

THE MORAL SEMIOSPHERE:
LOCKE'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERAL SEMIOTIC COMMUNITIES

By

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, Dr. Marina Banchetti, Department of Philosophy, and has been approved by the members of his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in Philosophy distinction.

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ABSTRACT

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The gulf between Locke's understanding the limits of human knowledge, as outlined in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and his theory of political rights and duties in the *Second Treatise on Government*, draws much attention from Lockean scholars. As the philosopher often named the "father of liberalism", many modern political theorists have returned to his writings to find cures for the ailments that have afflicted this ideology throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. This thesis intends to demonstrate that a central tension exists between John Locke's philosophy of language and the tenets of his political liberalism. I argue that this tension is born from the disagreement between his theory of word signification and use and his theory of natural law. A semiotic analysis utilizing the theories of Umberto Eco and Yuri Lotman is used to describe the form and effects of this tension systematically. Lotman's theory of the semiosphere is especially useful to model the spread and influence of liberalism and its ability to absorb other systems of meaning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Crisis of Meaning

It seems that this is a difficulty pertaining to our times ... either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or conversely, to posit a reality which is ultimately impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poetize. In a word, I do not yet see a synthesis between ideology and poetry (by poetry I understand, in a very general way, the search for the inalienable meaning of things).¹

The “synthesis” that Roland Barthes refers to in the conclusion of his famous essay “Myth Today” is, of course, still unknown to us. The modern world seems to suffer from a ‘crisis of meaning’ involving the constant collision of political, social, cultural and historical ‘realities’. For the most powerful and technologically-advanced populations on the planet, who primarily live in liberal democracies, these realities are illustrated by a steady consumption of media. The modern age promises a departure from tradition and religion as guarantors of the real, but our reliance upon the accumulation and affirmation of facts to build our internal, private understanding of the world leads us into a new dogmatism of the narrative.² However, despite the sheer volume of discourse that is delivered to us, the scope of what can be discussed seems to shrink daily. We might question how new meanings might be formed in a society that categorizes every relationship and object within it using concepts of property, money, and contract. To find

¹ Roland Barthes, “Myth Today”, in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 274.

² Michel de Certeau, “The Jabbering of Social Life” in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 151-152.

the source of this troubling situation, we must look back to the intellectual origins of our political society.

In 1689 John Locke published the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* as a response to the Cartesian deployment of skepticism. In it, he challenges Descartes' use of doubt as the way to insight, as well as his doctrine of innate ideas. Locke theorizes that all humans are born into the world as blank slates, with minds like "white paper".³ We receive our first ideas from our sensations and perceptions of the world, from which we abstract common qualities into what Locke calls "simple ideas" for the "clear and distinct perception" we have of each.⁴ The mind also has the ability to create "complex ideas" from the compounding of simple ideas, the relation of ideas to each other, or the abstraction of a particular idea (or group of ideas) into a general idea.⁵

Because perception differs from person to person and because the correspondence between one's perceptions and the objective world is difficult to establish, Locke considers the only areas in which real knowledge can be achieved are the deductive disciplines like mathematics. Importantly for our discussion, Locke finds human language to be unequal to the task of allowing a person to accurately communicate his thoughts to another. Words "stand as marks for the ideas within his own mind"⁶ and only that.⁷ People are forced to come to a common understanding with each other through language, but they can never be certain that their meanings are being accurately communicated through their use of words.

³ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), 1:121.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:145.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:213-214.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:9.

Almost simultaneously with the publication of the *Essay*, Locke anonymously published his *Two Treatises on Government*. We will be analyzing the traditional focal point of Lockean scholarship, the *Second Treatise*, since it provides the clearest contrast between the foundations of his politics and his epistemology. The intent of the *Treatise* is clear: to argue that human beings have a natural right to life, liberty and property and to outline the form of society Locke perceived as best-suited to protecting those rights. To argue his point, Locke relies heavily on a theory of natural law, as well as a “state of nature” in which to place his pre-societal subjects. Human reason allows us to perceive the “law of nature” and those “who will but consult it”⁸ the essential rules of living in justice and harmony with one another, while also resisting any “unjust will” that might attempt to subjugate them.⁹ However, as men have different understandings of “justice” (as Locke also mentions in the *Essay*) and cannot be trusted to judge their own actions, individuals must form communities to live justly with each other. These communities involve the subordination of individuals’ political power and freedom to a ruling power so that a common definition of justice can be established.

The *Essay* denies us the ability to know the reality of anything other than abstract moral truths, such as the simple dichotomies of “good” and “evil” or “justice” and “injustice”. The application of these terms requires us to travel into the uncertain waters of experience. We require language to communicate our ideas to each other, but as language is an imperfect transmitter of these ideas, we can never come to a single, universal understanding of a concept like “justice”. Instead, the justness or unjustness of any act

⁸ John Locke, “Second Treatise of Government”, *Political Writings*, ed. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 263.

