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1. Orienting to Reality

- 1 Brian Kemple's *The Intersection of Semiotics and Phenomenology* is an intellectual tour-de-force. Actually, the title is a misnomer... insofar as Kemple's monograph intersects three, and not two, traditions: phenomenology, semiotics, and Thomism (i.e. philosophy in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas). Kemple's Thomism can be presented to a layperson as a position of "realism," as opposed to "nominalism." Thomism, that is, implies a commitment to the intelligibility of reality itself: reality is a genuine horizon for human cognition, such that humans can know it as it is, in itself, and are not confined to a "bubble" of thoughts with no ultimate traction on things (the Kantian world of phenomenon and noumenon). One way of entering Kemple's work is, precisely, through such a concern for reality. In light of it, it becomes more understandable why he branches into semiotics and phenomenology.
- 2 Semiotics, especially as developed by Peirce, could be described as an inquiry into how relations of signification orient attention to the reality of some "thing." This, Peirce

adds, always entails a triadic relation, whereby a sign-vehicle (e.g. smoke) directs an interpretant (e.g. a distant observer/an eagle/a wandering hog) to an object (e.g. a fire). Peirce developed his thought on signs by retrieving the work of the medieval philosophers known as the Scholastics, who engaged deeply with the realism versus nominalism question. This, in turn, caused him to be concerned throughout his life with the question of avoiding a purely constructivist view of sign activity. Peirce, in other words, tried very hard to stay a realist of sorts.

- 3 Phenomenology also manifests a concern for reality. One could say it invites to “save the appearances,” by adopting the posture captured intuitively in the adage: “what you see is what you get.” The main differentiations within phenomenology concern the meaning of the verb “to see.” One might say that Husserl – the early founder of phenomenology – might have imagined “seeing” as something like a narrowed focus, a bit like “squinting.” His student, Martin Heidegger, would be less fond of the narrow effort implicit in “squinting.” He might instead have described phenomenological “seeing” with a word like “beholding,” which implies a kind of receptivity – an opening out – so that reality might “come forward” and “show itself” for what it is.
- 4 Coming back to the specific trajectory of Kemple’s monograph, it is important to set it in the context of his position, according to which the commitment to reality that animates Thomism should not be understood reductively, as a commitment to the reality of material things only. This is a critique Kemple reiterates elsewhere in his scholarly production (Kemple 2020). Indeed, “reality” also comprises relations: this is a foundational position that Kemple’s maestro, the semiotician John Deely, has become identified with (Deely 2019). Intuitively, it translates into a position whereby relations, say “marriage,” have a dimension of depth that exceeds any two specific termini (i.e. any two spouses) involved in it. Rather, relation becomes a source of questioning in itself (“what is marriage, really?”). Seen this way, relations are therefore not just figments of the human imagination, but participate of what is “real,” as much as the things they relate. “The undivided sway of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality” – not the words of Gilles Deleuze, but of Joseph Ratzinger (1970: 132), Pope Emeritus, whom Kemple (2020: 88) cites in support of his position at the crossing of Thomism and semiotics.
- 5 Kemple goes on to ask how the reality of relations manifests. He suggests that one of the dimensions of reality is the “capacity to affect another.”¹ By “capacity to affect” I mean here the ability to orient another’s attention, which manifests as sign activity. If some “thing” affects me, it is because it exists, however off I might be in my attempts at signifying the phenomenon that is affecting me: what initially appears as a “monster under the bed” might more properly come to be understood as “a cat” upon closer consideration (I develop this example further below).
- 6 To recapitulate: reality isn’t just a collection of material things, but also of the relations that make those things what they are, without being reducible to the latter. The reality of both “hard matter” and “immaterial relation” ultimately manifests through signs, which enact the reciprocal affectability between knower and known. On this notion of reality as “capacity to affect” that includes relations, Kemple’s re-reading of Thomism makes intuitive sense to contemporary readers, where the relational constitution of the real is something of a shared starting point.
- 7 Following on from this, Kemple inquires into the relationship between signs and reality. Far from saying that what we say something “is” the first time around will

