<u>The process philosophy of signs is a pragmatism</u>

(Responses to questions posed by Jon Roffe in his paper 'The meaningless sign, the Hall effect, the Williams hypothesis, the problem of grounding: a response to James Williams' A Process Philosophy of Signs' from the Deleuzian Encounters @ UNSW workshop, University of New South Wales, November 29 2016)[1]

JR: You argue that not everything is a sign, and that signs relate to an external reality: "There are signs and then there is the real world they relate to in some way." (*A Process Philosophy of Signs*, 34) But by arguing for a realist conception of the sign, isn't there a risk of subordinating the sign to a least a minimal but avoidable representational function?

JW: The question needs to be unpicked a little otherwise it will lead to confusion. We should set aside the quoted passage, since it is where I am addressing a possible objection to my philosophy of signs based on a distinction between real and fictional signs. However, you are right to detect ambivalence in relation to realism in my process philosophy.

I'm a realist if that means that signs are real processes as opposed to imaginary or fictional representations. This is a soft realism, resistant to the idea that signs can be described as unreal when compared to a deeper reality. It does not mean that we cannot appeal to the category of fictional for signs. Fictional is a subcategory of real signs, in the sense where some real signs admit to being described as fictional in certain circumstances; for example, when an excuse is really given – it is a real process – but is also made up.

I do not accept that it is beyond debate that there is a well-established reality with its privileged scientific, or sensed-based, or ideal modes of verification. That would be hard realism, usually restrictive in what it takes as real; for instance, by making all signs less real than what they are said to represent.

There are frequent appeals to such hard reality and I accept they carry weight in arguments distinguishing between, for example, true and false claims in science. These aren't definitive, though. One of the points of the process philosophy of signs is to show how signs challenge such appeals and thereby invite a continuing debate about signs and reality.

For instance, a lot of progress in the sciences comes from changes in what is taken to be real. Those changes depend on the creation of new and counterfactual signs such as names for new particles (boson) or matter (dark), which only become an accepted new reality after investigation and debate.

To explain the counterfactual role of signs, my main claim is that *everything can be selected into a sign and everything is put in motion by a sign*. Formally, everything can be taken into a set that

names a sign {a, b, c} and any sign implicates everything in its processes in a particular way (the substratum of the sign). Note that the emphasis is on potential and process, rather than state and being. The question about whether everything is a sign is therefore misleading. Things aren't signs; they are selected into signs and their processes. Signs transform, rather than represent.

The claim that everything is a sign or, more precisely, that everything is implicated in the processes of a sign is a speculative position that constructs for – makes a space for – opposed claims. I call them stipulations over the sign. Some stipulations can take the form of realism I do not subscribe to, but must allow for, within my definition of the sign. When I refer to 'things' as opposed to signs, they are to be understood as determined by stipulations; for instance, a stipulation about primary qualities determining real things as opposed to secondary appearances.

In my philosophy of the sign, I therefore include stipulations that deny individual signs and overall claims about signs; for instance, certain forms of realism and claims by science, law, philosophy and common sense. The difference is important because it determines where debate and conflict take place: prior to the definition of signs in general (rationalism) or as part of any given sign (pragmatism).

The absolute question 'Is everything a sign?' is unhelpful when we consider the fact that there are many influential and important positions that answer 'No'. Absolute questions tend to situate debate in the wrong place, on an abstract plane rather than within pragmatic problems. The pragmatic challenge is how to construct a model for the sign that gives space for consideration of those opposing positions, in detail, as each case arises.

The right questions – in the sense of the useful practical questions – are: How is this selection of a sign and description of how it works opposed by stipulations? Where can discussions around these oppositions lead us? How should we lead those discussions? I'm a pragmatist. I don't yearn for the incense of the absolute.

This realist feature of signs is underpinned by the rejection of the generality of the sign on Deleuze's view. In the same passage I just cited you say that "the claim that everything is a sign does not seem to hold", later in the book, you write that there may not be any "fundamental distinction between sign and non-sign." (PPS, 75)

This perceived contradiction is based on a misreading of what I was presenting as a possible consequence of a distinction between real and fictional signs (as in the debates in analytic philosophy and in history about the reality of fictional characters). Nonetheless, it allows me to clarify my position.

