

# **Human responsibility in the universe of ‘Global Semiotics’\***

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Biology and the social sciences, ethology and linguistics, psychology and the health sciences, their internal specializations – from genetics to medical semeiotics (sympomatology), psychoanalysis, gerontology and immunology – all find in Sebeok’s global semiotics the place of encounter and reciprocal exchange, as well as of systematization and unification. However, it is important to note that ‘systematization’ and ‘unification’ are not understood neopositivistically, in the static terms of an ‘encyclopedia’, whether in the form of the juxtaposition of knowledge and linguistic practices or of the reduction of knowledge to a single scientific field and its relative languages (neopositivistic physicalism). Global semiotics may be presented as a metascience concerned with all academic disciplines that are sign-related. It cannot be reduced to the status of philosophy of science, though of course as a science it is dialogically engaged with philosophy. Such a global view is possible for human beings in so far as we are semiotic animals: consequently, the question is what is our responsibility towards life and towards the universe in its globality?

## **Signs of the semiotic universe**

The manifold aspects of the ‘semiotic universe’ as they emerge from Thomas A. Sebeok’s semiotic research include:

— The life of signs and the signs of life as described by the biological sciences: the signs of animal life and of specifically human life, of adult life, of the organism’s relations with the environment, the signs of normal or pathological forms of dissolution and deterioration of communicative abilities.

— Human verbal and nonverbal signs. Human nonverbal signs include signs which depend on natural languages and, on the contrary, signs which are not dependent on natural language and cannot be accounted for by the categories of linguistics. These include: the signs of ‘parasitic’ languages, such as artificial languages, the signs of ‘gestural languages’, such as the sign language of Amerindian and Australian aborigines, the language of deaf-mutes, the signs of infants, the signs of the human body both in its more culturally dependent manifestations as well as its natural-biological manifestations.

— Human intentional signs controlled by the will, and unintentional, unconscious signs such as those that pass in communication between human beings and animals in ‘Clever Hans’ cases (cf. Sebeok 1979 and 1986). Here, animals seem capable of certain performances (for example, counting), simply because they respond to unintentional and involuntary suggestions from their trainers. This group includes signs at all levels of conscious and

unconscious life, and signs in all forms of lying (which Sebeok identifies and studies in animals as well), deceit, self-deceit, and good faith.

— Signs at a maximum degree of plurivocality and, on the contrary, signs that are characterized by univocality and, therefore, are signals.

— Signs viewed in all their shadings of indexicality, iconicity, and symbolicity.

— ‘signs of the masters of signs’: those a) through which it is possible to trace the origins of semiotics (for example, in its ancient relation to divination and to medicine), or b) through which we may identify the scholars who have contributed directly or indirectly (as ‘criptosemioticians’) to the characterization and development of semiotics, or c) through which we may establish the origins and development of semiotics relatively to a given nation or culture, as in Sebeok’s study on semiotics in the United States. ‘Signs of the masters of signs’ also include the narrative signs of anecdotes, testimonies and personal memoirs that reveal these masters not only as scholars but also as persons — their character, behavior, everyday habits. Not even these signs, ‘human, too human’, escape Sebeok’s semiotic interests.

All this is a far cry from the limited science of signs as conceived in the Saussurean tradition!

### **Critique of the *pars pro toto* error**

As a fact of signification the entire universe enters the domain of what Sebeok dubbed ‘global semiotics’ (2001). In such a global perspective semiotics is the place where the ‘life sciences’ and the ‘sign sciences’ converge. This means that signs and life converge. Therefore, global semiotics is the place where human consciousness fully realizes that the human being is a sign in a universe of signs.