forever stand for it, he is keenly aware of the ubiquitous possibility of error, and of the need for “semiotic hygiene” – the task of revisiting the traction signs have on what they are supposed to signify (Kemple 2018: 119-20). In the earlier example of the “monster under the bed,” one might provisionally entertain such a possibility, only to revisit their experience and subsequently come up with a different signification that better orients to what is really there. How do I revisit the experience of a “monster under the bed”? This is where Kemple brings in two alternatives, drawn from phenomenology. Husserl might remain in bed... but focus more narrowly on his perception of a supposed “monster,” e.g., by zeroing in on a rhythmic sound – like the breathing of a small-sized sleeping mammal – originating from under the bed. He might additionally “bracket” the memory of a recent horror movie, thereby dropping possible associations with danger, and go back to sleep with clearer awareness of his own experience (but not of the source of the rhythmic breathing, outside himself!). Heidegger, instead, might try to orient to the source of the noise by calmly turning on the light. This illumination would expose him to receive a richer picture of the relations between, say, the rhythmic breathing he hears, the coiled furry animal he glimpses under the bed, and the family’s ownership of a cat this reminds him of. After doing this, he might eventually resolve in favour of the reality of a cat under his bed. Hence, while Husserl might focus more narrowly on how an object is affecting the human perceiver in order to grasp the “pure” form of the object’s manifestation, Heidegger would favour “unconcealment” by exposing the knower to a richer tapestry of relations that direct him/her to the reality of “things themselves.” Amongst the two alternatives, Kemple chooses the second as the preferred mode for inquiring into the correspondence between signs and reality. This, because of Heidegger’s orientation to real possibilities outside of the knowing subject, in contrast to Husserl’s focus on a “controlled” subjective experience, aimed at extracting pure forms from the “interference” of the particular.²

- 8 This, in a nutshell, is the fil rouge that runs through Kemple’s adventurous journey across these three traditions, in pursuit of a realist attitude. What this attitude allows is a bridging of the separation between nature and culture, by seeing the latter as an extension of the former (albeit with greater semiotic freedom and, hence, possibility of error). This is where Kemple eventually leaves us: reality becomes actual (as opposed to merely potential) whenever it is able to affect another and bring itself into view. Semiotics describes what this “bringing into view” entails, particularly through a distinction of different categories of experience, all simultaneously at play in sign activity (Firstness, Secondness, Thirdness). Phenomenology in the Heideggerian sense helps make semiotics workable, by affording a method for revisiting semiotic associations, and therefore ensuring the coherence of the cultural world of signs with reality. Together, semiotics and phenomenology configure philosophical inquiry as a form of “cenoscopic” knowing (Paine 2021). That is: a way of inquiring into the reality that we experience in our everyday involvements that does not work through a “specialized” or idioscopic gaze (like that of a microscope or a telescope), but through a curious openness to the possibilities of our worlds, as they meet us. Having sketched Kemple’s main line of argument, the next two sections provide (1) a chapter-by-chapter summary to follow Kemple’s reasoning more closely in its build-up and (2) critical remarks, understood as attempts to work with, and “stretch,” Kemple’s conceptual framework into workable distinctions between semiotics and (Heideggerian)

phenomenology, idealism, posthumanism, and between semiotic synechism and “emergence.”