⁹ *Ibid*, 268.

would be evaluated by the community on the basis by whether it could come to reasonable assent over a shared definition of justice ‘in this case’. Here, purely analytic notions of morality would serve to guide the communal understanding of justice, since the synthetic understanding of an act’s just or unjust nature would be wholly conventional. Thus, this thesis will argue the following points:

- i. That the Locke’s theory of the signification of ideas in the *Essay* makes it necessary that a society have an arbitrary and conventional approach to its semiotic process;
- ii. That, in the society described by Locke in the *Treatise*, the non-arbitrary language of property rights entails that every meaningful message must be aligned with the end of protecting those rights;
- iii. That Locke’s doctrine of non-arbitrary property rights can be compared accurately to a “grammar” within the natural semiotic systems described by Lotman as “semiospheres” that host such ideological “grammars” growing within them and competing with other grammars for dominance;
- iv. Thus, the unchanging but highly adaptive non-arbitrary grammar of property rights neutralizes the creative function of other grammars within the semiosphere and forces them to align their own systems of meaning with that of Locke’s natural law.

II. THE SEMIOTICS OF THE *ESSAY*

2.1. The Signification of Ideas

For Locke, language is *arbitrary* in its connection between the word (or *sign*) being used and the *signification* of meaning intended through the word's use. Language, as the necessary condition for the birth of society, was created to *communicate*.¹⁰ Words aid memory, help to articulate thoughts, and makes them perceptible for others to understand and judge. But Locke stresses that even words improperly appended to the wrong ideas still represent those ideas for the speaker.¹¹ Even in the case of someone adopting the vocabulary of another, the words acquired now represent the unique ideas in the mind of the acquirer if he can form correspondences between his newly-learned words and ideas he already possesses. We have no access to another's ideas. We only have access to the words he might use to signify those ideas. Locke believes that complex ideas are formed from the accumulation of simple ideas originating in sensations and intuitions. His theory of signification is in accord with his theory of mind, since when we learn a word, we begin to immediately relate ideas to the phonetic sign we have acquired.¹²

To "speak intelligibly", Locke says, one must communicate using words that "excite the same ideas in the hearer" as those words signify for the speaker.¹³ But how can this be done if words only signify a person's own ideas and only then "by a perfectly arbitrary imposition"?¹⁴ The debate over exactly what Locke meant words to signify is an

¹⁰ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2:8.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 2:9.

¹² *Ibid*, 2:10.

¹³ *Ibid*, 2:13.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 2:12.

ongoing one in the field of Lockean scholarship. We will look at two interpretations of Locke's theory of signification. The first argues that Locke meant for the primary signification of a word to be its linguistic meaning while the second argues that Locke intended for words to signify only the idea connected to that word in the user's mind. By exploring these interpretations, we will begin to see how the tension inherent in Locke's theory of language is made manifest.

Timothy Pritchard argues that Locke's theory of signification is closely tied to his discussion of how we define a word. To do so, we use other words that "constitute the signification" of the word being defined. He argues that Locke "explicitly" identifies signification with meaning.¹⁵ Through repeated experience simple ideas (as of color and shape) become "fixed" in a person's memory and words can then be connected to those ideas. Thus, a word and an idea must first have this "initial connection" before that word can be used in other ways, like to indicate that the person speaking has a certain idea in his mind.¹⁶

Walter Ott takes his interpretation down a different path. He argues that Locke's conception of signification was influenced by the Port-Royal School and Thomas Hobbes.¹⁷ Ott finds the common notion shared by the thinkers within these "semiotic traditions" that for something to serve as a sign it must be "available as an object of sensation."¹⁸ There is also the notion of signs that signifies "concepts or acts of knowing." Ott describes the conventional indicative sign used within these intellectual traditions as

¹⁵ Timothy Pritchard, "Locke and the Primary Signification of Words: An Approach to Word Meaning," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (2013), 488.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 488-489.

¹⁷ Walter Ott, *Locke's Philosophy of Language*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

requiring “perceptual access to the signifier.”¹⁹ Ott argues that Locke subscribes to the indicative model of the sign through his doctrine of simple ideas. These ideas, being the “dependable marks or signs” of sensations caused by objects or their qualities, give the observer the “basis for inference to the presence of a secondary quality in a physical object.”²⁰ Thus what matters to the ‘dependability’ of a sign is not whether the same “qualitative content” is experienced by everyone who identifies a certain idea with that sign. What matters instead is the “significative sameness” of that sign. If different people have qualitatively different ideas of the same quality or object, those ideas are the “same” if they all signify evidence for the same thing’s existence.²¹

Ott holds that Locke’s theory of signification commits him to a causal and teleological explanation of how ideas become representative of their objects. Ott thinks the first problem with this explanation is that “it is unclear how a simple idea could ever *misrepresent* anything.” We can never have ‘incorrect’ ideas of a quality or thing, since our ideas merely represent the how things appear to us. The second problem arises when the idea of one thing is caused by something else as with color blindness causing someone to see only certain objects as the ‘wrongly’.²² Ott points out that, although these seem like major problems for a purely causal theory of signification, Locke’s theory has a teleological aspect that resolves them. In this explanation, our senses are designed by God (or some other creative force in the universe) to perfectly fit our functions as perceiving

¹⁹ Ibid, 21.