Sebeok extended the traditional boundaries of sign studies, that is, semiotics, or more correctly semiology, providing an approach to the study of signs which was far more comprehensive than foreseen by ‘semiology’. The limit of ‘semiology’, the science of the signs as projected following Saussure, consists of the fact that it is based on the verbal paradigm and is vitiated by the mistake of pars pro toto. In other words, Saussurean semiology mistakes the part (human signs and in particular verbal signs) for the whole (all possible signs, human and nonhuman). On the basis of such a mystification, semiology incorrectly claims to be the general science of signs. On the contrary, when the general science of signs chooses the term ‘semiotics’ for itself, the aim is to take its distances from semiology and its errors. Sebeok dubs the semiological tradition in the study of signs the ‘minor tradition’, and promotes what he dubs the ‘major tradition’, as represented by John Locke and Charles S. Peirce, as well as by the ancients, Hippocrates and Galen and their early studies on signs and symptoms. Therefore, semiotics is recent if considered from the viewpoint of the determination of its status and awareness of its wide-ranging possible

applications, and at once ancient if its roots are traced back at least, following Sebeok (1979), to the theory and practice of Hippocrates and Galen.

Through his numerous publications Sebeok has propounded a wide-ranging vision of semiotics that coincides with the study of the evolution of life. After Sebeok's work (which is largely inspired by Charles S. Peirce, Charles Morris and Roman Jakobson), our conception of the field of semiotics as well as of the history of semiotics have changed. Thanks to Sebeok semiotics at the beginning of the new millennium has extended its horizons, which no doubt are now far broader than envisaged during the first half of the 1960s.

Sebeok's approach to the 'life of signs' is 'global' or 'holistic' and may be immediately associated with his concern for the 'signs of life'. In his view semiosis and life coincide. Semiosis originates with the first stirrings of life. This leads him to formulate an axiom, which he believes is cardinal to semiotics: 'semiosis is the criterial attribute of life'.

'Global semiotics' (Sebeok 2001) provides a meeting point and an observation post for studies on the life of signs and the signs of life. In line with the 'major tradition' in semiotics, Sebeok's global approach to the life of signs presupposes his critique of anthropocentric and glottocentric semiotic theory and practice. In his explorations of the boundaries and margins of the science or 'doctrine' of signs (as he also calls it), Sebeok opens the field to include zoosemiotics (a term he introduced in 1963), or, even more broadly biosemiotics, on the one hand, and endosemiotics (semiotics of sign systems such as the immunitary, the neuronal, cf. Thure von Uexküll, 'Endosemiosis', in Posner, Robering, Sebeok 1997, vol. 1: 464-487), on the other. In Sebeok's conception, the sign science is not only the 'science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale' (Saussure 1916: 26), that is, the study of communication in culture, but also the study of communicative behavior in a biosemiotic perspective. Consequently, Sebeok's global semiotics is characterized by a maximum broadening of competencies.

### **Crossing over semiotic boundaries**

Sebeok's article 'The Evolution of Semiosis' (in Posner, R.; K. Robering; and T. A. Sebeok eds. 1997-98, I, and in The Sign Is Just a Sign, 1991) opens with the question 'what is semiosis?', and the answer begins with a citation from Peirce. Sebeok observes that Peirce's description of semiosis or 'action of a sign' as an irreducibly triadic process or relation (sign, object, and interpretant) (CP 5.473), focuses particularly upon how the interpretant is produced. Therefore, it concerns that which is involved in understanding or in the teleonomic (that is, goal-directed) interpretation of the sign.

Not only is there a sign which is a sign of something else, but also a 'somebody', a 'Quasi-interpretant' (CP 4.551) which takes something as a sign of something else. Peirce

analyzed the implications of this description further when he said that: ‘It is of the nature of a sign, and in particular of a sign which is rendered significant by a character which lies in the fact that it will be interpreted as a sign. Of course, nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign’ (CP 2.308). And again: ‘A sign is only a sign in actu by virtue of its receiving an interpretation, that is, by virtue of its determining another sign of the same object’ (CP 5.569).

From the viewpoint of the interpretant and, therefore, of sign-interpreting activity or process of inferring from signs, semiosis may be described in terms of interpretation. Peirce specifies that all ‘signs require at least two Quasi-minds; a Quasi-utterer and a Quasi-interpretor’ (CP 4.551). The interpreter, mind or quasi-mind, ‘is also a sign’ (Sebeok 1994b: 14), exactly a response, in other words, an interpretant: an interpreter is a responsive ‘somebody’.