2. Chapter Summary

- 9 In the general introduction (Chapter 0), Kemple sketches his project of investigating the related issues of indeterminacy and coherence. Indeterminacy belongs both to concepts (those intellectual “icons” – a bit like diagrams in the mind – which relate the forms that transpire in the experience of particulars) and to human cognition (specifically in its endless openness to development). This is a point he makes at greater length elsewhere (Kemple 2018), as he attempts a reconciliation of semiotics and personalism through a notion of philosophical inquiry as (i) the continual revisitation of the concepts we have of the world and as (ii) turning concepts back upon the self to enable greater alignment to the world in which the self is immersed. Kemple’s view of philosophical inquiry implies the search for coherence between concepts and reality, but also for *personal* coherence at the level of habits shaped by the concepts we hold. The twofold indeterminacy of concepts and human cognition is no obstacle to the achievement of coherence. Coherence is tied, for Kemple, to Peirce’s notion of synechism: the “essential continuity of the whole universe” (Kemple 2019: 7). Grasping this deeper continuity is what leads to conceptual coherence *and* coherence of self and world (Kemple 2018: 112).³
- 10 In Chapter 1 (“Historical and Theoretical Introduction”) Kemple introduces the two “brands” of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology. The clearest statement of their difference is actually found in the glossary (Kemple 2019: 308), under “Phenomenology.” There, Kemple clarifies that Husserl’s method of phenomenological reduction is “eliminative” (it removes particulars, as a kind of interference, to grasp what’s “really real” about a phenomenon in Husserl’s view – its “pure” form), whereas Heidegger’s reduction is “grounding” (it opens out to the source of differentiation, before even subject and object: the fundamental ontological continuity of Being). In Kemple’s account, Husserl proposes an idioscopic method, focused on grasping something “beyond” experiences themselves, through a rigorous procedure. Kemple is not interested in that, and favours instead a cenoscopic orientation, whereby a relaxed attention “illuminates” beings and allows them to disclose themselves. Kemple also finds a common motif between Heidegger’s phenomenology and Peirce’s phaneroscopy (the study of the categories of disclosure that are common to any experience – Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness). Peirce and Heidegger share common roots in the work of the medieval Thomas of Erfurt, which might have affected them both – at least indirectly. One of the main ideas this reviewer grasped is that, already in the work of Thomas of Erfurt, language is understood to be (i) an “icon” of a ground of fundamental ontological relatedness and (ii) “specifiable” by the very being of things, rather than being an arbitrary fiction. This, in turn, gestures towards the principle that acts of understanding make “actual” what is already “in potency” (whether as a substance or as relation).
- 11 Chapter 2 (“Phenomenology as Fundamental Ontology”) is a close reading of several of Heidegger’s texts, clarifying the meaning of his phenomenological method, built on the presupposition of the relational constitution of the human being (as “*Dasein*”). Kemple outlines here his understanding of the different phases of Heidegger’s

phenomenological reduction, as consisting of “destruction” (of preconceived notions of what something is), “construction” (reflexive awareness of the knower’s subjective comportment towards the object, and therefore of any attributes “constructed” in the relation between subject and object) and finally “reduction” to the possibilities that some being admits “in itself.” This method allows attention to be brought to the very ontological continuum in which individual beings exist: “to investigate *Sein*, we must move from asking about beings to asking about their world” (Kemple 2019: 86).

- 12 Chapter 3 (“*Sein* and Knowledge”) clarifies how the phenomenological method leads, in Heidegger’s own account, to knowledge. After an initial encounter with things as *Gegenstaende* (as “standing against” ourselves), we are able to “possess truth only by engaging with beings in such a way that the Being of their being, which is at first concealed both by the infirmity of our own intellects and by the commonsense opinions which we take for granted, might be disclosed, unconcealed” (Kemple 2019: 105). This unconcealment implies a hermeneutic cycle beginning with sensory intuition/impression, followed by understanding, and culminating with assertion. The difference that the step of “understanding” makes is to move from the merely referential significance of something (“for me”) to what it is, in itself (Kemple 2019: 117).
- 13 Chapter 4 (“Categories of Experience”) introduces Peirce’s categories of experience. These help understand the process of disclosure of beings, even though they are no guide for *how* this unfolds precisely (this is where Kemple prefers to rely on Heidegger). In particular, Firstness denotes what something is “in itself,” as-yet-undistinguished and hence as possibility (think: “there’s something here to be worked out”), Secondness some form of opposition (of an other) to the self, and Thirdness stands for the “form of relation”: it adds dimensions of “tendency,” “order” or “directedness” to the relation of “opposedness” of self and other (as Seconds). Thirdness is what makes conscious sign activity possible, because it is this awareness of regularity that allows relation to be perceived as some kind of ordering, beyond blunt opposedness (i.e. Secondness). He then introduces a “semiotic ladder,” laying out different levels of complexity in sign activity. Relevant to this discussion is the distinction between immediate object (the object as signified) and dynamic object (the object as it is in itself, beyond how it is being signified), and that between immediate interpretant (being specified in one’s “affectability” by an object), dynamic interpretant (orienting back to the object *in some way* after having been affected) and final interpretant (learning as lasting adaptation). This allows him to posit a category of “nascent” semiosis found also in the inorganic world, due to the fact that the particular way in which interpretants “receive” a specification creates a “record” of regularities that are propaedeutic to the onset of a dynamic interpretant, i.e. some form of learning or turning back to the object from which came the specification. Here, he is following his *maestro* John Deely (2001), who famously argued for the presence of physiosemiosis (semiosis in the inorganic realm).
- 14 The discussion in the previous chapter prepares the ground for what is perhaps the most captivating section of the monograph, Chapter 5 (“Synechism and the Modes of Existence”), where Kemple follows closely the growing complexity of semiosis across the inorganic and the organic world. Closely connected to this account is his conclusion that human beings are conscious of their sign use, engaging in what is called “semiotic” – as opposed to merely “semiosic” – activity. To be conscious of signs means being able to question relations “in themselves.”⁴ In terms of Peirce’s categories, this entails that human beings are able to grasp the Firstness (existence “in itself”) of Thirdness

