

Walker Percy's Semiotic Theory

In this essay, I explore the symbol theory developed by Walker Percy. Percy was born in Birmingham Alabama in 1916; he died at the age of 73 in Louisiana in 1990. He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and in 1941 he received an MD from Columbia University. He converted to Roman Catholicism in 1947. He was a writer, perhaps best known for his novel, *The Moviegoer*. He was also deeply interested in semiotics and language in general. In this work, he was strongly influenced by Carl Sanders Peirce. Here, I focus on his major publication in semiotics, *The Message in The Bottle* (MB) and I also draw on an excellent doctoral dissertation written by his former student, Karey L. Perkins, *Walker Percy and the Magic of Naming: The Semiotic Fabric of Life*

In his book, Percy distinguishes between signs and symbols, and signification and symbolization. He offers the case of Helen Keller to illustrate this distinction. While her tutor, Anne Sullivan, poured water on one of Helen's hands and spelled W-A-T-E-R on her other hand, Helen eventually discovers that the spelled word is not a sign indicating that she should do something such as drink the water, get a cup for the water, fetch water. She realizes that what was being spelled on her hand was the name for water; it meant water, water in general.

The sign had become a symbol that denotes the meaning, water. The spelled word now had a name. This a substance is called, water. At the same time, Helen guessed that everything had a name, and she went around asking for the name of the things in her environment. Percy argues, this movement from sign to symbol is a major emotional, and meaningful achievement.

Percy argues that the symbolic relation requires and engenders intersubjectivity. The name establishes a new bond for Keller. Now she knows that there is word, a symbol, for water for her, for her tutor, and for everyone. It becomes a shared social construct. In Logan's (2010) terminology, Helen had moved from perceptual cognition to conceptual cognition, and she can ask what the symbolic conceptual labels for other things are. When a sign is uttered, it signifies that an action should be taken in the environment. But with symbolization one can refer to water and other things, even if those things are absent.

Percy argues that with symbolization, the speaker and hearer (the symbol producer and the interpreter) enter " into a *mutuality* towards that which is symbolized" (256). Hence symbolization entails intersubjectivity between the symbolizer and the interpreter. "A new and indefeasible relation has come into being between the two organisms in virtue of which they are related not merely as one organism responding to another but as a namer and a hearer, an I and Thou" (257). The namer and the hearer of the name exist in a mutuality of understanding toward that which is symbolized" (257).

Percy suggests that naming then is the source of knowing and perhaps the source of consciousness itself.

Science and the scientific method find themselves in certain difficulties when they face the nonphysical world produced by the human ability for symbolization. Nailing down non-observable symbolic entities is not what science was developed to do. This is because nonphysical entities do not have the same order of determinism as entities in the physical realm. Symbolic concepts are degenerate and pluripotential. Thus, symbols (words) can have synonyms whereby the same or similar meanings can be carried by different words, and a single symbol (one word) can carry several different meanings (polysemy). And in the case where the entities referred to are nonmaterial, they are unobservable because they lack a physical form.

If the object of the research is physical, then the norms of the scientific method are generally appropriate. But if the entity is the product of the human ability to create nonphysical concepts, we have to ask whether the scientific method provides the right epistemology. In the study of nonphysical abstract concepts (e.g., emotion, motivation, identity, acculturation, self, attitude, patience, goal, appraisal), does normative empirical science permit the accrual of final answers? Do nonphysical entities have the same order of determinism as the entities of physical science?

Naming is a remarkable human ability; however, the symbolic association between a thing and its name can sometimes lead to distortion especially when dealing with nonphysical concepts. These concepts may become essentialized and reified, and the assumption may be made that what they refer to must have an instantiation that can be studied empirically and be understood directly, fully, and correctly. Under this notion, concepts such as "freedom" and "water", and "love" can have characterizations that are equally precise and scientific. Here we have nonmaterial symbolizations being forced to masquerade as physical realities.

There may be a difference between an investigation that begins with the observation of a physical thing which has been named and an investigation of a nonphysical entity that already has a name when the investigation begins. If the name is too closely associated with the concept, there may also be the assumption that the thing has a physical counterpart (in the brain for instance). Starting an investigation with matter (e.g. atom) may be very different than starting one with a nonphysical symbolic concept (e.g. love). Science generally moves from matter to name. It is a different kind of inquiry from those in the social sciences and humanities where we have a name and then try to find what it applies to. Thus, it would seem that the physical sciences start with the physical thing, give it a name, and investigate it. In the humanities arts and social sciences, we have a name for a nonphysical concept, and then we try to develop an understanding of that concept, entity or thing. We

might then make a distinction between “material object science” check and “nonmaterial concept inquiry”.

