Sein und Zeit, where Bedeutung is correlated with
I think it is a common belief today, unconsciously imbibed by the many but celebrated by the “learned sophists” of every stripe, that meaning in the sense of referentiality either excludes or subsumes meaning in the sense of intelligibility; that meaning is only ever “a local and situated phenomenon”\(^7\) or that it is “a product of the operations that use meaning and not, for instance, a quality of the world attributable to a creation, a foundation, an origin.”\(^8\) This belief has wrought no small amount of damage on the ability of people to think.

2. The Process of Interpretation

So, to begin thinking about the process of interpretation: generally considered, “to interpret” is understood as the attempt at explaining the meaning of something. We can understand such attempts in a construal either very broad or very narrow. It seems to me, therefore, that there is an analogical tendency in the common application of the term “interpretation”, such that it can be said more properly of some attempts to explain meaning than of others. The determining factor is in what sense and to what depth the attempt engages “meaning” in the senses outlined above. The more thoroughly these sense of “meaning” are explicated by the attempt, the more properly it can be called an interpretation.

The position I am advancing in this paper holds “meaning” to reside primarily but not exclusively in the sense of intelligibility, such that intelligibility grounds the referential and, together with the referential, attains completion in the teleological—which recursively enriches the intelligible. Therefore, while there are interpretation-like actions carried out at the levels of sensation and perception, only an intellectual attempt can be called an interpretation in the fullest sense, for only at the level of intellect does intelligible meaning, and therefore the whole of meaning, come into view.

2.1. Enunciat\(\text{i}\)ve Oration

The sign of such an intellectual attempt at explaining meaning, Thomas says, is “enunciative oration in which the true or false is found”.\(^9\) Enunciation is a technical albeit loose and inconsistently-used term for

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Anzeichen and zeigen in paradigms of pointing out, referring, and indicating. Sinn, contrariwise, is established as belonging to entities within the world insofar as they are grasped in themselves by Dasein, 151/192-93: “Wenn innerweltliches Seiendes mit dem Sein des Daseins entdeckt, das heißt zu Verständnis gekommen ist, sagen wir, es hat Sinn. Verstandnen aber ist, streng genommen, nich der Sinn, sondern das Seiende, bzw. Das Sein. Sinn ist das, worin sich Verständlichkeit von etwas hält. Was im verstehenden Erschließen artikulierbar ist, nennen wir Sinn.” — “When entities within-the-world are discovered along with the Being of Dasein—that is, when they have come to be understood—we say that they have meaning. But that which is understood, taken strictly, is not the meaning but the entity, or alternatively, Being. Meaning is that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself. That which can be Articulated in a disclosure by which we understand, we call ‘meaning’.”

\(^7\) Hoffmeyer 2010: “God and the world of signs” in Zygon 45.2, 386-87: “meaning is nothing more and nothing less than... the formation of a relation between a receptive system and a supposed object that results from the action of a sign that somehow itself is related to that same object... Meaning, according to this theory, remains a local and situated phenomenon.”

\(^8\) Luhmann 1997: Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft [Theory of Society], 18: “Meaning exists only as meaning of the operations using it, and hence only at the moment in which it is determined by operations, neither beforehand nor afterward. Meaning is accordingly a product of the operations that use meaning and not, for instance, a quality of the world attributable to a creation, a foundation, an origin. There is accordingly no ideality divorced from factual experience and communication.”

\(^9\) 1.1269-72a: Expositio peryermeneias, pr.3: “Et ideo sola oratio enuntiativa, in qua verum vel falsum inventur, interpretation vocatur.” Peirce gives a similar account of truth and falsity in his discussion of the dicisign, which possesses
Thomas which indicates the result of composition and division. What enunciation does not do—at least, in the interpretation of John of St. Thomas, John Poinsot—is assent or dissent to the reality of what it composes or divides; this, rather, is the function of judgment, properly speaking. It does not seem that Aquinas himself ever explicitly ascribes this function of assent to judgment exclusively, but there are some texts which strongly suggest that is the case.

In contrast enunciation is, to quote Poinso, “a complete oration expressing a complex object, concerning which a judgment can be made, and from which it follows that the enunciation signifies the true or the false.” Therefore, I think enunciation is justly termed a stage within a dialectical process seeking the intelligible unity of a subject and predicate, which is to say that, although enunciation can become part of scientific knowledge, such that the dialectical formation of interpretive opinions should be for the sake of knowledge, the enunciation itself belongs within a process which immediately seeks resolution to a unity of intelligible meaning, but not necessarily a unity of meaning and substantially-existent reality; that is, “to the things themselves.”

How is this resolving to a unity of intelligible meaning accomplished? In verbal expression, we explicitly signify any unity by a copula, some form of the word “is”. The term est, and by extension, esse, Thomas


10 The term “enunciation” is ubiquitous in Thomas’ work, and a survey of its use would require significant further study. As an example of the varied use, which is not necessarily at odds with Poinsot’s interpretation (or, rather, clarification), see for instance c.1252/6a: Super Sent., lib.1, d.4, q.2, a.1, c.; ibid., d.8, q.2, a.3, c.; ibid., d.19, q.5, a.3, ad.5; ibid., lib.4, d.38, q.1, a.1, qc.1, ad.1; 1271: ST Ia-IIae, q.53, a.1, c.; a text which seems explicitly to militate against Poinsot’s interpretation of the enunciation—or at least, of the term enunciation—as suspending judgment of existence is to be found in 1266-68: ST Ia, q.14, a.14, both in the corpus and in ad.2. Lonergan (1967: Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas, 60-105) signifies the same idea in his extensive discussion of compositio as a kind of “mental synthesis” or judgment, which he calls not “two concepts” but “one intelligibility”.

11 That is: enunciation as oration is the verbal expression of enunciation as composition and division. “Enunciabilia, are what can be thus composed or divided as complex objects of an intentio intellectus. Cf. 1266-68: ST Ia, q. 14, a.14.