In his article, ‘The Evolution of Semiosis’, Sebeok continues his answer to the question ‘what is semiosis?’ with a citation from Morris 1946 who defined semiosis as ‘a process in which something is a sign to some organism’. This definition implies effectively and ineluctably, says Sebeok, the presence of a living entity in semiotic processes. And this means that semiosis appeared with the evolution of life.

For this reason one must, for example, assume that the report, in the King James version of the Bible (Genesis 1.3), quoting God as having said ‘Let there be light,’ must be a misrepresentation; what God probably said was ‘let there be photons,’ because the sensation of perception of electromagnetic radiation in the form of optical signals (Hailman 1977: 56-58), that is, luminance, requires a living interpreter, and the animation of matter did not come to pass much earlier than about 3,900 million years ago. (Sebeok in Posner, Robering and Sebeok 1997-98, I: 436)

In Morris’s view the living entity implied in semiosis is a macro-organism; according to Sebeok’s global semiotics instead it may be a cell, a portion of a cell, or a genome.

In ‘The Evolution of Semiosis’ Sebeok examines the question of the cosmos before the advent of semiosis and after the beginning of the Universe and refers to the regnant paradigm of modern cosmology, i. e., the Big Bang theory. Before the appearance of life on our planet — the first traces of which date back to the so-called Archaean Aeon, from 3,900 to 2,500 million years ago — there were only physical phenomena involving interactions of nonbiological atoms, later of inorganic molecules. Such interactions may be described as ‘quasi-semiotic’. But the notion of ‘quasi-semiosis’ must be distinguished from

‘protosemiosis’ as understood by the Italian oncologist Giorgio Prodi (cf. 1977). (The milestone volume Biosemiotics, edited by Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok, 1992, is dedicated to Prodi who is described as a ‘bold trailblazer of contemporary biosemiotics’.) In fact, in the case of physical phenomena, the notion of ‘protosemiosis’ is metaphorical. In Sebeok’s view, semiosis by definition involves life. He distinguishes between nonbiological interactions and ‘primitive communication’ which refers to the transfer of information through endoparticles, as in neuron assemblies where in modern cells transfer is managed through protein particles.

Since there is not a single example of life outside our terrestrial biosphere, the question of whether there is life/semiosis elsewhere in our galaxy, let alone in deep space, is wide open. Therefore, says Sebeok, one cannot but hold ‘exobiology semiotics’ and ‘extraterrestrial semiotics’ to be twin sciences that so far remain without a subject matter.

In the light of presentday information, all this implies that at least one link in the semiotic loop must necessarily be a living and terrestrial entity: this may even be a mere portion of an organism or an artifact extension fabricated by human beings. After all semiosis is terrestrial biosemiosis. A pivotal concept in Sebeok’s research, as already stated, is that semiosis and life converge. Semiosis is considered as the criterial feature that distinguishes the animate from the inanimate, and sign processes have not always existed in the course of the development of the universe: sign processes and the animate originated together with the development of life.

Identification of semiosis and life invests semiotics with a completely different role from that conceived by Eco (1975) when he described the conjunction between semiosis and life as concerning ‘the inferior threshold of semiotics’. In Eco’s view, certainly as stated in 1975, semiotics is a cultural science. Sebeok interprets and practices semiotics as a life science, as biosemiotics: nor can biosemiotics be reduced to the status of a mere ‘sector’ of semiotics.

### **Global semiotics**

For Sebeok semiotics is more than just a science that studies signs in the sphere of socio-cultural life, in other words, ‘la science qui étudie la vie des signes au sein de la vie sociale’ (Saussure). Before contemplating the signs of unintentional communication (semiology of signification), semiotics was further limited by an exclusive concentration on the signs of intentional communication (semiology of communication). These reflected dominant trends in semiology following Saussure. Instead, semiotics after Sebeok is not only anthroposemiotics but also zoosemiotics, phytosemiotics, mycosemiotics, microsemiotics, machine semiotics, environmental semiotics and endosemiotics (the study of cybernetic systems inside the

organic body on the ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels): and all this under the umbrella term of biosemiotics or, increasingly now and in the future, just plain semiotics.