Percy asserts that naming and language, in general, are outside the purview of science. The linking of the symbol with the entity cannot be explained in physical terms. The name denotes the object. Science must be able to explain how the name as a symbol denotes the object, how the symbol “means” the object, how the symbol doesn't direct, as a sign directs, our attention to possible biological response. The symbol is a vehicle for knowing the object. Similarly, Perkins notes that “language is outside the realm of dyadic science.” (112).

According to Percy, the fact that the symbol is the object (but in another way) is to some extent mysterious and has to be accepted because it is not amenable to explanation or clarification by means of its part in the triadic relation; science and the scientific method, especially in the form of an experimental science, lies outside the domain of denotation, quazy identification, meaning assertion, imputation, and interpretation. Following Percy, Perkins (2011) notes, “dyadic science studies relationships of things in the world, but ‘the coupling relation of a sentence is not like any other world relation. Yet – indeed for this very reason – it may symbolize any world relation whatever... (Percy, MB 169)’. So, sentences are used by science, but dyadic science can't get outside them or outside itself to examine them with its own method. It can't

examine its own sentence uttering activities – it can only examine only the rest of the world" (Perkins, 116).

A symbol can be anything, but Percy argues that a vocable (a word) is an ideal symbol. The vocable has to be empty, transparent, and thus lacking any biological relevance; it can't be a sign to take some action. The symbol also has to be different/distinct from the object. If it is the same or similar to its referent, it would be an icon. A symbol must be physically unrelated to its the object; thus, it must be arbitrary. This gives the symbol agency in the mental (i.e. nonphysical) world. The symbol is simply valued for the meaning it carries. This allows it to take on the essence of the object, but, of course, in a different way.

2.5 Symbol as " world" and myth. (121)

Percy distinguishes between "environment" and "world". He argues that animals live in environments where their biology serves to foster their survival and their reproduction. They live in a physical environment where they respond to stimuli in ways that were designed by evolution to keep them alive and allow them to procreate. The symbolic world escapes many of the constraints of the physical environment. With symbols, man created an irrealis world, a world of fantasy, a world of belief, a world of religion, a world of ideas, a world of ideologies, a world of idealizations, a world of concepts, a world of

conceptualizations, a world of classifications, categories and superordinate categories. Pick any religion you do not believe in and look at its prescribed, suggested, and condemned behavior. Note notions of mortality, rules for marriage, and of course, you'll find many that you may be willing to accept as cultural practices, but you may not accept them as beliefs. Humans live in a world that does more than serve their biological needs. When humans became a symbolic species, they could create a world; they could move beyond his environments into both physical and nonphysical worlds. They could create gods, they could create their rules, and they could convince their conspecifics to obey those rules. Those rules were more than just responses to environmental stimuli; they were concepts that were not part of the environment but were created by and maintained in the human symbolic world of religion and culture.

Percy says, "the world is simply the totality of that which is formulated from symbols" (MB202), cited in Perkins (121). Perkins (2011, 121) continues, "a world has not only biologically relevant existences but non-biologically relevant ones, even imaginary and non-tangible existences, like ghosts and bogeymen and God and Hamlet and fairness. These non-physical entities do not exist for creatures incapable of symbol – and even if they did, the creatures would not care." "Not all items in an environment are part of the world, and not all items in a world actually physically exist in the environment... The idea of a unicorn and a boogey-man may be part of one's-world, but not actually exist in an environment" (123).

Percy asserts that naming and language, in general, are symbolic, and he also argues that ritual, art, music, and belief are also symbolic. These symbolic entities are part of culture, and Percy sees culture as assertory activities, and thus all arts, music, and religion are assertions. He says these aspects of culture are expressive, not practical. A work of art carries feeling within it, but like a word, it does so *in alio esse*. Artwork is "a symbolic event inside the artist and the receiver of the art" (Perkins, 125). An artwork is good or bad or mediocre as judged by the receiver. So, both the art produced and its appraisal by the viewer are both assertions.