12 1635: Philosophia Naturalis Quarta Pars, q.11, a.3 (R.III: 369b 33-36): “Aliquando sumitur iudicium strictus pro assensu vel dissensu circa aliquam veritatem vel falsitatem, quae fit affirmando aut negando.”

13 E.g., i.1256-59: DV q.24, a.1, ad.20: “sicut de primis principiis non iudicamus ea examinantes, sed naturaliter ei assentimus”; In Ethicorum, lib.6, lec.2, n.5: “Intelectus enim in iudicando habet duos actus, scilicet affirmanationem qua assentit vero, et negationem qua dissentit a falso”; and i.1269-72b: De malo, q.6, ad.14: “quod assentire non nominat motum intellectus ad rem, sed magis ad conceptionem rei, quae habetur in mente; cui intellectus assentit dud iudicat eam esse veram.” Many Thomists have, erroneously, I believe, collapsed compositio and divisione into iudicium.


15 1266-68: ST Ia, q.14, a.14, c.: “ea quae seorsum intelligimus, oportet nos in unum redigere per modum compositionis vel divisionis, enuntiationem formando.”

16 1272: ST IIIa, q.9, a.3, ad.2: “ex syllogismo dialectico causata, est via ad scientiam, quae per demonstrationem acquiritur, qua tamen acquisita, potest remanere cognitio quae est per syllogismum dialecticum, quasi consequens scientiam demonstrativam quae est per causam; quia ille qui cognoscit causam, ex hoc etiam magis potest cognoscere signa probabilia, ex quibus procedit dialecticum syllogismus.”

17 As Aristotle and Aquinas say, every enunciation requires the use of a verb (and every verb can be broken down into “is” + a gerund). i.1269-72a: Expositio peryermeneias, lec.8, n.11. Cf. Deely 1992: “The Supplement of the Copula”, The

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says, signifies nothing; it consignifies the composition of things, but of itself “it signifies that which first falls into the intellect in the mode of absolute actuality; for est, said simply, signifies ‘to be in act’.” 18 The “being in act” here, that which falls first into the intellect, ens, is not to be taken as the actus essendi of a substantial being, conceived in itself. Rather, the being in act here recognized is the being in act of the object which does not reduce to its relations to the individual cognitively realizing it. This is, to quote the Summa theologiae, the “ens that signifies the truth of a proposition, which consists in a composition, is made known by the verb est, and is the ens which answers the question ‘whether it is.’” 19 In other words, through composition and division we attempt resolution to ens as signifying the truth of a proposition; a state of being wherein what is it is—[since to say “whether” something is presumed that it already is understood under a provisional “what”]; 20 what everyone means when they say “the truth”, or “the way things are”. Consequently, it is a true enunciation signified by the expression, “A unicorn is a one-horned animal,” or “Othello’s Iago is a wretched soul”, such that the meaning is not only non-contradictory, but even apt, such that by them the mind is rightly intended towards a complex if fictional

Review of Metaphysics 46.2: 251-77. Myriad issues about the composition of mental propositions, representations, concepts, and the notion of the verbum mentis within scholasticism linger in the background of this discussion. These discussions are interesting and important but involve navigating the turns of a massive and torturous terminological labyrinth. Moreover, I think the notion of “mental language”, or analogates, frequently turns the situation inside out; such that we start asking whether, for instance, there are concepts which correspond to syncategorematic terms, instead of asking whether or not we possess concepts which intend the objects in turn signified by syncategorematic terms.


18 i.1269-72a: Expositio periermeneias, lec.5, n.22: “quia non eam principaliter significat, sed ex consequentii significat enim primo illud quod cadit in intellectu per modum actualitatis absolute; nam est, simpliciter dictum, significat in actu esse.” This is not the signification of ens said as predicated according to itself (lec.2, n.2), in which est signifies ens according to the mode of “rerum natura”, i.e., the order of substantial being. Cf. c.1252/56a: Super Sent., lib.2, d.34, q.1, a.1, c.: “Quaecumque ergo dicuntur entia quantum ad primum modum, sunt entia quantum ad secundum modum: quia omne quod habet naturale esse in rebus, potest significari per propositionem affirmativam esse; ut cum dicitur: color est, vel homo est. Non autem omnia quae sunt entia quantum ad secundum modum, sunt entia quantum ad primum: quia de privatione, ut de caecitate, formatur una affirmativa propositionis, cum dicitur, caecitas est; nec tamen caecitas aliquid est in rerum natura; sed est magis alicujus entis remotio: et ideo etiam privationes et negationes dicuntur esse entia quantum ad secundum modum, sed non quantum ad primum. Ens autem secundum utrumque istorum modorum diversimode praedicatur: quia secundum primum modum acceptum, est praedicatum substantiale, et pertinet ad quaestionem quid est: sed quantum ad secundum modum, est praedicatum accidental, ut Commentator ibidem dicit, et pertinet ad quaestionem an est.”


20 Cf. Poinso 1633: Philosophia Naturalis Prima Pars, q.1, a.3 (R.II 2415-27): “quando intellectu cognoscit aliquid quod an est, non praescindit a quod quid seu a quiditate, hoc enim impossibile cum sit formale eius obiectum, et primo, et per se intelligibile: sed solum non cognoscit quidditative, id est penetrando constitutionem propriam quidditatis et causas essendi, sed in ipsa quidditate solum attingit praedicatum quoddam valore commune et confusum, quod est ipsum esse et hoc est, quod tunc cognoscit ut quod quid.”
object; and yet the being of these objects, precisely as they are objects, resolve to no actus essendi of any substance.

Hence, why I term interpretation, or enunciation, a dialectical process: for it is an attempt to discover the intelligible which resolves to the principle of all intelligibility, but not to a principle of existence.