In Sebeok's view, biological foundations, therefore, biosemiotics, form the epicenter of the study of both communication and signification processes in the human animal. In this perspective, the research of the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, who in addition to being a teacher to Konrad Lorenz is one of the criptosemioticians most studied by Sebeok, belongs to the history of semiotics.

Sebeok's semiotics unites what other fields of knowledge and human praxis generally keep apart either for justified needs of a specialized order, or because of a useless and even harmful tendency toward short-sighted sectorialization. Such an attitude is not free of ideological implications, often poorly masked by motivations of a scientific order.

Biology and the social sciences, ethology and linguistics, psychology and the health sciences, their internal specializations — from genetics to medical semeiotics (symptomatology), psychoanalysis, gerontology and immunology — all find in semiotics, as conceived by Sebeok, the place of encounter and reciprocal exchange, as well as of systematization and unification. However, it must be stressed that systematization and unification are not understood neopositivistically in the static terms of an 'encyclopedia', whether in the form of the juxtaposition of knowledge and linguistic practices or of the reduction of knowledge to a single scientific field and its relative language (neopositivistic physicalism). Global semiotics may be presented as a metascience with a focus on all academic disciplines that are sign-related. It cannot be reduced to the status of philosophy of science, though as a science it is dialogically engaged with philosophy.

Sebeok reaches a global view through a continuous and creative shift in perspective that favors the development of new interdisciplinary relationships and new interpretive practices. Sign relations are identified where it was sometimes maintained that there were no more than mere 'facts' and relations among things, independently from communication and interpretive processes. Moreover, this continual shift in perspective also favors the discovery of new cognitive fields and languages, which interact dialogically. This is a question of dialogical interpreted-interpretant signs among fields and languages, which already exist. As he explores the boundaries and margins of the sciences, Sebeok dubs this open nature of semiotics 'doctrine of signs'.

### **The origin of language and speech**

The question of the origin of human verbal language is often set aside by the scientific community as unworthy of discussion, having most often given rise to statements that are naïve and unfounded. (An exception is offered by a book by Giorgio Fano entitled, Origini e

natura del linguaggio, 1972, Eng. trans. 1992). However, despite this general attitude Sebeok neither forgets the problem of the origins nor underestimates its importance. He claims that human verbal language is species-specific. It is on this basis that he interrogates — often with ironical overtones — the enthusiastic supporters of projects aimed at teaching captive primates verbal language. Sebeok points out the absurdity of such projects that are piloted by the false assumption that animals might be able to talk, or even more preposterous, that they possess the capacity for language understood as a syntactic modeling device. Sebeok's distinction between language and speech (1986: chp. 2) not only guards against false conclusions regarding animal communication, but also constitutes a general critique of phonocentrism and of the tendency to base scientific investigation on anthropocentric principles.

According to Sebeok, language appeared and evolved as an adaptation much earlier than speech in the evolution of the human species to Homo sapiens. Language does not arise as a communicative device (a point on which Sebeok is in accord with Chomsky, even though the latter does not make the same distinction between language and speech). In other words, the specific function of language is not to transmit messages nor to give information.

Instead, Sebeok describes language as a modeling device. Every species is endowed with a model that 'produces' its own world, and language is the model belonging to human beings. However, as a modeling device, human language is completely different from the modeling devices of other life forms. Its characteristic trait is what the linguists call syntax, the ordering and operational rules of individual elements. But, while for linguists such elements ordered by syntax are words and phrases, instead Sebeok refers to a mute syntax when he speaks of syntax in language. Thanks to syntax, human language is like Lego building blocks. It can reassemble a limited number of construction pieces in an infinite number of different ways. As a modeling device, language can produce an indefinite number of models; in other words, the same pieces can be taken apart and put together to construct an infinite number of different models.