²⁰ Ibid, 22.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 23.

beings, so any misrepresentation or disjunction of ideas can be explained as part of God's plan.²³

No such issues plague Pritchard's account of Locke. Pritchard's view is that Locke thought that the word-idea relation is what "makes words significant". Thus, Locke's use of the term "signification" is primarily meant to call to mind how the relation between a word and an idea provides us a medium for the future classification of experiences.²⁴ He thinks Ott's indicative signs "presuppose reliability" in the correlation of sign and signifier. Pritchard points out that signs are often used unreliably or in novel ways but that they can still have meaning despite their unconventionality.²⁵ Most importantly to this thesis, Pritchard proposes that Locke "shows a way in which an idea-based approach to signification has the resources to provide an explanation" for the intelligible usage of words when they are deployed in unusual ways.²⁶ It is clear that Ott's interpretation relies heavily on the indicative relationship between idea and sign, which leads to the aforementioned questions of reliability and the need for some kind of authoritative figure to guarantee the 'correct' association of ideas to experiences. Pritchard's interpretation, which holds that Locke uses words to signify a conventional linguistic meaning, gives the language of Locke's ideal society in the *Essay* a greater flexibility regarding unconventional usage without having to resort to an outside authority to maintain intelligibility.

²³ Ibid, 23-24.

²⁴ Pritchard, "Locke and the Primary Signification of Words," 502.

²⁵ Ibid, 490.

²⁶ Ibid, 492.

III. THE *SECOND TREATISE*

3.1. The State of Nature

Compared to the dense *Essay*, the *Second Treatise* is a short and easy read. Yet it is difficult to think of another text until *Das Kapital* that had quite as much influence on the course of political thought. Starting with Chapter II, we arrive at the explanation of the state of nature as the reasonable equilibrium between humans in an ideal environment with equal capabilities and access to resources. Humans in this state are in possession of a “perfect freedom” and are only bound by the precepts of the “law of nature” while being “equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection.”²⁷ What is the law of nature? It is equality “by nature” and not one explicated through law or code. It is, in fact, perceived through and identical to our use of reason, which “teaches all mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health liberty, or possessions.”²⁸ Since, in this hypothetical state, all subjects have the same ability to use reason, there is no necessary cause for individuals to develop more complex moral codes to order social behavior. We can begin to see Locke’s state of nature as requiring that humans to exist without language to prevent the complications of understanding that his theory of language maintains as a constant of human communication. This, of course, conflicts with Locke’s belief that humans, as “sociable creature[s]”, have a natural urge to communicate and use language.²⁹ We also run into the issue of finding the transition point from the peaceable and equitable state of nature to Locke’s description

²⁷ John Locke, “The Second Treatise of Government”, *Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 262-263.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 263-264.

²⁹ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 3.

of a Hobbesian dystopia of “confusion and disorder” rendered by men confused by their errors of self-judgment.³⁰ How could a pre-linguistic array of “equal and independent” people suddenly find themselves “varying from the right rule of reason” and requiring a government to “restrain the partiality and violence of men”?³¹

A close reading of the *Essay* and *Treatise* as complementary works allows for us to offer an interpretation of how the pre-linguistic state of nature bridges to the language- and code-using political society as a process of communal meaning-generation for the incipient social organization. Locke says this explicitly when describing the formation of political society in the *Treatise* as requiring men, whose judgment of the morality of an act is mere “opinion”, to submit their freedom of judgment “into the hands of the community.”³² This accords with Locke’s account of the importance of developing “common sensible ideas” in language.³³ Although humans in the state of nature possess the rational understanding of their relationship to one another as individuals, Locke believes that the invention of money, which allows people to possess more than they need to survive and thrive, leads to the introduction of “larger possessions” and the need for “consent” to account for them in the law.³⁴ Before the invention of money, what a single human could own was limited to what they could directly “mix their labor” with, whether it was land, private possessions, or nonhuman animals.³⁵ The invention of money, Locke reckons, was a moment of crisis for this understanding of property: now the value of a thing was not connected directly to the value of the labor mixed with it, but, instead, to its quality as something “truly useful”.³⁶

³⁰ Locke, “Second Treatise of Government”, 267.

³¹ *Ibid*, 264-267.

³² *Ibid*, 304.

³³ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 5.

³⁴ Locke, “Second Treatise of Government”, 279.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 274, 280.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 285.