But this interpretive composing and dividing, both when judgment is and is not suspended, does not occur in a realm of ideas abstract from the perceptual. In other words, the “return to the phantasm” through which any act of understanding is accomplished stands ontologically but not chronologically posterior to the acts whereby we compose and divide. Consequently, while the act of interpretation itself consists in the enunciative composing and dividing, the act of interpretation exists within a larger operative whole through which the meaning is worked out, and if we are to understand the act we need also to understand the process of its elaboration.

To do so, I want to draw on some distinctions made by Charles Peirce. To the best of my knowledge, Peirce does not give a specific definition of interpretation; but, extrapolating from his extensive discussions of it, I believe it accurate to say Peirce considers interpretation as the internally-generated determination of a living being in its relationship towards some object. Since every object presupposes a sign, as Deely was fond of saying, I think a few words about the structure of sign-relations can help us to understand better the process surrounding enunciation, i.e., the interpretive act itself.

2.2. Semiosis, Interpretants, and Interpretation

Peirce described semiosis—the action of using signs—as irreducibly involving three elements: an object, a sign-vehicle, and an interpretant. Together, these give rise to a relation, which is the sign properly

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I believe that this is an explanation of what is occurring in in Aquinas’ Sententia libri Metaphysicae, lib.4, lec.4, n.571-577 (Marietti; n.1-8), wherein the philosopher is distinguished from the dialectician and the sophist (who is concerned only with appearances of demonstrative truths about what is and does not here concern us). Both philosopher and dialectician make use of logic, but the philosopher does so demonstratively, inasmuch as he uses the second intentions discovered by logic to prove things from the principles of beings themselves; whereas the dialectician indicates probable truths or falsities concerning beings by use of the second intentions as principles. In this way, dialectics can be a science along the via inventionis, i.e., a science “ordered to inquisitional discovery” (ordinatur ad inquisitionem inventivam; 1271-72: ST Ia-IIae, q.51, a.2, ad.3.), or “tentatively”, “searchingly” (Sententia libri Metaphysicae, lib.4, lec.4, n.574/n.4.). If dialectics is a science, however, it still needs a common principle to which it can resolve secundum rationem, and this, I hold, is ens primum cognitum.

1266-68: ST Ia, q.84, a.7.

Cf. Heidegger 1927a: SZ, 150/191, where the “totality of involvements” as the threefold fore-structure of interpretation is discussed.

Cf. c.1905: “Consequences of Critical Common-Sensism” in CP.5.505: “A sign is objectively general, in so far as, leaving its effective interpretation indeterminate, it surrenders to the interpreter the right of completing the determination for himself. ‘Man is mortal.’ ‘What man?’ ‘Any man you like.’ A sign is objectively vague, in so far as, leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, it reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing the determination.”

Cf. Deely 1994a: The Human Use of Signs, 12; 2001: Four Ages of Understanding, 19, 155n72, 434, etc.
speaking: namely, the relation whereby the interpretant is, from the specification the sign-vehicle renders, oriented towards the object.⁷

To add more nuance to this triadic model, Peirce in later years differentiated first between the immediate object and what he called the dynamic object, and between three modes of interpretant: the immediate, dynamic, and final interpretants [handout].⁸ The dynamic object is the whole reality that cannot be represented by an individual sign-vehicle, but only indicated (and which must therefore be discovered by “collateral experience”) while the immediate object is that partial reality that can be represented by an individual sign-vehicle.⁹

Peirce coined the term “interpretant” in an attempt to show that there are things which do not themselves actually interpret, but that nevertheless have some interpretation-like capacity and can be involved in the overall process where interpretation properly speaking occurs. In other words, so long as one thing takes or receives another as something, so long as the other is “taken-as”, to use language similar to that of Heidegger,¹⁰ a process of interpretive elaboration is opened—that is, a process of working-out something’s meaning. Therefore, interpretants are not interpreters as such, but occasions of interpretation, or ways in which an interpretation can develop according to the various powers or properties that the recipient of a sign-relation possesses.¹¹

To describe the three interpretants as simply as possible: immediate interpretants are the “as” of receptivity; that is, since the received is in the receiver in the mode of the receiver, every reception is a taking-as. An immediate interpretant is thus not any one specific power, but the occasion for reception made possible by every part of the organism involved in receiving. In other words, it is not intellect alone, nor the exterior senses, nor the cogitative power, but any or even all of them, as well as any other part of the person that plays an immediate role in one’s capacity for cognitive reception.

Dynamic interpretants are the “as” of a sign’s effect, or the reaction thereby evoked—the “agitation” of the faculties determined in some way by the actual presence of a sign-relation.¹² That is, after something has been received by an immediate interpretant, a result follows: such that someone is sympathetic, shocked, nonplussed, angered, etc.¹³ Thus, we not only receive an object as colored or human or intelligent, but react to it as repulsive or irritating or admirable. Following the mode of receptivity, and dependent upon it, is this mode of reactivity.

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²⁷ The triadic structure of object, sign-vehicle, and interpretant is a highly-scalable model, in some sense applicable to every interaction of finite beings. I will be limiting my use of this model, however, to human semiosis.


²⁹ Only human beings are capable of realizing the existence of the dynamic object; other living beings realize only, at most, an amalgamation of immediate objects. Additionally, this is not the distinction of formal and material objects, which are the proper intelligibility and the instance in which that intelligibility is realized, respectively, but rather closer to the difference between “phenomena” and “noumena”.

³⁰ 1927a: SZ, 149/189: “Das »Als« macht die Struktur der Ausdrücklichkeit eines Verstandenen aus: es konstituiert die Auslegung.” — “The ‘as’ makes up the structure of the explicitness of something that is understood. It constitutes the interpretation.”

³¹ 1909a: Letter to William James 26 February 1909, EP.2.496.

³² 1909c: Letter to William James 1 April 1909, EP.2.499.