(relation, consciously considered).⁵ It follows that the indeterminacy of human cognition can be approached as the field of “disclosure” in which the reality of beings (which includes relations) can appear “in itself,” and thereby invite a comportment of “care.”

- 15 The following chapter, Chapter 6 (“*Sein* and the Categories of Experience”) begins Kemple’s revisit of the questions he laid out in the general introduction. First, the question of indeterminacy of human concepts. He distinguishes indeterminacy as “general” (i.e. when a concept is considered in relation to particular instances of it) and the “vague” indeterminacy (of a concept that can always be refined further). Next, he turns to human cognitive indeterminacy, which he locates in the fact that there is always a “general” element at work in human cognition. For instance, he suggests that the transition between perception and intellectual cognition occurs through “a *sui generis* act of abductive inference [where ‘abductive inference’ refers to a hypothesis on a possible reason/order]... which nevertheless attains some dim realization that the ‘reason why’ things appear as they do belongs to a reality beyond objectivization [i.e. beyond what something is ‘for me’], and that there is, correlatively, a being independent of our evaluation” (Kemple 2019: 237).⁶ This is perhaps stated better elsewhere: “all species-specifically human cognition grasps, however vaguely, its object as possessing an *actus essendi* irreducible to the Umwelt of relation to the interests of one’s self. Non-human animals experience others, to be sure, but as ‘lumps’ against their own subjectivity. Human beings transcend their own subjectivity” (Kemple 2018: 109). In other words, Kemple is arguing that the indeterminacy of human cognition is connected to the human capacity to experience “Firstness” (i.e. the independent existence of the world, apart from human purposes).
- 16 In the final chapter, Chapter 7 (“Semiotic Continuity of the World”), Kemple brings this to bear on the question of coherence. Coherence, he says, issues from the existence of relations. Kemple goes further than Deely here, when he affirms that “realization of the existence of relations is ontologically (not chronologically) prior to the realization of the existence of signs. *Ontologically prior to either, however, is the realization of the undifferentiated fact of existence*” (Kemple 2019: 254; *italics added*).⁷ Specifically, this entails that “the objects of our cognition [are] recognized as belonging to some reality independent of what we make of it, prior even to their explicit recognition or separation” (*ibid.*). This is the experience of Firstness, made possible by human cognitive indeterminacy. In turn, it grounds the capacity for *conscious* human involvement in sign activity, premised as it is on the acknowledgement of Thirdness (the form of relation), in itself (i.e. in its Firstness and not merely as something relative to the subject experiencing it). Finally, the capacity to grasp relations grounds the possibility for “cenoscopic inquiry,” the aim of which is continually to revisit the purchase that human concepts have on reality. In the monograph’s conclusion, Kemple specifies that this continual re-examination follows two complementary ways. The first is the *via resolutionis*, i.e. the phenomenological reduction that recovers the formative possibilities of the world, beyond inherited conceptualisations and subjective projections. The second is the *via inventionis*: questioning after Thirdness – order, regularity, purpose – in the world.