My definition of the sign works with the supposition that there is no fundamental distinction between sign and non-sign. First, anything can be included in the set that determines or names a sign. This statement can be understood along the lines of statements such as 'art can always express something about a thing'. Neither the sign nor the art-work has to be true or even accurate in order to initiate something new with things they take up and transform.

Second, every sign has repercussions for everything else. These may be minute or major, but they are there and they can be drawn out more or less in the ways we sketch diagrams of the effects of signs. The selection of a sign has wide ripples. For example, when we call a people or character 'untrustworthy', this new sign has close and distant effects over the whole of history.

There will be denials of these new signs and their effects. These denials can take the shape of stipulations or general claims, or disagreements about specific processes. I am wary of describing these as *fundamental*, seeing them rather as *practical*. This is a matter of the nature of claims and of the form of subsequent debates.

I think it is more sensitive to the matter at hand, more fruitful, more democratic, more pluralist, and more open to situate the claim in the midst of a shared problem we are seeking to describe and transform, rather than as a foundational moment.[2] Those moments follow from a desire for certainty that turns away from the changeable and multiple aspects of signs as processes. This multiplicity calls for pragmatic models and experimentation, shaped by subsequent debate and negotiation, rather than deceptively secure foundations.

Ultimately, is there room in your account for constitutive misrecognitions of the stipulated sign? In other words, can the recognition that the process sign can be subordinated to various socio-political stipulations be put more strongly as a recognition that the sign is always and necessarily captured by stipulation and settlement, and that this moment obscures the processual character of the sign itself? In other words, is there any register of the transcendental illusion at play in the capture of the sign?

Yes, of course there is room for such recognitions, but they aren't *constitutive*, in the sense of necessary, or *mis*recognitions, in the sense of false in comparison to a deeper truth. It will be open to debate whether they are important, and what their effects are, once a sign has been selected, diagrams of its effects proposed and stipulations stated, relative to a particular series of problems and claims.

The second formulation of the question is stronger, in a political and social sense. The answer is 'No, the sign is not always and necessarily captured'. The process philosophy of signs offers a model for the naming and description of every kind of sign and, more importantly, *adapted to every kind of sign as a situated event open to multiple descriptions*.

Sometimes, the proposed sign and competing descriptive diagrams will enter rapidly into conflict with stipulations; a sign about political equality and stipulations about universals, for instance. At other times, the selected sign will be very distant from what you call capture by misrecognition, and what I would call mooted codes and laws for the sign.

A sign transforming how to cultivate a garden can be codified and subjected to law, but there could be more interesting problems and ways of giving diagrams for that sign, its presuppositions and its

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[2] The role of persistent problems and their transformation in pragmatism is taken from Deleuze. That explains why I borrowed the mise-en-abyme from XKCD as example and backdrop to my talk (see photograph below, taken by Li Xian-fei)

consequences. These could be aesthetic, or about water use, or animal diversity, or soil preservation, or healing for the body and the mind. The point is that the idea of a necessary capture by law and code must take its place alongside all the other practical ways of responding to problems posed around signs, rather than prior to them.

I think that every sign is political, insofar as every sign gives rise to debates about differences that matter and that have no legitimate final resolution. The idea of capture by misrecognition depends on a realm outside this open politics of difference. That realm promises certainty in truth. From the point of view of my pragmatic politics, this certainty is a violent imposition supported by dubious transcendental justifications. It should be drawn back into the political and pragmatic. This pragmatism is closer to Dewey's democratic value-forming than Peirce's semeiotic.

The idea of necessary transcendental illusions is one that has long preoccupied me in the work of Deleuze. It is a weakness of his mid-period philosophy, making it much less flexible and adaptable. In the model for the process sign, I deliberately avoided that kind of philosophical structure, designed to support deep truths and necessary illusions.

Differences, divergences, departures, creations and speculations are many and take many forms. It is therefore better to allow for a multiple structure of relative differences, where the certainty of criteria for detecting illusions is taken away. Deleuze's use of intensity contradicts the dominant interpretation around transcendental illusions, because intensity is continuous whereas the real-illusion dichotomy is discrete.

Happily, the Kantian critical conceptual apparatus disappears from Deleuze's later work, and is never present in Guattari and Deleuze's joint works. They wanted to be more speculative, pragmatic and experimental, more critical and more creative. They succeeded.