And thanks to language, not only do human animals produce worlds similarly to other species, but as Leibniz also stated, human beings can produce an infinite number of possible worlds. This brings us back to the 'play of musement', a human capacity that Sebeok following Peirce considers particularly important for scientific research and all forms of investigation, and not only for fiction and all forms of artistic creation.

Speech, like language, made its appearance as an adaptation, but for the sake of communication and much later than language, exactly with Homo sapiens. Speech organizes and externalizes language. Consequently, language too ended up becoming a communication device, enhancing the nonverbal capabilities already possessed by human beings; and speech

developed out of language as what some evolutionary biologists call a derivative exaptation (see Gould and Vrba 1982: 4-15).

### **The destiny of semiosis after life?**

We do not believe it exaggerated (if not just a little) to say that thanks to Sebeok semiotics reaches self-consciousness just as the Spirit of philosophy reached self-awareness with Hegel (as he maintained himself). And just as in Hegel's case philosophical self-consciousness is connected with the end of philosophizing, in Sebeok's case too the coming to awareness of semiosis in semiotical terms is associated with the awareness of the possibility that semiosis may come to an end. With Sebeok (1991b) the inevitable question is: 'Semiosis: What lies in its future?'

Semiosis extends over all terrestrial biological systems, from the sphere of molecular mechanisms at the lower limit, to a hypothetical entity at the upper limit christened 'Gaia', the Greek for 'Mother Earth'. This term was introduced by scientists toward the end of the 1970s to designate the whole terrestrial ecosystem that englobes the interactive activity of different forms of life on Earth. As Sebeok says, alluding to the fantastic worlds of Gulliver's Travels, semiosis spreads over the Lilliputian world of molecular genetics and virology to Gulliver's man-size world, and finally to the world of Brobdingnag, Gaia, our gigantic bio-geo-chemical ecosystem.

And beyond? Can we assert that semiosis extends beyond Gaia? A 'beyond' understood in terms of space, but also of time? Is semiosis possible beyond Gaia, outside it, and beyond this gigantic organism's life span? Sebeok ponders this question as well (see 'Semiosis and Semiotics. What lies in their future?,' in Sebeok 1991: 98).

With his research Sebeok takes stock of the impressive general progress and expansion of the semiotic field during approximately the past twenty to thirty years. Starting from an oversimplifying definition of semiotics as the study of the exchange of any kind of message and related sign systems (which he criticized), he theorizes semiotics as the 'play of musement' mediating between reality and illusion:

the central preoccupation of semiotics is an illimitable array of concordant illusions; its main mission to mediate between reality and illusion — to reveal the substratal illusion underlying reality and to search for the reality that may, after all, lurk behind that illusion. This abductive assignment becomes, henceforth, the privilege of future generations to pursue, insofar as young people can be induced to heed the advice of their elected medicine men. (Sebeok 1986: 77-78)

We believe that the question posed by Sebeok concerning the destiny of semiosis also derives from awareness of the responsibility of semiotics relatively to semiosis. Going beyond Sebeok we now believe that the time has come for global semiotics to evolve into what we propose to call 'semioethics' (see Petrilli and Ponzio 2002b, Part Three, and 2003a).

### **Responsibility and semioethics**

With the spread of 'bio-power' and the controlled insertion of bodies into the production apparatus, world communication goes hand in hand with the spread of the concept of the individual as a separate and self-sufficient entity. The body is experienced as an isolated biological entity, as belonging to the individual, as part of the individual's sphere of belonging, which has led to the almost total extinction of cultural practices and worldviews based on intercorporeity, interdependency, exposition and opening of the body. The private and static conception of the body in today's system of global production-communication may be opposed to the concept of 'grotesque realism' in medieval popular culture, as theorized by Bakhtin (1965) for example.

As Foucault in particular has revealed (but let us also remember Rossi-Landi's acute analyses as already articulated in his books of the 1970s), division and separatism among the sciences are functional to the ideological-social necessities of the 'new canon of the individualized body' (Bakhtin). This, in turn, is functional to the controlled insertion of bodies into the reproduction cycle of today's production system.