Similarly to how language developed from the communal need for understanding of terms, the laws and moral codes of society grew out of the need to “begin a title of property in the common things of nature”.³⁷

Through the *Treatise* Locke lays out his conception of how political society grew out of the “tacit consent” of people seeking to establish the kind of laws and moral codes necessary to protect their property and livelihoods in a peaceful and equitable way. A series of tacit agreements over time between people to arrange government, social norms, and property rights has led, in Locke’s view, to the present situation.³⁸ However, since the civil state slowly grows to replace the individual application natural law with a proper legal system based upon it, the all-important command to guarantee and protect property becomes enshrined as the core doctrine of the society it governs. Thus, the *Treatise* fundamentally lays out a *property-oriented* model of how our semiotic society could develop. That is, using reason, we reach a state in which the protection of certain material goods is elevated to the status of analytical truth. This is the natural law, the absolute moral imperative for the construction of a “good” society, and the beginning and the end of moral reasoning. The property-oriented society, in contrast with the previous model of a conventional one, has its moral language encompassed by an “encyclopedic” semiotic structuring that defines its terms by their ability to be interconnected with one another sensibly. Thus, those things that require non-material relations become relevant only through a relation to material goods.

³⁷ Ibid, 286.

³⁸ Ibid.

3.2. The Natural Law

*To say that interpretation (as the basic feature of semiosis) is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object ... To say that a text potentially has no end does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy ending.*³⁹

Although Locke muses about placing morality “amongst the *sciences capable of demonstration*,” he described the difficult task of doing so, due primarily to the “vices, passions, and domineering interests” of humans that prevent the work from being done. He exemplifies this idea using the expression “where there is no property there is no injustice.” However, there is a catch: first he must define his terms. The term “property” is defined in such a way that implies a negative relation to “justice”. Locke then goes on to describe how “ideas of quantity”, i.e. mathematical concepts, have a “greater and nearer correspondence” to their numerical signs than their poor cousins in the realm of moral concepts, which are condemned to be represented only through language.⁴⁰ Locke describes how he envisions the difficulties inherent in pursuing demonstrable moral truths as “remedied by definitions” for “simple” moral ideas and then using these definitions “steadily and constantly”.⁴¹

However, this raises an interesting conflict with his earlier remarks on the nature of ideas and the use of words. At the start of Book II of the *Essay*, Locke says that when a human “represents to himself other men’s ideas by some of his own,” even if he chooses to use the same words that other people use to represent their own ideas, *these are still only representative of his own ideas*. Locke dedicates a large portion of Book III to his view that humans cannot transmit information perfectly to each other. Although humans

³⁹ Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 6.

⁴⁰ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 208-209.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 211.

commonly believe that their words both correspond accurately to ideas in others' minds and to the true nature of things, this is categorically false according to Locke.⁴²

The relation between Locke's theories regarding language and its uses and his political theory is easier to follow once we understand what he thinks are the fundamental limits of human moral knowledge. Indeed, he names the "domineering interests" of humanity as *explicitly political*. "Parties of men" who desire the money, fame, and power that are granted by following fashionable ideas will seek out favorable arguments for them, regardless of their truth.⁴³ Thus, even if these men are prevented by the nature of language to force the rest of humanity to conform to the 'true' meanings of words, they will use argument and rhetoric to convince others of the *validity* of words instead. Even if, as Locke says, it is impossible for Augustus Caesar to force a new semiotic creation upon the Latin tongue⁴⁴, he can deploy his political clout to create the "tacit consent" necessary to make a certain word correspond to a certain meaning.

How is this compatible with our understanding of Locke's political theory as dependent on the agreement of a community for the shared meaning of terms? As Locke explains it, the "comfort and advantage of society" cannot be obtained "without communication of thoughts"⁴⁵ and so humans sought out the semiotic processes necessary to transmit and receive ideas. In Locke's ideal community, these processes are democratic ones characterized by citizens equally capable of accepting, for their own benefit, various conventional definitions that establish common beliefs, understandings, and legal procedures. This semiotic system is preserved through Locke's conception of the "law of

⁴² Ibid, 10-11.

⁴³ Ibid, 211.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 12.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 8.

nature” that is intuitively grasped by every human being that values “life, health, liberty or possessions,”⁴⁶ and that requires us to respect each other’s autonomy and moral equality.

He follows this by adding the fatal corollary, “Everyone, as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station willfully, so by the like reason, when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not, *unless it be to do justice on an offender*, take away or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, liberty, health, limb, *or goods* of another. [Emphasis added]”⁴⁷

The reason why this corollary is fatal is that the state of nature seems incompatible with Locke’s theory of mind. Locke admits as much in his discussion of how men’s “self-love” will lead them to be biased in their application of the law.⁴⁸ How can this be, if in the state of nature “all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal”?⁴⁹ We can receive a partial explanation by examining Locke’s theory of knowledge and of humans’ inability to communicate perfectly with one another. At first glance, it seems self-evident that humans, only able to know their own thoughts⁵⁰ and unable to communicate either their intuitive or complex knowledge to each other⁵¹, would fall almost immediately into disagreement. However, Locke insists on providing his participants in the state of nature a universal law by which to abide.

