

1. Foreword to the Theme

The objects of philosophy are problems, questions, and questions demand answers. Not all questions are philosophical questions, however, and not even every answer to a philosophical question is a philosophical answer. Questions result from the restriction of a field of vision, and the answer is supposed to widen the field. But now every scientific discipline, for example, has its definite field of vision. If the discipline wanted to answer its questions by means thereof that it left the field, then the answers would be unscientific in its own sense. For the sake of its discipline, it can answer, according to its own method, only questions that have resulted from its own manner of thematization. A similar thing holds for "everyday" questions. They result from definite respects and from a pre-given restriction of the circumstances of life.

The specifically philosophical questions spring, on the other hand, from the transgression of such limits, within which limits the possible answers are sketched out in advance. They are the result thereof that a standpoint itself, with the horizon belonging to it, comes into view and becomes questionable. This cannot be intended from the concerned standpoint itself. Rather does it happen to it against its interest in preserving its identity, and the pure form of this happening is time. In so far as "there is a time for" all restrictions conditioned by time or otherwise, time is even the pure form of all standpoints. What is happening at a given time, in so far as it can no longer be understood and explained from a standpoint, poses the questions of philosophy. For this reason, philosophy is, as Hegel formulated it, "its time grasped in thoughts."

Thus these thoughts are not themselves conditioned by a standpoint, but rather thoughts moved above and beyond the standpoint by what is happening at a given time. When there is talk, in what follows, about "signs" and about a "philosophy of the sign," what should then be at stake is not a definition of the concept "sign" from some standpoint, as it is always presupposed with definitions. The traditional definition of the sign, according to which the sign stand "for" a "meaning," implies a definite ontology of meaning, one which, in the course of the history of philosophy, has become increasingly problematic. By "signs" are

understood rather the signs of the times, which move thinking above and beyond its preconceived standpoint, as the real *vis-à-vis* it and *vis-à-vis* a concept of the "objects of experience" at all *possible* in terms of it.

A sign is that which is of importance for the experience of this reality. Signs are the signs of the times, in so far as time is the dimension that leads one above and beyond the standpoint and the time of its duration. A sign, in this sense, is that which one understands above and beyond that which appears to be possible from the standpoint, and, consequently, that which one is very good at understanding, without there being defined in advance "what" a sign *be* or have to be *in order that* one understand it. Thus a sign is everything that we understand in an *unrestricted* sense, without opining that it be grasped exhaustively in *one* or even in "my" interpretation, so that one would already know "what" be special about it. The sign is, to this extent, the exemplary object of philosophy *before* its commitment of itself to disciplines or schools, and a philosophy of the sign, if it did succeed, would, accordingly, be a philosophy that led one from such commitments, which have all once happened as answers to earlier questions, back to questions of the present time.

Only of an *attempt* in this direction can one say a priori that it be *possible*. It cannot adhere to a framework sketched out in advance, such as, for example, to the orientation of the philosophy of language predominant in recent times. Rather would a philosophy of language, vice versa, have to find its place in the philosophy of the sign. Just as little, however, can the attempt be "polemically" oriented against definite movements, for even that would designate a preconceived standpoint. It must attempt to get involved in what is unquestionably understood, and thus in time, in order to find, in a nondissembling manner, a way from there to the understanding of its questions, so far as this is possible. "Reprobation is a silly [business]."¹

A philosophy of the sign is possible today, however, only in the language of metaphysics. We have no concept of philosophy at all other than the metaphysical one. This already works itself out therein that, when we philosophize, we speak "of something," for example, of the sign. We *thematize* a sign as a being, as a *thing* (*res*) in the widest sense, and we ascribe properties to this thing in distinction from things of dif-

1. C. S. Peirce, *Lectures on Pragmatism, Collected Papers (= CP)*, ed. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), § 116

ferent species. In the case of the sign, we say that the thing be “something” that stand for something different, something different that *not* be a sign. Thus, before we have begun with a philosophy of the sign, we already find ourselves within a division into beings of different species, and, to be sure, within a division that we hold to be “essential.”

Such metaphysical pretenses are “essential” for us, however, in so far as we cannot help but talk in this language. The time of metaphysics is still our time. We get above and beyond the schema of the thematization of something as a thing with properties by which it is to be distinguished from things of different species only in that we call to mind that we are thereby already orienting ourselves on signs. The “essential” properties stand out for us as significant *characteristics*; they “fall,” so to say, significantly within the purview of the senses, and only as a result of this do we impute to the “essential property” a “substance” from which it were not to be separated, as distinguished from other properties, which were not “essential,” but rather only “accidental,” that is, “without significance” for the determination of the thing.