³³ Cf. 1908: Letters to Lady Welby 24-28 December 1908, EP.2.490.
Final interpretants are the “as” of inference, namely, the inference of what some relation is, either between the sign-vehicle and the self, or between the sign-vehicle and the object, which in turn leads to the pursuit of some purpose: either to modify one’s consideration of the object, or behavior towards it, or else to reinforce the current patterns of interpretation. Thus, we see the truth between some statement and what it represents, or the goodness of some directive, or the nature of some being.

Paraphrased, Peirce gives as an example of this structure the scenario of his wife asking him what the weather is like. In response, he says that it is a stormy day. She is disappointed by this news and learns from it that she should not get up her hopes for picnic-suitable weather in April. In this scenario, the sign-vehicle is the statement, “It is a stormy day.” The immediate object is the common notion of the present weather, signified by the “it” in the statement, and the dynamic object is the real meteorological condition. The immediate interpretant is the conceptual schema (that is, intelligible meaning and phantasmal representations) which allows for reception of the meaning conveyed by the sign-vehicle, the statement that “It is a stormy day.” The dynamic interpretant is the reaction evoked by receiving the meaning conveyed by the sign-vehicle, that is, whatever emotions or thoughts she may reactively experience, such as disappointment. The final interpretant is the inferential lesson she learns about not getting her hopes up for picnics during the cruelest of months.

The relations between the three interpretants are mutual but asymmetrical. In each case, the prior interpretant determines the posterior in the manner of a sign, while the posterior interpretant, in consequence, affects the prior by habituation, i.e., by a kind of internal formal causality as the completing of a power in actuality. The consequence of the immediate is a sign to the dynamic, the consequence

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34 1906/07: “Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism”, CP.4.536.
35 Behind this last claim, in particular, is a complex issue concerning the role of abductive inference in Peirce’s philosophy, which I explore at length in The Intersection of Semiotics and Phenomenology; specifically, that abductive inference—whereby Thirds are discovered (and which can then subsequently be turned into new Firsts)—“shades into perceptual judgment”, such that, despite a true distinction of kind between the operations, there is no gap, and quite a bit of overlap, between the two. Cf. Peirce 1903b: “Pragmatism as the Logic of Abduction” in EP.2.226-27; Kemple 2019: Intersection of Semiotics and Phenomenology, 5.3.1.
37 The provision of her inference is my own contribution.
38 Not every process of interpretation will include a final interpretant, and not every process of interpretation need involve a powerful emotional response in the dynamic. Those processes which include no final interpretant are, however, instances in which a vestige of interpretation occurs; for the “taking-as” works out the meaning of the object only in terms of reacting to the effect had upon the self; that is, there is a receptive “as” and a reactive “as”, but no inferential “as”. Without the inferential “as”, something cannot be called an interpretation properly speaking; for although not every final interpretant accomplishes this, only final interpretants can be said to attempt explain meaning—either in its sense of intelligibility or in its sense of referentiality—by a composition or division, that is, to form an enunciation.
39 That is, by an objective or specifying causality. Objective causation is the way in which an object determines the subject as related to the object as this rather than as that. Therefore, it is also called specifying causation: a growling dog, for instance, specifies the dog as hostile to its audience, while a wagging tail specifies it as positively-disposed to its audience. This is the kind of causation whereby a thing shows itself as some “what” to a cognitive being. Consequently, it is also considered a kind of formal causation, in that its effect is a cognition of what. Cf. Deely 1994a: The Human Use of Signs, 34-39; 1994b: New Beginnings, 161-62; 2004: Basics of Semiotics (4th ed.), 115-20.
40 Cf. c.1252/56: Super Sent., lib.1, d.35, q.1, a.5, ad.4: “habitus non est nisi perfectio alicujus potentiae incompletae ad actum: non tamen ultima perfectio; unde ponit duplicem imperfectionem, scilicet et in potentia perfecta per habitum et in habitu qui per operationem perfectur”.

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of which is a sign to the final. And the consequences of the final, in turn, condition the immediate proximately and the dynamic indirectly.\textsuperscript{41} For instance, someone may have an understanding of the word “Catholic” or “Thomist”, an immediate interpretant, which evokes a negative dynamic interpretant upon being heard, but which may be changed through new and better-informed final interpretants—which thereby improve the immediate interpretant and thus condition the dynamic.

2.3. The Problem

Obviously, there is a great problem here: namely, that the lessons and habituation attained through final interpretants are quite often in error. As a consequence, our emotional reactions and receptive cognitive capacities may be diminished or diverted from their proper ends. If we believe certain false compositions or divisions—and take for granted that they are true, never questioning whether the unity or disunity they signify resolves coherently into an intelligible whole—we will come to believe further false compositions or divisions, often to the reinforcement of disordered emotions or passions; such that a small error of resolution becomes a great irresoluble mess. For instance, someone can assent, with no bad faith, to the statement, “Homosexual intercourse is natural”, as though a statement which accords with truth, for they have already imbibed the belief that there are no “natures” (except, perhaps, an amorphous notion about unconscious or inevitable behaviors), but that there is only “nature”—which signifies only that which happens independent of human interference. Consequently, the notion of “homosexual intercourse” can be resolved with this deficient concept of “nature”, encountering no internal inconsistency when enunciatively composed and therefore the individual will be deviant in ordination to further perceptions or cognitions, and perhaps offended when someone says that homosexual desire is disordered.

To revive the earlier question, of how interpretation arrives at a unity of meaning, we can now say that the unity to which a proposition resolves is the unity of a sign. A sign has its own unity by the object it signifies. A proposition signifies a complex object; that is, an object carrying at least two different conceptual notes separable by at least a \textit{distinctio rationis}. So long as the composition of these conceptual notes does not result in an incompatibility evident to it, the mind entertaining the proposition is determined by that object.\textsuperscript{42} Thus, assent can readily be made to propositions which are false. Assent to a proposition turns a thought into a belief, and therefore a habitual pattern of interpreting.\textsuperscript{43} The results of final interpretants reshape our possibilities for immediate interpretants—or, in other words, the

\textsuperscript{41} E.g., learning not to get one’s hopes up \textit{may} curb future disappointment, or as one observing animal behavior \textit{may}, in recognizing intimidation behind which there is no true threat, learn not to feel fear in reaction to a growl. With such lessons and habituation of reaction, we can even alter or train our perceptual faculties, as the locus of immediate interpretants, to some degree—as the sommelier distinguishes the smells and tastes of wines or the paleographer intuitively distinguishes a ‘g’ from an ‘s’. What we believe affects what we perceive, and what we perceive can affect our senses. Cf. Deely 1994a: \textit{The Human Use of Signs}, 94-96.