Locke holds that the natural outcome of this paradoxical relationship between the universal and the individual is the production of a common set of definitions of “justice”,

⁴⁶ Locke, “The Second Treatise of Government”, 262-264.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 264.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 267.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 263.

⁵⁰ Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 190-191.

⁵¹ Ibid, 12.

since individuals are equal and are subject to their own ideas about natural justice. This common law is necessary to regulate the doling-out of justice to the offending parties without leaving it to the “boundless extravagance” of the transgressed-against party’s personal sense of the natural law.⁵²

It is possible to see that Lockean natural law seems perfect in its function as a moral code. An individual understands that he cannot abandon life, so he seeks to live healthily and well, not infringing on others’ lives, and taking as much material sustenance from the world as he needs and nothing more. As every human in this state is equally empowered and lacks no faculty or ability compared to his peers and, furthermore, understands what he ought to do using the same set of intuitively-true maxims, then we can reasonably expect that after a brief period of experimentation, this ‘proto-society’ would settle into an uneventful banality. In this ‘idyllic state of nature’, prior to the consideration of justice and injustice, people can remain forever at peace. Yet according to Locke, people’s use of reason leads them to a final category. The term *justice* does not bother them (at first), since they seem to live justly without much effort. It is the term *injustice*, which at this point means *nothing* to them. Prior to the consideration of this antithetical relationship, the individual did not consider his actions either just or unjust; there was a right way to live and that was that. It is the very introduction of this relationship between the two terms that engenders the creation of a new and discursive moral language.

Moral language requires a reference to physical forms to give it meaningful content.⁵³ Moral messages reference either actions one has undertaken or actions that one is considering undertaking; we can use as examples the propositions “I have made bread/I

⁵² Locke. “The Second Treatise of Government”, 264.

⁵³ Ibid, 90.

will make bread” and “I have stolen bread/I will steal bread”. In the idyllic state of nature, the latter pair has no moral content, since we have not yet introduced the terms for it yet. This is not to say that no retribution occurs if such a thing happens: the aggrieved party will retaliate, but he will have no concept of justice ‘being done’. Conversely, the former pair of propositions (the “just” pair) have lost their positive connotations as the ‘correct’ pair; one can make bread or steal it, but both lack the moral coding correlated to the actions.

However, upon exiting the idyllic state by learning a sense of justice, individuals immediately acquire its antithesis and expose the contradiction in which they have been living in. This contradiction arises when they consider the *conditions* under which justice can emerge. Namely, that certain parts of the law are now elevated to the status of just and others are condemned as unjust. Even if they had lived peacefully in the idyllic state and had never acted unjustly, people are forced to develop the moral language. Naturally, those activities that previously allowed for peaceful conduct will be named as just, while the activities that led them into conflict with one another will be called unjust.

IV. SIGNS AS BOUNDARY

4.1. Eco: Sign and Interpretation

Umberto Eco expands his theory of sign and signification in his book *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* to include the entire universe of possible signs besides language. However, we will focus on his remarks regarding language for the purposes of this thesis, as well as the more general passages on the nature of signs.

Eco's argument in his opening chapter on the nature of signs and sign systems leans heavily on a historical investigation of the sign as a tool for studying language. He finds that, at the level of meaning-generation of a sign, "the conditions of necessity of a sign are socially determined" according to weak or strong personal cultural codes.⁵⁴ Upon encountering an unfamiliar sign that is telling us something we do not yet understand, we are forced to invent a code to decipher the sign's meaning. When we do this, Eco proposes that we are using an abductive inference to reach our goal.⁵⁵ All three examples of abductive inference that Eco presents serve to illustrate what kind of interpretative activity might occur in a wholly conventional society.

The "overcoded" abduction is the state in which citizens of the subjective society would find themselves if they encounter another person and engage in conversation with them. In this society, the Lockean "dictionary" is the only key to meaningful communication between citizens. A citizen must make abductive inferences with each term

⁵⁴ Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 40.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 39-41.

used by the other person to ‘check them’ against the term’s public signification within the dictionary.

In the “undercoded” case, many equally attractive alternatives present themselves simultaneously. This arises if we replace the artificial rules of the thought experiment with more realistic ones and the citizens occasionally slip in their use of meaning. Our model citizen has *not* memorized their dictionary and when conversing with his interlocutor must decide whether their memory of the “correct” definition is likely to be true. Eco explains that this form of inference leaves its explanation “entertained” or waiting for further definition. The citizen very well might have unwittingly understood the wrong meaning.