3. Critical Questions

- 17 In the remaining space, I wish to lay out some of the significant theoretical distinctions that can be found scattered across Kemple's monograph, and which will be of wider critical interest.
- 18 First, Kemple locates the difference between Peircean phaneroscopy and Heidegger's phenomenology, in Heidegger's failure to pursue rigorously the implications of relation, understood as Thirdness in Peirce's categorization (Kemple 2019: 125-6). Heidegger, in other words, apparently missed the fact that saying that beings are "relationally constituted" is not enough. Rather, relations question the human knower and invite a response of *assent*: the free acknowledgement of the presence of relations outside the self, and responsible adherence to the direction of their fuller actualization. Second, Kemple (2019: 40) also differentiates phaneroscopy from an idealistic posture in relation to Husserl's focus on "pure form," by highlighting the idealist's overemphasis on Thirdness, which *absorbs* (and therefore subordinates) particulars in their forms of Firstness and Secondness.
- 19 Third, Kemple pursues an original marriage of semiotics with personalism. This shows most evidently in his "semiotic ladder," whereby human cognitive indeterminacy is clearly differentiated from animal cognition, as enabling the disclosure of beings as they are "in themselves" (Firstness) (Kemple 2019: 248-9). This position contrasts with the tendency, within posthuman discourse for instance, to equate a "relational ontology" with the flattening also of human difference. For Kemple, instead, the unique semiotic freedom of human cognition is what enables an attitude of "care," *in consequence* of the experience of Firstness.
- 20 Lastly, Peirce's semiotics suggests a more rigorous understanding of the concept of "emergence." Far from being the appearance of order from chaos, Kemple suggests that "emergence" is more properly seen as a normal consequence of pervasive sign activity in the world. This is because sign activity implies the ubiquity of interpretation, i.e. the orienting back of the "interpretant" (human or non-human) to the object signified. This "orienting back" isn't deterministic, however, because the sort of causality involved in signs is unlike the impression of a seal in wax (efficient causation that transfers a form, unidirectionally, from one object to another), but rather "specificative": it involves the "affectability" of object and interpretant towards each other, such that one "specifies" and the other "receives" the specification. This type of causality accommodates both relation (and therefore order) *and* freedom (the ability of the interpretant to orient back to the object in a range of possible ways, however infinitesimally different), so that evolutionary transformations have their precursors in "minutial changes" at the level of sign activity (Kemple 2019: 188).
- 21 As a concluding thought, one does not set out to do what Kemple has tried in this book, without coming out with a few scratches. In the attempt to negotiate terminological differences between different traditions, Kemple's text can appear... baroque in both senses of the word. In the negative: at times heavy on the spectator. In the positive: it has something awe-inspiring.

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NOTES

1. "Affectability" is my choice of an intuitive term, to stand for what Kemple calls "objective specificative causality," i.e. the sort of causality that is productive of relation as a two-way street, as opposed to unidirectional efficient causality.
2. Readers are advised that there exist alternative treatments of the edge between semiotics and Husserlian phenomenology, which suggest greater compatibility (Stjernfelt 2007).
3. The introduction also explains some recurrent Scholastic terminology as adopted by Kemple, notably "subjective" and "objective," with significant departures from common use: subjective means "existing in itself," whereas objective "existing towards another" – a synonym for "intentional."
4. And, derivatively, as concepts passed on in the world of culture – what Kemple baptizes the *Bildendwelt* (Kemple 2019: 87).
5. One implication of this is that relations are not reducible to their *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem*, so they are not merely inter-subjective, but *supra*-subjective (beings move "in" them, so to speak). This position, elaborated by John Deely, led him to fall out with his teacher Mortimer Adler, who propounded an intersubjective view of relation (Minerd 2017).
6. In other words, human beings grasp the general fact of existence outside the self even before having worked out *this* or *that* specific existent: there is an "implicit presence of Thirdness in our awareness, so long as that awareness includes the undifferentiated fact of existence" (Kemple 2019: 254).
7. This is a point he engages in greater depth in his published PhD dissertation (Kemple 2017).

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