\textsuperscript{42} Poinsot holds that even a contradictory object can be determinative of the intellect; this is true—but, cognition-dependent being dividing exhaustively into negations and relations (1632a: \textit{Artis Logicae Secunda Pars}, q.2, a.1; 1632b: \textit{Tractatus de Signis}, 52/32-49), the object to which we are specified by a contradiction is not a relation, but rather the impossibility of the combination; such that we can hold the goatstag in intellectual vision as the impossible combination of two natures in one and the same being, and thus as a kind of non-being. Cf. Doyle 1994: “Knowability of Beings of Reason”, 342-44.

\textsuperscript{43} Peirce defines belief in contrast to doubt: 1877: “The Fixation of Belief”, \textit{EP}.1.114: doubt is that state which “stimulates us to action until it is [itself] destroyed”, and belief that wherein “we shall behave in a certain way, when the occasion arises”. 

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compositions and divisions intellectually rendered upon objects previously apprehended partially determines the possibilities and probabilities for our consequent apprehensions.

This determination, however, is not absolute; for the concept as a sign, whether of an object simple or complex, can be further determined either by the application to some object more particular or by some new sign and object which further illumines the object of the first sign. The first of these possibilities is an indeterminacy by generality; the latter, indeterminacy by vagueness. As Peirce states, a triangle in general is neither scalene, nor isosceles, nor equilateral; while the vague sense of animal is neither truly nor falsely male, nor truly nor falsely female.44 Someone may know the possible variants of a triangle and yet entertain the notion in general; while someone may know “animal” without knowing the exhaustion of its potential genders, just as someone may know “nature” only in its characteristic of independence from the artifice of human beings.45 The universe of signs is not closed,46 but rather one which remains inherently open to the elaboration of meanings—and the universe constituted by the signs that are human concepts remains always open to further determination, for they are themselves grounded in the vaguest of all concepts: being.47

Unfortunately, it is all too easy for people to hold their vague concepts as sufficiently determined, or to mistake a concept which is vague for being general, and in either case reject further determinations resoluble into the concept itself.

3. Contexts of Interpretation

I think this peculiar deficiency can be understood better with insights drawn from Heidegger. One of the key distinctions Heidegger makes in Being and Time is between the present-at-hand and the ready-to-hand;48 the former consists in a sight of the object abstracted from referentiality,49 which can be either meaningless or directed at the meaning of the thing in itself.50 The ready-to-hand, however, exists instead within an already-determined referential context of purpose and therefore of use. While this is primarily

45 One could likely draw a parallel to the four kinds or conditions of knowledge which Cajetan gives—in c.1493: In de Ente et Essentia D. Thomae Aquinatis Commentaria, 3/41; cf. Kemple 2017: Ens Primum Cognitum, 35-37—such that there is a ready contentment to rest with confused knowledge and never proceed to distinct. Cajetan, however, held that most things had a clearly discernible ratio formalis which could be known with precision, following the Porphyrian model of genus and specific difference, while Peirce holds for pursuing ever-more-precise knowledge of our objects.
46 Deely 1994a: The Human Use of Signs, 96: “while interpretation, if well done, increases the definiteness of a sign or sign-system, where an interpretation, however excellent, leaves off, there the signs on which it depends and by which it achieved itself are left imperfect in the transition to objects manifested.” This results in, ibid., a “syncategorematic infinity, in Poinso’s apt expression—a prospective and virtual [infinity], not one actually achieved at any given moment or in any given sign sequence or sign system.”
47 This contra Ricoeur c.1969: “The Problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and Semantic Problem” in The Conflict of Interpretations, 78: “Is not philosophy’s task then to ceaselessly reopen, toward the being which is expressed, this discourse which linguistics, due to its method, never ceases to confine within the closed universe of signs and within the purely internal play of their mutual relations?” Somewhat ironically, Ricoeur draws heavily upon Saussure while condemning Peirce for this “closed universe”, when the two’s treatment of signs is precisely inverse of their positioning by Ricoeur.
49 1927a: SZ, ibid.
50 1927a: SZ, 224/266-67; 363/414.
worked out in terms of perceptual objects, what Heidegger terms—for lack of a better translation—“equipment”, I think the notion of the ready-to-hand works just as well to explain our intellectual positions—that is, we take concepts as “ready-to-mind”, ready to be deployed for attempting the understanding of new phenomena.

Taking things as ready-to-hand is, in Heidegger’s view, a kind of interpretation—as aforementioned, he views any “taking-as” to be interpretation—such that we are, I think truly and not just in the opinion of Heidegger, always already in the process of interpreting things around ourselves, at the very least in the process of seeing things in their readiness-to-hand and understanding ideas in their readiness-to-mind.

3.1. Pre-Philosophical Context
Heidegger describes finite intuition—which we can understand perhaps as similar to abstractio totalis or abstractio totius in the Thomistic tradition) as a hinnehmen—which, in the published English translation, is rendered “taking-in-stride”, but more literally means “accepting”, “submitting to”, or “swallowing” which I think a more accurate image: for our early concepts are seldom obvious to us; rather, we absorb them by a social or cultural osmosis, so to speak, allowing our intellects to become those notions without critical evaluation. We do not challenge the meaning of such concepts—i.e., whether we are disposed by them to the understanding of the truth of the objects they signify—but take it for granted that their significations are true, just as we take for granted the functionality of the ready-to-hand hammer when we need to drive a nail.