Finally, the “creative” abduction arises when our citizen encounters someone saying something completely new to them. If we safely assume that, short of the subjective society banning all outsiders, citizens would be constantly learning new words and associated meanings, it is difficult to imagine a way for the subjective society to survive in its semiotically-unchanging state.⁵⁶

This leads us organically to Eco’s next claim that for signs to function, there must be the “possibility of interpretation”. Interpretation of a sign involves the “[definition] of a portion through the use of other portions, conveyed by other expressions.” It involves the “opening up of something new.” This is possible because sign production, inference, and interpretation all occur within a “continuum of matter” that is contextualized as “content” by the conflicting social and historical forces of a civilization.⁵⁷

Eco’s explanation of semiotic theory as a part of natural language cracks the foundation of the *Essay*’s perfectly self-regulated, wholly conventional community.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 41-43.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 44.

Although it seems hypothetically possible to construct such a society, it would have to strictly control its citizens to guarantee semiotic consistency. Eco's theory of interpretation makes it clear that this control would have to extend beyond the epistemological tool of the political realm of the public dictionary into the realm of the personal. Even without outside influences, it seems a natural part of the human response to signs to try to see if there is 'more' under the surface.

4.2. Lotman: Translation and Autocommunication

In his preface to *Universe of the Mind*, Yuri Lotman writes that human intelligence cannot be "set in motion" without interaction with another human, either in personal or textual form. "For an intelligence to function there must be another intelligence." This interaction must be governed by what he terms the "minimum semiotic structure", that is, at least two "mutually untranslatable languages" that are linked by the "pulley" of translation. "A dual structure like this is the minimal nucleus for generating new messages and it is also the minimal unit of a semiotic object such as culture."⁵⁸ This "asymmetry" of semiotic structures requiring interaction with one another to begin the generation of new meaning leads Lotman to compare the inevitable question about the "beginning" of semiotic structures to the questions about the origins of life and culture.⁵⁹ Although he dismisses the value of such an investigation for his own purposes, the parallels between this model for the creation of "semiotic objects" and Locke's theory of the generation of the political state means that a comparison and analysis is possible.

⁵⁸ Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 3.

Lotman offers a critique of the view of language as merely a mechanism for sending and receiving messages “adequately”, where adequacy is determined by whether the messages are identical between sender and receiver. Lotman believes that this view, although accurate to one aspect of semiotic structures, fails when that singular function is considered as the most essential or only one.⁶⁰ This view raises a “whole number of paradoxes”, such as the near-impossibility of transferring messages of any complexity with their identities intact due to the inherent linguistic incompatibilities between sender and receiver. “Even the fact that both participants in the communication use one and the same natural language ... does not ensure the identity of code; for there has to be also a common linguistic experience, and an identical dimension of memory.”⁶¹ So in this view, the only safe form of message transferal possible is to employ an “artificial” language and similarly “artificial” communicators who lack the “baggage” of a natural language user who possesses the “semiotic memory of culture”.⁶² Lotman divides the functions of language into three: the function of communication, the creative function, and the function of memory. The latter function persists in all texts, regardless of whether they fall closer to the communicative or creative “poles” of the functions of language.⁶³

Lotman proposes that in addition to the “I-s/he” form of bi-directional communication, in which the sender is telling the receiver something that the sender presumes the receiver did not yet know, there is a second form of unidirectional communication in which the sender addresses a message to *himself*. This message, whose content is (obviously) already known to him, serves a cultural function that reinforces

⁶⁰ Ibid, 12.

⁶¹ Ibid, 13.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid, 13-19.

knowledge and can even generate “new” information. Lotman believes this is achieved through the effect of intrusion, as when a rhythmic pattern of sound influences the way a poet examines his feelings within a poem, and extrusion, in the form of “internal speech” being expressed on the page to ‘work out’ the tension produced by the intrusion.⁶⁴ Lotman concludes that “human communication can be constructed along two models.” In the model of “I-s/he” communication, we find the traditional model of the addresser sending information he possesses to an addressee who does not, using a mutually-understood and unchanging (during the act of communication) code. On the other hand, the act of “I-I” communication, or *autocommunication*, involves an addresser introducing new codes to knowledge they already possess, “transforming” and transmitting it to themselves, and the “reformulation” of their understanding of its meaning.⁶⁵

To simplify, autocommunication consists of a re-interpretation by the “addresser” of a text already known to him or her, treating it as a “new” code. Lotman seems to believe that most texts possess the potential to be interpreted as codes, but that texts indicate this potential via “rhythmical-metrical systems”, which originate themselves from autocommunication. As an example, Lotman uses the ‘rhythmic’ nature of the climax of *Anna Karenina* and a hypothetical female reader who learns that the woman that commits suicide in the beginning of the novel was Karenina herself. If, inspired by this poetic repetition “invading” her understanding, the reader then “comes to the conclusion: ‘Anna Karenina is me’ and starts changing her understanding of herself ... then obviously she is

⁶⁴ Ibid, 20-28.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 29.

using the novel not as a message like any other, but as a kind of code in her own process of self-communication.”⁶⁶

