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THE SEVEN SIGNA: IMPLICATIONS OF A MEDIEVAL NOTION

Introduction

When Thomas Aquinas calls a sign «aliquid ex quo deveniatur in cognitionem alterius quasi discurrendo,» and «quodcumque notum in quo aliquid cognoscatur»[1], the possible extent of a typology of significance may threaten to exceed all bounds. What, after all, does not — when noted — somehow lead us on a course which bespeaks some other? Nonetheless, if we resist the shift to a pan-significant stance by reserving the word sign for those things alone which we recognize, with a sort of spontaneity, as pointing to some other thing, we discover a short list, and a very important one at that. I wish only to suggest that the list be slightly lengthened, and in a significant way, in order to accommodate what I see to be all seven species of sign.

Beyond the familiar classes of the formal sign (the concept), the natural sign and the arbitrary or conventional sign in philosophy, and the sacramental sign and the miraculous sign in theology, we would do well to include both the image and the symbol within the same theoretical framework. They are no less manifestive of an other than the five more familiar signs. In some ways, they are even more so. Beyond where conceptual thought may venture, or where causal reflection may explore the ramifications of natural phenomena, or where human custom may

[1] *Ver*., 9, 4, 4; in the second passage, I suspect some early, nodding copier wrote down *aliquid* instead of *aliud* by mistake, the latter being more fully the sense Thomas intends.

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fashion arbitrary tokens of its many intentions, and beyond where sacrament and miracle may point out the objects of faith, we find ourselves signifying in two other ways as well: we imagine, paint pictures and take snapshots and so know other things by means of these things in new ways, and we often glean from certain objects hints of mysteries no thought, nature or convention could ever adequately capture. Signs point to other realities in diverse ways. The concept signifies by its total transparency to the reality it denotes, formal in that it need not be grasped first as a concept in order to function as a sign — its very nature is to point to the other. The natural sign, of course, also points by nature, but it needs first to be noticed in its own right (like the smoke we see that signifies the fire unseen) before any significance occurs. It is the human will that lends significance to the conventional sign. The sacrament is understood in theology to be the kind of sign that effects what it signifies, giving it its special mark; and the miracle signifies by its witness to a divine agency nature cannot account for. But it is the unique mark of the image and the symbol that they signify by representing — the former through iconic imitation, the latter by evocation and suggestion. It is towards an inclusion of these two signs in a philosophical theory of significance that I offer the following remarks.

The Overplus of Significance: the Concept

A sign, for John of St. Thomas[2], is something that leads to the knowledge of a thing other than itself. Starting with those privileged means of knowledge, concepts, we find that by their very nature, they do not yield knowledge about themselves, but about things. The concept is a *signum quo cognosictur*, which is to suggest that we know the signified by means of the sign, without first adverting to the sign as such. You must first look at the stop-sign with your eyes before recongnizing the need to stop at the present intersection. But when thinking stop-sign, you did not

[2] Ioannis a S. Thoma OP, *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus,* «Ars Logica», pp. 21-22, Marietti, Rome, 1948, pp. 646-722. J. Maritain's remarks in *Les degrés du savoir*, Paris, 1932, pp. 769ff. and *L'esprit dans sa condition charnelle*, Paris, 1939, pp. 80-89, are useful commentaries on this commentator, as is A. McNicholl's relation of this tradition to modern trends in *Structuralism*, Rome, 1975, pp. 16-38.

first have to think: «Ah, there is a concept of 'stop-sign' in mind—I had better use it in order to think about that thing out there». The concept works, signifies, without being first looked at. Instead, you look through it. Its significance is perfectly diaphanous, each concept like a window to the world. As we don't look first at the glass and only then through the window, so it is with concepts. By calling this a formal sign, the Scholastic tradition is hinting that this kind of signifying lies at the base, or at the matrix, of all other significance. Its perfect intentionality makes all other intentionality possible. As Aristotle would have phrased it, that which is perfect in any genus is the cause of all other members of the same genus[3].

The vicariousness of the concept is so formal, all but an identity of knower and known is achieved. When the Stagirite affirms that the human soul is «in a certain way, all existing things»[4], he is crediting this to its capacity to conceive new forms in itself, and thus become itself, in a way, transformed into that which it knows. This characteristic of properly intellectual, or spiritual, knowledge is what makes man and angel both into beings imbued with significance and ordered to discovering and communicating significance.

The created spirit enters into cognitive contact with the world other than itself by somehow becoming it. That is to say, by being formed after the image and likeness of the object to be known, the created spirit knows it. The species or form of that knoweldge, "conceived" in its fruitful embrace with the inseminating act of being outside of it, makes the spirit itself into a kind of primordial sign. Each cognitive act transforms the knowing mind into an intentional sign, like one pointed finger somehow pointing to itself, and yet, somehow, indeed thereby, pointing to something beyond it.