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51 1927a: SZ, 149/189: “Das im Verstehen Erschlossene, das Verstandene ist immer schon so zugänglich, daß an ihm sein »als was« ausdrücklich abgehoben werden kann. Das »Als« macht die Struktur der Ausdrücklichkeit eines Verstandenen aus: es konstituiert die Auslegung. Der umsichtig-auslegende Umgang mit dem umweltlich Zuhandenen, der dieses als Tisch, Tür, Wagen, Brücke, »sieht«, braucht das umsichtig Ausgelegte nicht notwendig auch schon in einer bestimmenden Aussage auseinander zu legen.” – “That which is disclosed in understanding—that which is understood—is already accessible in such a way that its ‘as’ which can be made to stand out explicitly. The ‘as’ makes up the structure of the explicitness of something that is understood. It constitutes the interpretation. In dealing with what is environmentally ready-to-hand by interpreting it circumspectively, we ‘see’ it as a table, a door, a carriage, or a bridge; but what we have thus interpreted need not necessarily be also taken apart by making an assertion which definitely characterizes it.” In different words, here, Heidegger illustrates the immediate interpretant as already in some sense providing an interpretational-as.

52 Heidegger often does not make hard and fast distinctions between “perceptual” operations and “intellectual” ones; rather, he sees them continually in their dynamic unity, cf. Heidegger 1933-34: Sein und Wahrheit, 185: “αἰσθησις in its proper meaning as perceiving is taken up first as the essence of knowing, spontaneously as it were, because for the Greeks, perceiving and being perceived mean the same thing as φαίνεται: to say that this shows itself, something shows itself, is the same as saying that something is perceived.” Ibid, 186: “The answer that ἔπιστήμη = αἰσθησις lies close at hand because αἰσθησις comes upon us immediately, because it is the fundamental form in which things are there for us.” Ibid, 187: “while a certain openness surely takes place in perception, this openness is not yet in itself the openness of beings as such. In a certain sense, αἰσθησις is necessary, for through it, something comes upon us, but perception and being-perceived are insufficient to make openness equal the truth of a being for us.” Thus, intuition represents the transition between αἰσθησις, as a perceptual grasping, and ἔπιστήμη, which proceeds by understanding (and its subsequent hermeneutic circle).

53 Heidegger 1929: Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik, 29/15; 31-32/18.

54 Heidegger 1952: Was Heißt Denken? 127: “As the saying goes, we attach a meaning to [words]. What comes to our minds here is at first fleeting and blurred. Most of the time, we can leave it at that. It satisfies the demands of common speech in usual communication. Such communication does not want to lose time tarrying over the sense of individual
Some taking-for-granted of the truth of the signification of our concepts is unavoidable; no one is born a philosopher, and in our youth we seldom focus on genuinely questioning the meaning of much of anything. But the concepts we form in our early years do not occur in a schedule according to some predetermined genetic plan. That is, aside from the very vaguest, very earliest of concepts—being, non-being, unity, multiplicity, etc.—the development of our concepts follows no necessary linear path. In consequence, the things truly better known to us can be missed altogether, and things untrue can be mistaken as though they are the things better known to us, or the things which are better known to us can be falsely composed with other notions which distort the meaning of the truly better known.\footnote{Misappropriating the term from Aquinas, Maritain spoke of a moral knowledge “by connaturality” (1947: Court Traite de l’Existence et de l’Existant [Existence and the Existent], 78; 1953: Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry, 117f), i.e., of a recognition through and in our own natures of things which are according to natures—as though we could not help but learn certain moral truths by virtue of our nature. I think this would be true if we were not so adept at deviating from our natures, and at miseducating from a very young age. In other words, a pervasively perverse presentation of “nature” distorts the possibilities of a knowledge by connaturality, such that those raised in a way which contravenes the natural end up with a “fake” knowledge by connaturality—genuinely believing as a matter of normality, for instance, that deviant sexual orientation is by nature but gender identity is by free association, nurture, or other “non-natural” causes.}\footnote{Heidegger 1930: “Vom Wesen der Wahrheit”, 23/134-35 [emphasis mine]: “left [in the sphere of that which is readily available], humanity replenishes its “world” on the basis of the latest needs and aims, and fills out that world by means of proposing and planning. From these man then takes his standards, forgetting beings as a whole. He persists in them and continually supplies himself with new standards, yet without considering either the ground for taking up standards or the essence of what gives the standard. In spite of his advance to new standards and goals, man goes wrong as regards the essential genuineness of his standards. He is all the more mistaken the more exclusively he takes himself, as subject, to be the standard for all beings.\textit{The inordinate forgetfulness of humanity persists in securing itself by means of what is readily available and always accessible.} This persistence has its unwitting support in that\textit{bearing} by which Dasein not only ek-sists but also at the same time in-sists, i.e., holds fast to what is offered by beings, as if they were open of and in themselves.”} This results in not only conceptual lacunae but an ill-disposition to signs which would make known the truth. When these false concepts are correlated with emotional charge, the dynamic interpretant can play a greater, more disruptive role in reconciling the interpreter with the reality that contravenes the falsity. In consequence, a challenge issued to concepts taken-for-granted may not only be not understood, it may be interpreted as offensive or threatening—often leading to those challenges not only being deferred from intellectual reconciliation but deemed irresoluble and unequivocally rejected from being considered.