Lotman defines the “semiosphere” as “the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages, not the sum of different languages; in a sense the semiosphere has a prior existence and is in constant interaction with languages.”⁶⁷ Lotman outlines a theory of the semiosphere’s makeup and function: “At the centre of the semiosphere are formed the most developed and structurally organized languages, and in first place the natural language of that culture. If no language (including natural language) can function unless it is immersed in the semiosphere, then no semiosphere ... can exist without natural language as its organizing core.”⁶⁸ Semiospheres reach their apotheosis when they engage in “self-description”, through which the commonly-accepted form of the society is developed. This ‘solidifies’ the semiosphere and prevents it from breaking down into incoherency, but it also restricts its ability to change and adapt over time. During this period of self-description, the semiosphere’s socio-political mainstream creates a “grammar” or set of codified rules for itself. It subsequently begins to try to propagate this grammar to the entire semiosphere. As historical examples of this process, Lotman uses the emergence of Florentine Italian as the literary *lingua franca* of Italy and the standardization of Rome’s legal code across the Roman Empire. The establishment of a “semiotic practice” gives the illusion that life in general abides by the rules and constrictions defined by that practice. In fact, as the new norms begin to invade the yet-to-be-defined edges of the semiosphere, where the grammar is not yet practiced,

⁶⁶ Ibid, 30.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 123.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 127-128.

contradictions between the centralized code and the existing practices of the periphery will begin to accumulate. This leads to the generation of “correct” texts to replace “incorrect” ones. This also leads to peripheral figures of the semiosphere, whose texts are considered “marginal” and to have no relation to this “idealized portrait” of a grammar, to become “non-existent” as the new code dominates.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Ibid, 128-129.

V. SEMIOTICS AND LOCKE

5.1. The Possibility of Unlimited Semiosis

Earlier, we discovered the method by which those individuals living in Locke's state of nature might have discovered the possibilities of the generation of meaning. The discovery that language is arbitrarily formed leads to the formulation of 'real' language as systems of signs that do not restrict its users from forming new meanings. But where do these acts of semiosis end? Where does our society end up, since it now finds itself bound by the "law of nature" but has the power to perceive the tensions generated by those laws and create new meaning from those tensions? Eco claims that, after terms are defined within categories (as with the acts that constitute "injustice"), the categories themselves are redefined. Now, through the redefinition of not only what exists within a category of knowledge but also of how that category is constituted, society has the capability of controlling runaway semiosis.⁷⁰ The invention of money, for Locke, would be one of these redefinitions. He considers its creation as the logical conclusion of his chapter on property as "some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling" and that is suitable to be used as a tool for trade *in the same fashion* as the fruits of one's labor.⁷¹ Through tacit agreement and convention, society redefines its conception of "property" to make some classes of objects within it (like gold, silver, salt, or paper bills) *representative* of the category. It is easy to see how something that is elevated to the status of encompassing the entirety of a category of meaning within itself will eventually supersede and reduce the value of the

⁷⁰ Ibid, 103.

⁷¹ Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 285.

category. We can look to our world, in which one does not work primarily for the object of one's labor but instead for the earning of currency.

But the redefinition of categories does not stop the semiosis occurring within that category. It can contribute to the phenomena, as with the steady accumulation of new objects that are now considered "property". For example, mathematical formulations, scientific discoveries, and interplanetary bodies are just a few of the items that are now understood as being owned or ownable. The metaphorical nature of money allows for disparate ideas to be linked together in a web of overlapping definitions — it allows for the creation of an *encyclopedia*. The encyclopedic nature of the money-property category allows for it to pliantly stretch in association with unusual or alien concepts, like the idea of not only valuing a piece of raw information (for example, like a mass of anonymized consumer data) but considering it as a *discrete piece of property*. The money-property category, as an encyclopedic set of definitions, "presents itself as the most economic solution"⁷² to the question and the problem posed by the absolute 'good' represented by the notion of property in Locke's law of nature.

But this is a problematic solution. The encyclopedia, in its classic form, represents itself as a tree of interconnected nodes, all linked by their existence within and by their relational position in the tree. But this is not a true representation of the concepts in the tree; the encyclopedia abstracts, localizes, and *misrepresents itself* as a "global" network of meaning.⁷³ Eco contends that the "universe of semiosis . . . the universe of human culture" must be structured in labyrinthic fashion as a dense network of nested and interlinked meanings and as a constantly-growing entity. This is to avoid the "bias" inherent in the

⁷² Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, 82.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 83.

local nature of “structured knowledge”, which can (and will) clash with the structured knowledge of another culture.⁷⁴ But can we adopt a truly unlimited semiotic system, like Eco suggests?