Thus the formal sign is a kind of primary analogue in a world of very diverse signs. It is the first and foremost sort of created modification which leads to the knowledge of another. Its special paramountcy in this function, lifting it high in its work above the other kinds of signs we shall presently discuss, is the pure self-effacing transparency with which it acquits itslf of the office of indicating the other. It literally vanishes in the performance of

[3] This principle, oft cited by Thomas (*Contra Gentiles*, I, 41; II, 15; IV, 25; *Summa Theol*., I, 2, 3; III, 45,1 and passim) he borrows from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (II, 1, 993b 27).

[4] *De Anima*, III, 3, 431b 20-21.

its work. All other signs must first be somehow seen in themselves before they can give the signal that hastens the mind on to the actual target of significant cognition. We can go even further and affirm that it is normally only to the degree that a concept is inadequate, confused or just fuzzy, that it draws attention first to itself, or even at all.

The Six Non-Formal Signs

It would seem that the principle non-formal signs could be meaningfully grouped into four classes: natural, arbitrary, representational and supernatural, the latter two admitting further subdivision, giving us six in total. I only remark briefly on the two supernatural signs for sake of completeness: miracles and sacraments.

The miracle signifies God's origination or approbation of a given phenomenon. It lends divine testimony to an event, deed or word, which without it would stand naked and frail before the corrosiveness of human doubt. The Resurrection of Christ, for example—the Miracle of Miracles for the Christian—lends celestial sanction to all the other words and deeds of Christ on earth. Its crucial historicity, within the ambit of faith, is crucial because that story signifies in truth the transhistorical. A sacrament, on the other hand, is a quite different, almost opposite, kind of sign. Here there is no spectacular sensory, historical display at all. Like the miracle, it too is staged, if you will. And, both the miracle and the sacrament invite faith. The miracle, however, does so by a sensibly evident testimony, leading our mind to assent to something (or someone) other than the miraculous event itself. The sacrament is different. It might even be one of those things to which a miracle points! But it does not dazzle you. If you accept the testimony of the miracle-working Being, you will take His word that He can establish sensible signs as vehicles for invisible grace. That is what the sacrament is: a sign that effects what it signifies. It is over-the-top significance. It is as if stop-signs were to throw bricks at approaching cars. But let us return to philosophy. The philosopher should at the very least take note of the fact that champions of a supernatural order also insist on the centrality of significance.

Our remaining four kinds of signs will fall into their categories along the axis of how they signify by being adverted to first. That is to say, it may be the very nature of the thing that is significant (smoke of fire); it

may be a deliberated determination of the human will (mathematical signs, traffic signs, etc.); or it may be a kind of re-presentation of the things signified either by imitation or by suggestion (a portrait on the wall or a scull and crossbones on a jar of poison). Let us examine each in turn.

The Natural Sign

The natural sign indicates something other than itself by virtue of its very nature. A human convention need not be established to enable the appearance of smoke to signify fire to our minds; two or three experiences of the nexus between the two suffice to impress the natural significance of smoke on a mind awake. Smoke is related to fire as to its source, and the significance of smoke hails from this causal derivation. Likewise color in the cheeks is caused by vigorous circulation of blood, and so on. Zoologists tell us that the tail wag of dog, cat and horse each signify something different, but all three are still natural signs, albeit of three different inner dispositions. Throughout the world of nature, the variety of signs whose significance is independent of the human will testify to nature's causal coherence, and all of them together connive to make the very cosmos seem to naturally signify its Source. Many attempts at proof for the existence of God hail from this quality.

Arbitrary Signs

The human mind is by nature a maker of one kind of sign, as we have seen: the formal sign. One is almost tempted to classify the concept as a sub-species of natural sign. But, as was made clear before, though the concept is a natural act of the human mind, a given concept does not signify that mind, but rather something other than the mind (Idealism notwithstanding). If you could see a concept emerging from a hair-covered promontory, like smoke from a forested hill, you might conclude that the hairy object is a human head. That would be a natural sign indeed. But the very uniqueness of the concept, one must repeat, is that its work of signifiying occurs self-effacingly. You do not see it at all. Its naturalness is due to none of the natures it may be conceiving, but only to the one nature that is doing the conceiving. And initially invisible even to that nature, it hardly qualifies as a natural sign.

But the concept does submit, one might propose, to the control of the will. Is it not therefore an arbitrary sign? Again, one must answer no. The significance of an arbitrary sign is determined by a choice of the human will. The concept's significance, in contrast, is determined by its conforming to the form of the object. The last is not, as a rule, subject to the decrees of created volition.