Heidegger named this phenomenon “in-sistence”, with a hyphen between the “in” and the “sistence”; that is, we not only ek-sist, or through our concepts stand outside ourselves and in a meaning irreducible to ourselves, but we may also stand obstinately within the meaning revealed by those concepts.\footnote{Instead, words are constantly thrown around on the cheap, and in the process are worn out. There is a curious advantage in that. With a worn-out language everybody can talk about everything.”} This obstinate in-sistence—the holding of a concept as sufficiently and truly determined—is seldom, I think, a decision made with full consciousness, but rather a complacency into which we easily slide. This complacency—the obstinate satisfaction with the meaning rendered present to us by some concept insistently held—not only holds false determinations as true, but also abandons true determinations to pernicious vagueness: that is, by failing to distinguish the proper integral parts, as well as the crucial relations to others which illumine a being’s purpose, we leave the notion of that being open to false interpretations and deviant developments. We can see this clearly in the faulty notions commonly held
concerning, for instance, “nature” or “social construction”; or in the notions of “science”, “knowledge”, “justice”, “morality”, “Catholicism” or any number of ill-defined concepts as they are commonly appropriated in a pre-philosophical attitude which consumes without question.

In this pre-philosophical context of interpretation, meaning as referentiality readily comes to a position of dominance in our thinking: that is, meaning as referentiality dominates inasmuch as our thinking about objects consists not in attempting to understand them as they are in themselves, but rather as they are related to the self. This kind of thinking is not practical thinking as such—which, being properly human, necessarily entails the extension of speculative understanding either in oneself or in truths transmitted through tradition—but rather is practical as having usurped the primacy of the speculative and thereby lost the fulness of its own character. As a consequence, meaning as teleological comes under the auspices of this deficient praxis; the importance of things is judged by their referentiality to the self rather than by their own properties. I think that this is the true fear Heidegger expresses in “Question Concerning Technology”—that is, the fear not of technology as such, but how technology alters our thinking, diverting us from the speculative understanding of nature and ordering us rather towards its domination. Heidegger considered understanding, as the foundational moment of our thinking, to be the opening of the self into possibilities for further intellectual realization; or, as Gadamer put it, within the expanded notion of interpretation as including the whole process of working-out the meaning of something, the “working-out of appropriate projects, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves, is the constant task of understanding.”\(^57\) With the prevailing of technologically-influenced thinking, immediate interpretants—the grounds of understanding—become receptive only to the possibilities for domination of what we encounter and reject the possibilities of what those things are in themselves.

Grounding this paradigm of thinking for the sake of domination or control is a background understanding of the universe. Deely would often speak of the “background cosmological image” of the Latin Aristotelian tradition—the idea of the celestial spheres and the biological determinations they rendered—with an eye to how that image influenced the thinking of the time. I think today we can identify a different background cosmological image, which has been widely appropriated, swallowed, and assimilated, which shapes not only the paradigms of technological domination, but much of the thinking of our culture as a whole—a background image which is, ultimately, nihilistic, for it is one in which the sensible, corporeal universe is all that we can know; that the sensible, corporeal universe is vast, and in that vastness, uncaring for humankind; that it produced us through an improbable and extensive series of evolutionary accidents; and that eventually it will rest in the unmeaning equilibrium of a heatless death.

3.2. Philosophical Context
Presumably, to reclaim culture from this nihilistic worldview, philosophy is necessary. We cannot simply replace the nihilistic background image which has spread to every corner of the Western world by winning a “culture war”; it will be handed on, handed down, both explicitly and implicitly, for the foreseeable future. For philosophy to obviate this nihilism requires philosophy to be defined: for much of what today claims the name of philosophy is in fact sophistry of such sophistication that the sophists themselves are of the belief that they genuinely are philosophers.

So, what is it that turns thinking into philosophical thinking—what distinguishes the context of philosophical interpretation from that of an ordinary interpretation? According to Aquinas: the answer is the use of logic, which concerns itself with second intentions—that is, not just the ideas of genus and species, and so on, which are distinguished within the doctrine of logic—but any reflective considerations which study the relation between a concept, as a sign, and the object made known by a concept, insofar as they may be made useful in demonstrating the truth about ens naturae. In other words, without reflection upon what we have swallowed, we cannot tell whether we have adequately grasped the truth about the object; that is, we are very often mistaken, and need a reflective move to distinguish what merely appears from what is. I believe this is what Peirce gets at when he identifies semiotics—for which he considers logic a synonym—as the “normative science of truth”, for it guides all our scientific inquiries into meaning.

The need for reflection is also well noted by Heidegger, who brings it to prominence in his phenomenological method. Where Husserl distinguished phenomenology in terms of various reductions, Heidegger approaches phenomenological inquiry not only through his own reduction—quite different from that of Husserl—but also what he calls “construction” and “destruction”. Without belaboring all the details of my interpretation, which I lay out at length in Intersection of Semiotics and Phenomenology, the phenomenological reduction leads an apprehended object back to the ground of intelligibility, i.e., of unconcealment, what Heidegger calls Sein. The phenomenological construction brings forward the precise means through which an apprehended object has been disclosed to us, i.e., through and with what concepts we have apprehended the object, with an awareness of what meanings we have constituted in our specifically-individual relations to that object, in order to enable phenomenological reduction of that object. And phenomenological destruction is the “critical process in which the traditional concepts, which at first must necessarily be employed, are dismantled down to the sources from which they were

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58 c.1257/58: In de Trin., q.6, a.1, c.2, ad.3: “Ad tertium dicendum quod in addiscendo incipimus ab eo quod est magis facile, nisi necessitas aliud requirat. Quandoque enim necessarium est in addiscendo incipere non ab eo quod est facilius, sed ab eo, a cuius cognitio sequentis cognitio cognito dependit. Et hac ratione oportet in addiscendo a logica incipere, non quia ipsa sit facilior ceteris scientiis, habet enim maximam difficultatem, cum sit de primo intellectis, sed quia aliae scientiae ab ipsa dependent, in quantum ipsa docet modum procedendi in omnibus scientiis. Oportet autem primo scire modum scientiae quam scientiam ipsum, ut dicitur in II metaphysicae.” – “To the third it must be said that in learning we begin from that which is easier, unless necessity requires something else. For sometimes it is necessary in learning to begin not with what is easier, but from those things cognition of which subsequent cognition depends. And for this reason, it is necessary in learning to begin from logic, not because it is easier than other sciences, for it has the greatest difficulty, since it concerns second intentions—but because the other sciences depend upon it, insofar as it teaches the mode of proceeding in every science. It is necessary first to know the mode of a science before the science itself, as is said in Metaphysics II.” Cf. In Librum de Causis, lec.1, and In Ethicorum, lib.6, lec.7.