A global and detotalizing approach to semiotics demands openness to the other, the extreme capacity for listening to the other. Therefore, it presupposes the capacity for dialogic interconnection with the other. Accordingly, we propose an approach to semiotics that privileges the tendency toward detotalization rather than totalization. Otherness opens the totality to infinity or to 'infinite semiosis', which leads beyond the cognitive order or the symbolic order to enter the ethical order, creating the condition for infinite involvement with the other, therefore of responsibility toward the other.

Such considerations orient semiotics according to a plan that is not the expression of a specific ideology. Rather, semiotics thus described concerns behavior as it ensues from awareness of the human being's capacity for radical responsibility as a 'semiotic animal'. Properly understood, the 'semiotic animal' is a responsible actor capable of signs of signs, of mediation, reflection, and awareness in relation to semiosis over the entire planet. In this sense global semiotics must be adequately founded in cognitive semiotics, but it must also be open to a third dimension beyond the quantitative and the theoretical, that is the ethical. Since

this third dimension concerns the ends toward which we strive and aim to reach, we propose to characterize it as 'semioethics'.

For semiotics to meet its commitment to the 'health of semiosis' as well as to cultivate its capacity to understand the entire semiotic universe, it must continuously refine its auditory and critical functions, that is, its capacity for listening and criticism. And to accomplish such tasks we believe that the trichotomy that distinguishes between (1) cognitive semiotics, (2) global semiotics, and (3) semioethics is important, indeed decisive not only theoretically but also for therapeutic reasons.

### **Signs of humanity, humanity of signs**

In the light of what has been said so far, semioethics may be considered as proposing a new form of humanism. In fact, semioethics is committed at a pragmatic level. Furthermore, it is capable of transcending separatism among the sciences relating the natural sciences and the logical-mathematical sciences to the historical-social or human sciences. And again, it evidences the condition of interconnectedness between the problem of humanism and the question of alterity.

This new form of humanism is inevitably the humanism of alterity, a point convincingly demonstrated by Levinas throughout his writings, and especially in Humanisme de l'autre homme (1972). The claim to human rights centered on identity, which is the approach to human rights that has dominated thus far, has left out from the very concept of 'human rights' the rights of the other. This approach must quickly be counteracted by the humanism of alterity where the rights of the other are the first to be recognized. And our allusion here is not just to the rights of the other beyond self, but also to the self's very own other, to the other of self. Indeed, the self characteristically removes, suffocates, and segregates otherness, which it mostly sacrifices to the cause of identity. But identity thus achieved is fictitious, so that all our efforts invested in maintaining or recovering such identity are destined to fail.

Semiotics contributes to the humanism of alterity by bringing to light the extension and consistency of the sign network that connects every human being to every other. This is true both on the synchronic level and the diachronic level. Also, the spread world-wide of communication today means that a communication system is being established progressively on a planetary level. As such this phenomenon is susceptible to synchronic analysis. And given that the destiny of the human species is implied in all individual events, behaviors, and decisions, in the destiny of the individual, from its most remote to its most recent and closest manifestations, in its past and in its evolutionary future, on a biological level and on a historico-social level, and vice versa, diachronic investigations, staggering to say the least for diversity, are just as necessary. This sign network concerns the semiosphere as constructed by

humankind, a sphere inclusive of culture, its signs, symbols, artifacts, etc. But global semiotics teaches us that this semiosphere is part of a far broader semiosphere, the semiobiosphere, which forms the habitat of humanity (the matrix whence we sprang and the stage on which we are destined to act).