The stop-sign, again, is a handy example, and for more than one reason. It is clearly arbitrary in its shape. An octagon does not bespeak stopping, slowing down, halting, any more than a triangle or a dodecahedron. It was chosen, for whatever reason, to betoken the stop-message, and agreement was forthcoming from all life-loving motorists. But, you might interject, what about the color? No one will deny that red seems to signify alarm and call attention to itself more than other colors. Why is this?

Somthing beyond pure convention seems to be at work here. Why does red call us, along with the bull, to attention? The answer is easy: blood. The bright crimson fluid that courses through our veins is supposed to run only on its hidden, interior highways—and not over the asphalt of our trafficways. When we do see the red river run, we know something is wrong. So the red stop-sign mixes its conventional message with an instinctual apprehension in man's psychology, thus stopping us more effectively than the rest of the rainbow can.

Still, we do choose to make our stop-signs red. The octogon is a voluntary selection, amost a whim. The red, however, is grounded in reality, *cum fundamento in re,* if you will. Well, is red a natural sign for danger? Not really. Red roses are not alarming. We do not gasp with horror at the sight of a red bird. The color red needs the sanction of a human choice to lift that strong, but not universal, signification of alarm to the status of a full sign. The arbitrary sign may not be fully arbitrary in the sense of indifferent or capricious, but it must be arbitrary in hailing from the willed decree of a *liberum arbitrium*.

The Representational Sign

The natural sign inidcates its cause, as smoke signals the presence of fire, but it does not re-present it. Smoke is not really like fire at all; it does not illuminate, nor does it normally burn. It cannot be said to imitate fire

or stand in the place of fire for purposes of suggestion or intimation. Existing smoke points out the presence of existing fire, but all it represents is cloudiness, coughing, obscurity, nuisance, etc. The North American Indian's smoke signals are arbitrary signs, of course, but only because the smoke represents something other than fire. The logic of our reflection suggests another type of sign which signifies neither by natural causal sequence nor by voluntary resolve, but rather by making the thing signified somehow present. This would seem to occur in two ways:

a. The Imitative Sign

The clearest example is what we might term the imitative or iconic representational sign. This is quite simply the image. Thomas defines the image in general as an expressed, specific similitude proceeding from its exemplar[5]. Now, John of St. Thomas argues against classifying the image as a kind of sign, and for two reasons. First of all, he says the image is related above all to its principle, the exemplar, and only secondarily to the knower of the image; the sign, in contrast, is related first to the knower, to whom it is significant. Secondly, an image can be of equal nature with its principle, as in the Image who is the Son proceeding from the Father in the Godhead; a sign, he maintains, is always inferior to the signified[6]. Thus, he restricts the number of non-formal (or instrumental) signs to the natural and the arbitrary.

It is not clear why the sign's prior relatedness to the knowing power to whom it is significant should wield such sway in the definition of sign. John himself gives a definition of the same, using even the word *repraesentare*, which seems to concede this: «id, quod potentiae cognoscitivae aliguid aliud a se repraesentat»[7]. In Thomas' many suggested definitions (he seldom pins one down), the word "represent", it is true, does not occur at all, but a subtle and instructive emphasis is placed on the significance-bearing reality as of greater moment than the knowing power to whom the sign is significant. For example: «aliquid manifestum

5 *Summa Theol*., I, 35,1.

6 Ioannis a S. Thoma, *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus*, «Ars Logica», II, q. 21, art. 3.

7 Ib., «Ars Logica» I, Summul. Lib. 1, c.2.

quoad nos, quo manducimur in cognitionem alicuius occulti»[8]. Furthermore, when Thomas does use the word represent, it is to designate an ontological similitude, and not merely to indicate something to the mind[9]. Since natural and arbitrary signs are clearly not similitudes of the signified, John makes the business of signifying to consist essentially in making the mind represent the signified, taking the occasion offered by the indirect indices of natural or arbitrary signs to produce the expressed species of the imagination, which really is a representation.

This circuitous use of the idea of representation, though circuitously justifiable, is hardly the clear and obvious meaning one would expect, and certainly not the vocabulary characteristic of Thomas. It prevents John from seeing, I suggest, the truly representational function of a large class of genuine signs left entirely out of his classification.