59 Cf. 1272: Sententia libri Metaphysicae, lib.4, lec.4, n.574-77.

60 We might say: we take the immediate object either as though there is no dynamic, or as though the dynamic is unknowable; or we ignore the possibility of the dynamic’s existence altogether—all three effectively the same.

61 The richest instance, to my knowledge, wherein Heidegger does this is in his 1923: Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität), 90-91/69, wherein he describes his own experience of a table, pointing out that the table as it is apprehended is also all the memories and experiences which go along with it in its various relations.
drawn”, so that we may in turn engage in construction and reduction in a “genuine repetition of a traditional question”. In other words, the phenomenological method proceeds in no small part by exposing our own background images—the notions we have appropriated, and perhaps not consciously, through both our personal experiences and our reception of tradition, no less of ideas attained within a philosophical context of interpretation than a non-philosophical context—and allowing us to genuinely re-ask the questions which produced those backgrounds in the first place.

4. Resolution of Interpretation

To begin wrapping up: the obstinate in-sistence which Heidegger calls out is, I think, the common factor in the maintenance of bad interpretations: which in-sistence, put otherwise, is the belief that one or another concept is sufficient for understanding its object and all those things in which its object is found, when in fact the concept has been rendered into an incorrect determination; most often by false compositions or divisions, though at times simply by leaving it uninvestigated. The belief thus engendered effects not merely our intellectual dispositions, however, but the whole of our cognitive and even cathetic bearing—altering our dispositions for reception and reaction and thereby leading into a downward spiral of interpretational deviance.

Today, we can see the supposed in-itself meaninglessness of the cosmos as an uncritically swallowed notion which initiates many a vicious interpretive spiral. Likewise, at the root of many common errors is an unconscious and implicit nominalism. I think we can identify these two—cosmological nihilism and implicit nominalism—as the root causes of most of our culture’s current malaise. Were we to dismantle, say, postgender ideology, socialist utopian fantasies, scientism, the decrease of faith, or advocacy for polyamory, I believe we would find at least one if not both nihilism and nominalism at the bottom; probably not as consciously-adopted, critically evaluated positions, but which have been simply taken-in-stride, as unchallenged givens.

Of the two, I believe nominalism is what more immediately distorts the interpretive capacity: for it distorts ens primum cognitum as the principle of intelligibility; that is, the ens signified by the copulative est, never stands for the nominalist as independent of the mind’s activity, but solely by its own constitution; the “whether it is” becomes turned inside-out and thereby perverts the purpose of a resolutio secundum rationem. Resolution to non-referentially circumscribed intelligible unities of meaning is not sought when it is believed they do not exist; one, instead, seeks resolution to the referential, experiential, ground of meaning: in other words, resolution for the nominalist is never to “what is this in truth?” but to “what is this for me?”

On the other hand, cosmological nihilism—guarded, first of all, by this implicit nominalism, but not absolutely—rejects the other movement of resolution: the resolutio secundum rem, the metaphysical

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direction of resolution. Whenever the light of reality breaks through the veil of nominalism, the dark cloud of nihilism is there to obfuscate away the purposive intelligibility of truth.

That is: I think it is critical we not only understand but make central to our philosophical evangelization, so to speak, the twofold movement of resolutio. While some notice has been given in recent years to this twofold movement—the resolutio secundum rationem and the resolutio secundum rem—most of the attention has been paid to this movement specifically as within the philosophical sciences, such that we have a resolutio secundum rationem to the common notion which unifies a particular scientific inquiry, and a resolutio secundum rem which resolves to the causes responsible for all things which fall within that common notion. In my dissertation, I argued for a general resolutio secundum rationem, that is, of all our cognition as a whole, to ens primum cognitum and not just to the common notions grounding each of the particular sciences. I believe it is this resolution which Heidegger has in mind with his phenomenological method ordered towards a reduction into Sein. I think Peirce similarly has this in mind with his notion of the categories of experience—not discussed explicitly here for time and space and all the complexity those notions bring in, but implicit in the three senses of meaning I have employed—especially when we see his notion of Firstness applied to the human intellect. At any rate: what these three thinkers—Aquinas, Heidegger, and Peirce—have in common is the notion of a foundation of intelligible meaning; this is ens primum cognitum, a notion which reduces neither to the “subjective” nor the “objective”, a notion which transcends all divisions because it underlies all.

Today, this notion has been displaced; that is, while ens primum cognitum cannot be avoided in the order of intellectual realization—it is, after all, the first intelligible, as sound is the first audible—its proper signification has itself been hijacked by the nominalists who reduce meaning to the sphere of referentiality. This nominalism has formed a symbiotic relationship with the unconscious and implicit background image of a cosmological nihilism. This combined disbelief not only distorts the content of thought but also undermines the ability to think itself; such that, for instance, we cannot argue with an advocate for polyamory about the meaning of marriage—since marriage itself has for the polyamorist no meaning at all.

5. Conclusion: a postscript

After I submitted the title of this presentation, I considered whether I should have gone with another: “Dialectic and Metaphysics”, subtitled “if nominalism is true, everything is permitted.” That is: Peirce and Heidegger both possess great insight into the dialectical mistakes whereby we become obstinate in our false interpretations and thereby help us overcome the problematic immediate acceptance of what accords with our opinions as though fact; but Thomism—which can accept and incorporate the suggestions of semiotics and phenomenology—and Thomism alone, I think, offers the path of resolution
which turns dialectical excellence, a way towards knowledge in its own right, into the legitimate attainment of metaphysical truth, or, perhaps, of a complete philosophy.
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