We proceed, in doing so, therefrom that the division into “essential” and “nonessential” properties, and thus the delimitation of things *according to concepts of them*, be perfect, and, in those cases in which we are not certain about this and are still working on the distinctions and divisions of things, and thus on our worldly orientation, we still proceed therefrom that the division of things be perfect “in itself” and were merely to be followed with understanding by us “in knowing.” We presuppose a world of things as a well-ordered cosmos. Even in this, we are thinking metaphysically, and, when we say that with our representations, as we express them in language and write them down in signs, we were, “in the long run,” *coming closer* to knowledge of “objective” relationships, we are living in the metaphysical belief in definitive “meanings” of signs “for” which the signs would stand, if only they were used “correctly.” We live in the belief that, at least “in the long run,” signs would have to mean something other than again and again signs, although *now* and in every imaginable present we can name as an answer to the question about the meaning of a sign again and again only another sign and precisely the supposedly objective meaning remains our mere “opinion.” That something other than another sign could *in the final analysis* take “the place” of a sign, is the eschatologically fundamental feature of metaphysics. It is just as rational or just as irrational as the idea that temporal conditionality would gradually be neutralized in the course of time, that the square root of 2 would gradually become a

rational number by means of the calculation of further decimal places, or that there would at all be a commensurability between signs and something other than signs, that is, that one could say "what" a sign mean without once again using signs, or even that one could say this without, in doing so, once again saying something about whose meaning could, as soon as it has been said or however else "expressed," once again be asked. (The main fallacy of metaphysics is, perhaps generally, the inference from a potentially unlimited procedure to the possibility of an objective approximation to a goal—as the attempt to overcome finitude *in order that* it not come to a path "*eis apeiron*.")

Thus the philosophy of the sign must get involved in the language of metaphysics because it finds no other language. No philosophy can want to say something and at the same time want to invent for itself its own language. As philosophy, it *must* become exoteric above and beyond "internal" opinions. It can only get above and beyond metaphysics and its *aporiae*—*aporiae* increasingly manifesting themselves—, which alone can properly matter in an "overcoming of metaphysics," *in so far as* it reflects on its language *as language*, and, by means thereof, shows that one does *not* get out of and beyond it as language. For metaphysics itself does indeed not want to remain idiolectically stuck to "its" signs, but rather does it want to get *above and beyond them* to meanings, to meanings which are supposed to be grasped as meanings as "pure" as possible, and which are therefore supposed not to be once again signs about whose meanings were once again *to be asked*. Metaphysics itself wants to overcome *definitively* its language as a language to be overcome anew again and again in its history, and thus its historicity in every one of its historical approaches. It wants to get, each and every time, to the "correct" signs, to the signs that in their correctness are supposed to stand definitively for their (true) meanings. An overcoming of metaphysics is, to this extent, possible in its own language. It is only possible in its own language, however, in that it points out the linguistic arrestedness of *metaphysics, too*, thus as a philosophy of the sign that is not to be passed over for pure meanings.

Philosophy of the sign is not philosophy of language. The concept of a language signifies a *system* of signs that in their composition according to "internal" rules of this system—rules that at the same time systematically exclude signs alien to the system—are supposed to mean "something" extralinguistic. The *concept* of a language is, to this extent, a metaphysical concept. It indicates at the same time one of the "essen-

tial” *aporiae*—one could perhaps say, *the fundamental aporia*—of metaphysics: Signs connected according to rules are supposed at the same time to refer, in this internal connection, to external, “objective” relationships. The “form of the picturing” is supposed to be regulated immanently to the system and precisely *therein* “to correspond” to “external” relationships.

This entails that even the “internal” forms of particular languages, in that they claim meaning as a “relation to the object,”² correspond to *each other*. It entails the postulate of the determinacy of translation from language to language, of a common depth-grammar of all languages, or, in other words, the *exclusion* from the concept of language of everything that does not stand in the relationship of determinacy of translation to *one’s own language in each case* or that cannot be brought into such a relationship.

Idealism is, to this extent, the truth of metaphysics. Even the analysis of language is idealistic metaphysics, in that it measures the idiomatic of languages by norms of general significance that the one doing the measuring in each case can *himself* understand and find once again in *his* language, even if he is including his own idiom in the analysis and may be endeavoring to align it normatively.

The metaphysical concept of language wants to say what (kind of a thing) language *is*, what have to pertain “essentially” to languages in order that they be languages. However the conceptual determination may turn out in terms of the particular metaphysical approach, it as such implies that, at the goal, it be a matter of the definitive establishment of a meaning of the sign “language.” Thus it is metaphysical. What matters in a philosophy of the sign (instead of in one of “meaning”) is, accordingly, no longer what the sign “sign” mean, but rather only that this cannot be made out definitively by any sign, that is, without a transition to a further sign that as such *remains* open to interpretation. The philosophy of the sign leaves it, even in the transition, at the sign.

2. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Sec. ed. (= B), 300.