According to Percy, culture is not exempt from science. It is "just that dyadic science is incomplete to describe the real foundation of culture, only it's secondary characteristics. And science, as an aspect of culture itself, can't fully describe itself" (Perkins, 126). He notes that science uses symbolic language and assertions to express itself. But these are symbolic processes for which science was not designed. Thus, the medium within which science makes itself known is outside of the realm of science. (ME: this becomes particularly relevant when dealing with words/symbols that refer to nonphysical symbolic entities.)

What does the ability to symbolize gain for humans? Percy explores this issue and argues that the practitioners do not derive any biological advantage from their enterprise. One does not become an artist because it guarantees or even increases one's probability of accruing wealth, good health, mates, and offspring. Nevertheless, Percy argues it would appear that the arts speak to an existential domain in human existence. So artistic endeavors go beyond biological and extend to meaningfulness in the life of the artist and to the appreciation of the art by perceivers/viewers. Thus, symbolization speaks to something beyond the biological to something existential in terms of meaningfulness. For this reason, Percy argues that symbolization's products (art, music, dance, religion etc.) cannot be understood through the methods of science. Science is the domain of the physical, the biological, but because symbolization engages issues in human life that are ontological and existential, it is relevant to different levels of existence, beyond the physical/biological/chemical. He believes that symbolization is a means of knowing and is therefore valued. It "is merely the *means* to satisfying this uniquely human cognitive mode of knowing in a new and unique way – not facts about but the essence of fixed the thing known. In other words, he means knowing not in the sense of 'possessing facts' but rather, of encountering the object, "in the Thomist and existentialists sense of identification of the knower with the known object' (MB297)' "(Perkins, 132). In Logan's (2007) terms, symbolization transforms percepts/perception into concepts/conceptualization.

Perkins notes (138) that there has been no resolution yet the mind-body problem/mind-brain problem. I suggest that perhaps this is because the notion of mind is a concept, and therefore, as a conceptualization it is non-physical. Thus, mind can be construed in perhaps an infinite number of ways. The notion of mind is like any other nonphysical conceptual entity. It has fuzzy boundaries; it is subject not to verification or fact, but instead to interpretation, imputation, an attribution. A final conceptualization may not be possible.

Perkins (139) notes that Percy's view that when science attempts to deal with non-material entities, it becomes incoherent; it fails. He sees the way for understanding man/humankind is through the examination of the nature of naming and of learning a name. It is here, in the primordial act of symbolization and subsequently through a broader understanding of language (and not simply its grammatical/syntactical aspects), we can come to grips with meaning and mankind. It is with the event of naming that human nature began.

Perkins (141) also notes that in Percy's assessment of Chomsky's view of language, the focus on universal grammar completely ignores symbolization and its origin in naming. He argued that scientists rejected "mystery in favor of subtly varying theories of materialism or physicalism, including those describing human behavior... Scientists and other intellectuals often have a materialist or mechanistic view of the nature of humanity and the language event – seeing a human being as a

chemical biological system, a purely physical substance, solely subject to and explainable by cause-effect scientific laws of physics and biology. Human thinking and communication, if not exactly replicable by computers, is at least not so dissimilar to computers. The result of this conflict is that a realistic understanding and explanatory model of the greatest mystery of all, the "Mystery of Language" (MB 150), is unexplored."(142).

Percy wants to understand the interpreter: the coming together of the symbol and the entity to which it refers. He wants to know where it is. He'd like to see a picture of it drawn. But we have to remember that Percy was trained as a physician; he was trained in science and at the same time, he maintains that the triadic relation is outside the domain of science; it cannot be understood through the scientific method; it is not amenable to experimentation. So, it would seem that Percy is demanding a scientific account of something that he doesn't believe is within the purview of science.

The interpreter, the triadic relations, and symbolization may be a product of brain activity, but there is nothing we know about neuroscience at this point that demonstrates the fact. Chomsky has the same problem with his notion of UG/LAD. There is no evolutionary biological, genetic, or neurobiological evidence for a UG/LAD, but someday there may be or there may never be. But because we have concepts for such things as democracy, mediocrity, genius, love, and creativity, which are nonmaterial symbolic abstract concepts, that somehow the human brain

produces, processes, and interprets these entities. The brain had to create any symbol which refers to the entity the meaning of which the interpreter's brain must recognize and understand.

References

Logan, Robert (2010). Mind and Language Architecture. *The Open Neuroimaging Journal* 4, 81-92