Semiotics has the merit of having demonstrated that whatever is human involves signs. Indeed, it implies more than this: whatever is simply alive involves signs. And this is as far as cognitive semiotics and global semiotics reach. But semioethics pushes this awareness in the direction of ethics and even beyond ethics; for semioethics makes the question of responsibility inescapable at the most radical level (that of defining commitments and values). Our ethos, but more than this, the cosmos itself falls within the scope of our responsibility. Among other things, this means that we must interpret humanity's sign behavior in the light of the hypothesis that if all the human involves signs, all signs in turn are human. However, this humanistic commitment does not mean to reassert humanity's (monologic) identity yet again, nor to propose yet another form of anthropocentrism. On the contrary, this commitment implies a radical operation of decentralization, nothing less than a Copernican revolution. As Welby would say, 'geocentrism' must be superceded, then 'heliocentrism' itself, until we approximate a truly cosmic perspective. The attainment or approximation of such a perspective is an integral part of our ultimate end, hence a point where global and 'teleo-' or 'telosemiotics' or, as we now propose, 'semioethics' intersect. As already observed, otherness more than anything else is at stake in the question of human responsibility and therefore of humanism as we are now describing it. But the sense of alterity in the present context of discourse is other than what has previously been acknowledged: it is not only a question of our neighbor's otherness or even of another person at a great distance from us, in truth now recognized as extremely close, but also of living beings most distant from us on a genetic level.

Reformulating a famous saying by Terence ('homo sum: umani nihil a me alienum puto'), Roman Jakobson (1963) asserts that: 'linguista sum: linguistici nihil a me alienum puto'. This commitment on the part of the semiotician to all that is linguistic, indeed, endowed with sign value (not only relatively to anthroposemiosis nor just to zoosemiosis, but to the whole semiobiosphere) should not only be understood in a cognitive sense but also in an ethical sense. And this commitment alludes to concern not only in the sense of 'being concerned with...', but also in the sense of 'being concerned for...', 'taking care of...'. Viewed in this perspective, such concern, taking care of, responsibility which is not limited by belonging, proximity, community, communion is not even that of the 'linguist' nor of the 'semiotician'. Modifying Jakobson's statement, we could make the claim that it is not as professional linguists or semioticians that nothing that is a sign may be considered as 'a me alienum', but rather (leaving the first part of Terence's saying unchanged), that 'homo sum', and, therefore, as humans we are not only semiotic animals (like all other animals), but also

unique in the sense that we are semiotic animals. Consequently, nothing semiotic, including the biosphere and the evolutionary cosmos whence it sprang, 'a me alienum puto'.

Semioethics does not have a program to propose with intended aims and practices, nor a decalogue, nor a formula to apply more or less sincerely, therefore, more or less hypocritically. From this point of view, it contrasts with stereotypes as much as with norms and ideology. If at all, semioethics may be described as a critique of stereotypes, norms and ideology, consequently of the different types of value as characterized by Charles Morris in Signification and Significance, 1964. (Above all, his tripartition of values into operative, conceived and object values, along with the subordinate distinctions of the dimensions of value into detachment, dominance, and dependence). Semioethics alludes to the exquisitely human capacity for critique. Its special vocation is to evidence sign networks where it seemed there were none, bringing to light and evaluating connections, implications, involvement, and intrigues which cannot be evaded, where it seemed there were only net separations, boundaries and distances with their relative alibis. These serve to safeguard responsibility in a limited sense, therefore consciousness when it presents itself as a 'clean conscience'. The component 'telos' in the expression 'teleo-' or 'telosemiotics' does not indicate some external value or pre-established end, an ultimate end, a summum bonum outside the sign network. Rather, it indicates the telos of semiosis itself understood as an orientation beyond the totality, beyond the closure of totality, transcendence with respect to a given entity, a given being, infinite semiosis, movement toward infinity, desire of the other. And in the present context one of the special tasks of semioethics is to expose the illusoriness of the claim to the status of indifferent differences.

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Giorgio Prodi (1928-1987) 'was, on the one hand, one of his country's leading medical biologists in oncology, while he was, on the other, a highly original contributor to semiotics and epistemology, the philosophy of language and formal logic, plus a noteworthy literary figure. Prodi's earliest contribution to this area [immunosemiotics, an important branch of biosemiotics], [is] 'le basi materiali della significazione [1978]'' (Sebeok, 'Foreword' in Capozzi ed., 1997: xiv).