As to the inferiority of the sign to the signified as a further disqualification of the image, we might well be before a pseudo-problem. This inferiority only consists in the sign being ordered to the knowledge of the other, and not to itself—which does not necessarily entail an inferiority in nature. The theological example cited by John is so *sui generis*, it hardly reflects our common world of images and the imaged, where every portrait, for example, is inferior to the person portrayed. Even Joseph Gredt, in his famoous old handbook of scholastic philosophy, concurred with us by including the image under the rubric of sign, though with a slightly different ordering principle[10].

b. The Evocative Sign

Another kind of representative sign suggests itself to the logic of the question. This one would signify also by representation, but not by way of imitation. Whatever is represented in this imitative way is the kind of thing you really could see for yourself if you were there—such as the sitter who sat for the portrait, the landscape painted, the object photographed. But

8 *In Sent*., IV, 1,1,1,1,5m; *In Ver.*, 9, 4, 4m.
9 *In Ver.*, 7, 5, 2m.
10 J. GREDT OSB, *Elementa Philosophiae Aristotelico-Thomistae*, pars 1, no. 9.

isn't there also a mode of representation which attempts to make present something you could not see for yourself if you were there? Are there not realities which cannot be imitated or imaged in the material medium because they share no common material denominator? Such objects can only be suggested by metaphor, evoked by sensory innuendo, or hinted at by a combination of at first nonplussing signals. It is the species of sign that points, however imperfectly, to them that best deserves the name of symbol.

You may look directly at a fire without first being led to it by a trail of smoke. You may be stopped at a corner by a full appreciation of the danger of converging traffic, or by a policeman, without the visual tip of the stop-sign. Likewise, you can look at a person straight in their breathing face, without first familiarizing yourself with their portrait or photo. All these signs signify realities to which you could have direct access, and which—and this is important—would be even more present to you then than they were through their signs.

Indeed, even the formal sign, by its very nature, takes this all the way to its consummation, for it virtually hides itself beneath the signified—so perfect is its referential act of signification. At least in many cases, however, that object could be directly accessed by the senses, without the concept. But might there be sorts of things that can only be made present by a sign? An affirmative answer opens our minds to the quite different horizon of symbolic significance.

The symbol represents, as the image does, not merely indicating or denoting, but by making the things somehow present. But unlike the image, it does so not by imitation or delineation, projection or configuration, or any kind of attempted similitude, however stylized; it represents instead indirectly. The axis of reference in true symbolism is that of allusion, suggestion, intimation, evocation, and indeed, in some religious contexts, by invocation. The reason the symbolized objects need this larger, less exacting sphere of signification is because they are themselves harder to pinpoint, either conceptually, verbally or mimetically.

A national flag is indeed an arbitrary sign when we consider it as a conventional assembly of figures and colors which are taken to identify a ship as belonging to a certain country. But when the sailors of that ship gather around the same flag, saluting it and perhaps reciting the national hymn, it has become a symbol. It represents their country. But clearly it is

not an image of it. You cannot have an approximately adequate image of something as vast and various as a country. In fact, do we know what a country is? The soil? The people? The constitution? The ideals?—all these and more? We cannot adequately conceptualize it or imitate its full reality, so we symbolize it. We must leave the complexity and magnitude and even its more enigmatical dimensions all intact.

But not only wealth and multidimensionality require the symbol. Values and immaterial entities also need to be signified, but balk at the more circumscriptive embrace of the other signs. Over many court-houses you will see a pair of scales represented, usually held up by a blind-folded woman. They too are symbolic; they represent the virtue of justice. But why do we reach for symbols here? Are they anything more than just a clever visual shorthand for «the constant and perpetual will to render to each what is his own»?

We have a perfectly serviceable definition of justice, so who needs allusion and the conjuring up of suggestive atmospheres? But we must not confuse the possession of a definition with the elimination of mystery. For a mathematical symbol, perhaps, the two may conicide (though do not forget the crisis brought on the Pythagoreans by the perfectly defineable incommensurables, or the implications of the introduction of the cipher—the zero—into mathematics!).

Certainly, «to render to each his due» is logically compact in the abstract. Put it to work in a few concrete examples, however, and you will soon be teased by all the questions that visited the minds of Socrates' pupils in the *Republic* of Plato. Just what, after all, is man's due? Whence does he have it? Can he lose it? etc. Suddenly the definition is charged with all the excitement and doubt of a thousand contingencies. And we reach for a symbol.

Our examples here may lead one to surmise that the whole point of symbolism is to represent something that is vast and vague, like a mist or a faint perfume. Nothing could be further from the truth. To designate vague things you need vague words; vague arbitrary signs will do the job quite nicely. The word haze is an arbitrary linguistic sign for the formal sign (concept) of haze in the mind, which denotes an unclear atmosphere—no mystery at all, just obscurity. True mystery, on the other hand—and with it, true ontological complexity—is not symbolized because of its confusion or lack of definition, but for its richness of order and vitality which tends to boil over the hard edges of univocal concepts.

It is not that it is impalpable like smoke, but that it is unembraceable like a mountain.

Conclusion

There is good reason, we shall now conclude, to list the species of *signa* as seven, two supernatural: 1) the miracle and 2) the sacrament; and five natural (in the broader sense) : 3) the formal sign; 4) the natural sign; 5) the arbitrary (conventional) sign; 6) the imitative representational sign: the image; and 7) the evocative representational sign: the symbol. Significance is septenary.

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