In what sense is the selection of a sign's set unconditioned?

It is unconditioned by definition, as part of a speculative philosophy. In the sense that there is no logical deduction or empirical ground offered at that stage of the pragmatic speculation: *a sign is determined (or named) by a set where the elements are selected with no preconditions*. Anything can be selected into the set for a sign and the set can be any collection of things.

This is not set theory and the use of the concept of set is loose. From a formal point of view, it is not part of an axiomatic system. It is a formal notation in an informal structure of definitions and arguments for a practical model. That the definition is speculative does not imply that the philosophy is not constructed through critical argument and justification. In *A Process Philosophy of Signs*, I explain the definition of signs in more detail and respond to objections to my choice.

There could be two different arguments behind your question about sense. On the one hand, the point could be that it makes little sense to define the selection of signs as unconditioned given that their production follows certain laws or rules, causal or normative, say. There are two connected answers to this.

First, the point of the definition is to allow for signs of many kinds, some of which are taken to be aleatory or freely produced. Second, the point is also to allow for signs that are part of explicit challenges to particular laws and codes. So the aim is to reverse the order of justification. It is not that signs must obey laws, but rather that for laws to evolve and be challenged signs must be anomalous.

On the other hand, you could be objecting that signs cannot be unconditioned because it is in the nature of signs to be limited in certain ways, for instance in number, or internal and external logical structure. Here, my answer splits into practical scepticism about such limitations and critical responses to philosophies of signs providing such logical structures.

Practically, that is historically and in terms of contemporary experience, it seems unwise to limit the forms signs can take a priori. Whether in science, art, nature, or language new and shocking signs have emerged over time in ways that have made pronouncements about the limits of world, nature, art and human invention look very foolish. A starting definition of the sign failing to make space for the radically new and unexpected is ill-advised.

Theoretically, I am concerned not to develop a speculative and pragmatic philosophy that disallows large classes of counterfactuals due to the nature of its initial definitions. One of the tasks of my process philosophy is to take account of the role played by signs as counterfactuals in challenges to established positions (there is a great debt to Deleuze's work on sense, in *Logic of Sense*, here).

My strategy is two-fold. First, I give definitions and construct methods that are as open as I can manage. Second, I give critical responses to philosophies that depend on more limited logical structures and ontologies. In the book this leads to critical responses to Wittgenstein, Uexküll and Saussure, among others.

What grounds this method itself?

To ground a method is not the same as having arguments for it. I have avoided seeking a ground, in the sense of an apodictic and homogeneous foundation, because that seems to be a counterproductive approach to a field like signs, whose variability and multiplicity calls for a more flexible, empirical and practical approach.

The act of grounding comes from a solipsistic line of philosophy that seeks to start everything anew on secure grounds, accessible to a subject in intuition or reflection. Where signs are concerned, I worry that it involves violence and lack of sensitivity to otherness and change, since it depends on finding an exclusive and superior type of sign ('*Cogito, sum*', 'I think', 'As we know, all of this makes up a truth-procedure, which is activated in its becoming by a subject, that is, by a body behaving as a support for a formalism.')

For many reasons, it does not make sense for pragmatism of the sign to seek that kind of ground. First, pragmatism has to be experimental and creative even in relation to its values and presuppositions. It is trying things out in response to problems encountered in multiple forms that are changing all the time.

Of course, these must be approached with a series of relatively secure ideas, practices and positions, but these must be challenged in experiments and new creations in order to be sensitive to diversity. The problem with grounding is that the ground is not put back into play, back into question, in new encounters. That's why I much prefer the idea of models rather than ground.

Second, pragmatism is an exercise in pluralism, in the sense that it proceeds by carrying different and often incompatible views and positions together. These confront one another, but without a fixed and prior frame regulating that confrontation. The problem with grounding is that it seeks such a frame and, worse, the frame then replaces the difficult pluralism of democratic pragmatism with uniform methods and rules.

Third, pragmatism is a communal activity. It is done by many, rather than one, or even many taken as one. The only thing that's agreed is a relative and evolving frame for open discussion and decision-making. The process philosophy of signs is designed to provide an adequate practical model for signs that contributes to pragmatic communities.

James Williams, Edinburgh, February 2017

Pragmatism is fixing the problems I created when I tried to fix the problems I created when…

https://xkcd.com/1739/

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