What motivates the growth of such a system? And once our hypothetical society puts their unlimited, global semiosis into effect, does the very act of de-limiting the boundaries of meaning devalue meaning itself? The cause of the growth of Eco’s labyrinth is fundamentally the “cognitive function” of the metaphor, the trope we as humans are simultaneously most familiar with and least capable of describing. Evocatively, Eco says that the metaphors are “expressions that speak about the world *by lying*.”⁷⁵ We use metaphor to learn about the world because, when we encounter one, we must “infer a code” that makes it *make sense*.⁷⁶ We must interpret the unfamiliar term to make it familiar. Through this mechanism, we draw new connections between previously-discrete definitions, and form new meanings thusly. But, here we run into the danger of this model for societal semiosis: the risk of “unlimited semiosis”, or the tendency of the interpretive process to free-associate and repeat itself “ad infinitum”.⁷⁷

5.2. The Necessity of Boundary

To solve this conundrum, we must turn again to Lotman’s model of the semiosphere. Specifically, we must build an understanding of the Lockean legalistic, contractual model of natural law as *a semiosphere*. Locke’s texts represent the “partial grammar” that became the “metalanguage of description” for the overall historical moment we occupy, beginning

⁷⁴ Ibid, 84.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 109.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 101.

⁷⁷ Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, 28-29.

with the Enlightenment and stretching forward into our futures.⁷⁸ The implication of a smooth, uninterrupted surface of meaning is incorrect, since the semiosphere is unified in its conflict, joined together by the clash of colliding spheres, which may represent individuals or entire cultures.⁷⁹ This constant encountering of the “other”, of a perceived boundary-line at the edge of the understanding, is fundamental to the self-definition of those at the center of the semiosphere, for whom the “metalanguage” is their own. The ‘pressure’ of metaphor, of interpretation, also becomes constant, increasing the “tension” between the core and the boundary.⁸⁰

This translative pressure, the “elementary act of thinking” which creates new thoughts⁸¹, leads to the generation of new systems of meaning. Responses are given to the infringing new codes, which demand adoption and use. These responses, framed through the understanding borne of the mind at the periphery, are children of both spheres: the Western and the Eastern, the individualistic and communalistic, the pragmatic and poetic, and every other asymmetrical relation of ideas imaginable.⁸² So we do not observe the collapse of the liberal semiosphere upon its contact with mutually-untranslatable concepts, just as the world did not see feudalism and imperialism disappear entirely with the appearance of global capitalism and democratic ideals. Instead, we see the birth of *new grammars*, new codes that describe the new situation that results from the “rebellion”⁸³ of partial grammar (or *encyclopedia*) against another, incompatible, grammatical code.

⁷⁸ Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, 128.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 131.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 134.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 143.

⁸² *Ibid*, 127.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 138.

This concept of boundary is necessary to the liberal semiosphere. In truth, the very nature of Locke's model of natural law presupposes the mutually-interpretive nature of the semiosphere's shifting, changing periphery. As one commentator notes, Lotman "was quick to observe that 'the existence of an agreement ... implies that it may be broken, just as within the conventional, semiotic nature of the exchange there lies the possibility for deception and misinformation.'"⁸⁴ The nature of Locke's law is that it *will be broken*, thus the necessity of constructing a society of mutual understanding around it to protect its continued existence. Built into any understanding of the liberal semiosphere is the knowledge that, through the violation of its core edicts, the natural law is being affirmed. The same applies for the "boundary moment", when a new grammar arises from the ashes of the old. The very process of obsolescence and replacement proves the worth of the core ideas and guarantees their replication across and through multiple "moments".

⁸⁴ Yuri Lotman, quoted by Amy Mandelker in "Lotman's Other: Estrangement and Ethics in *Culture and Explosion*", *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, ed. Andreas Schönle, (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2006), 68.

VI. CONCLUSION

6.1. The Liberal Semiosphere

So, what can be done to reform liberalism if the very act of confronting and re-defining our relationship to its property-centered code reaffirms it? Is it possible to stop the unlimited semiosis of the liberal semiosphere, centered around a steadily-expanding definition of property and the correlated need to protect that property at all costs? The answer is, of course, predicated on our position within that very semiosphere. If we stand near its center, we can hardly see the periphery, where other possibilities await. We may not be able to see that edge at all. If we remain in the sphere, but near that border, we might celebrate the very act of envelopment, of collision: we recognize it as innovation and disruption, a fresh set of concepts to be redefined by our ownership or proximity to ownership. And we if find ourselves on the outside of the liberal semiosphere, either naturally or by choice, we may rage at its approach to our sphere of meaning, but we are incapable of devising a superior grammar that proves liberalism's self-contained justification incorrect.

We have examined the semiotic nature of Locke's political philosophy, found useful interpretative tools in the theories of Eco and Lotman, and determined the source of its power to be its ability to endlessly absorb and redefine in its own terms seemingly wholly-contradictory ideas. This may serve as an example of how we can continue to examine political philosophies as systems of thought, without placing them into epistemologically and ideologically separate containers, by utilizing the interlinking and creative function of semiotic studies.

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