Morrisian behaviorism and Peircean pragmatism

Pragmatism and logical empiricism are the two main trends in American thought taken up by Charles Morris and united in a doctrine called scientific empiricism at the time of his adherence to the project of Unified Science as envisaged by the supporters of logical positivism. It was within this perspective that Morris' behaviorism was to be gradually delineated as his research proceeded. Applied to psychology, the physicist thesis underlying the Unity of Science Movement found expression in American behaviorism, which generally consisted in rejecting the notions of mind and consciousness (refusal of mentalism) and in limiting investigation to the observable behavior of organisms. On his part, Morris had already dealt with the problem of sign within the framework of his discussion of mentalism and behaviorism in his early 1927 article, "The concept of the symbol". Morris' association of the study of signs with behaviorism initially occurred with reference to the latter as it had been formulated by K. Koffka and by A. P. Weiss. In addition to this, Morris was even more strongly influenced by the behaviorism of his master, George H. Mead, who in 1922 had already published an article entitled "A behaviorist's account of the significant symbol".

For a study of Morris' relation to the American pragmatists and behaviorists during the years of his intellectual formation, of fundamental importance is his 1932 survey of the various trends in American philosophy, *Six Theories of Mind*. In this volume Morris examines diverse stances from Plato to Russell and Whitehead in the light of the epistemological relation between mind and world. Furthermore, this volume proposes a discussion of the pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey with references also to Mead, whose influence on Morris was more direct. Working in the same direction, another significant volume is *Logical Positivism, Pragmatism and Scientific Empiricism* (Morris 1937), a collection of five articles originally published between 1934 and 1936. Here Morris examines logical positivism in its formulation by the Vienna Circle, together with other trends in European philosophy (of which he had had direct experience during his stay in Europe in 1935) in relation to the American tradition of thought.

In 1938, besides *Foundations of the Theory of Signs,* Morris also published "Scientific empiricism" as well as "Peirce, Mead, and pragmatism". In the latter he insisted on the affinity between Peirce and Mead, or more precisely between Peirce's "original pragmatism" (or "pragmaticism") and Mead's more recent formulation of it. These two scholars had many points in common, including: the importance attributed by both to the social factor, and to the theory of signs; the thesis of the inseparability of thought and semiosis; and the thesis of the connection between thought and action. Moreover, for both Peirce and Mead such aspects as finalism, chance, and creativity played an important role in the relation between mind and world. Morris identified a fundamental distinguishing element between the two scholars in his attribution of a metaphysical vision to Peirce and the altogether different "contextual or situational" approach characterizing Mead–a difference he traced back to Peirce's belief in "isomorphism between signs and things". We shall not dwell on this problem now, though it is doubtless worth observing that the current return to Peirce's philosophy, evident in Italy as well, would seem to contradict Morris' interpretation, at least in part. Here we shall simply observe that both Morris' acceptance of Mead's behaviorism and his recognition of the numerous points in common with Peirce's pragmatism is an indication that Morris' behaviorism is a special sort of behaviorism largely coincident with Peircean pragmaticism (more so than with the pragmatism of James, even though Morris did not fail to acknowledge his debt to the latter in a paper entitled "William James today", cf. Morris 1942).

In "Signs about signs about signs", Morris (1948) made a point of clarifying that he was mostly interested in behaviorism as it derived from Mead, as well as from Tolman and Hull. Indeed, far from applying a theory of psychology as elaborated in the study of rats in the laboratory (as stated by one of Morris' critics) to human beings, Mead, Tolman, and Hull aimed at elaborating a general

theory of behavior capable of explaining the behavior of both men and rats while at the same time accounting for the differences. The most interesting part of this 1948 paper by Morris is his reply to Bentley, who, in his review of SLB and with reference to Dewey's criticism of FTS, concentrated on the relation between Morris and Peirce. On considering Morris' use of the key concepts "interpreter" and "interpretant", Dewey accused the former of having "overturned Peirce". On his part and quoting from SLB, Morris replied that "as much as his orientation does not derive directly from Peirce", his position was in fact "an attempt at carrying out in resolute fashion his [Peirce's] approach to semiotics". On the other hand, Morris explains that his own form of behaviorism is a direct derivation from Mead, while only later was he to reckon with Peirce, as with Ogden and Richards, Carnap, Russell, and only subsequently with the behaviorists, Tolman and Hull. On replying to Bentley Morris also dealt with the criticism of Dewey, who was mainly concerned with the notions of "interpreter" and "interpretant" as adapted from Peirce. Dewey was unaware of the close connection established by Peirce between these two concepts, given that–at least in the text where he accused Morris of having misinterpreted Peirce–he viewed the relation between sign and interpretant as internal to the sign system, consequently leaving aside the relation between sign and interpretation and, therefore, the role of the interpreter in the process of semiosis in which something functions as a sign. There is no such thing as a sign without an interpretant or an interpreter, given that the interpretant is the effect of the sign on the interpreter; indeed, since the interpreter cannot exist as such if not as a modification caused by the sign in an open chain of interpretants, the interpreter is also an interpretant and therefore a sign. Peirce himself explained this coincidence between man and sign, interpreter and interpretant in "Some consequences of four incapacities" (*CP* 5. 264-317), while clarifying at the same time that far from eliminating any one of the two terms forming such pairs, each evidences a different aspect of the same process.

Another interesting point in Morris' discussion is his specification that Peirce used the term "interpretant" with different meanings: it is common knowledge that he in fact distinguished between immediate interpretant, dynamical interpretant, and final interpretant. Dewey's criticism of Morris was based on a misunderstanding which arose because of the different ways in which Peirce himself understood the term "interpretant", and despite Morris' own efforts at reducing the ambiguity of this term by introducing another, "significatum" ("designatum" in FTS) alongside it to indicate "the circumstances in which a person could respond because of a sign". Dewey used the term "interpretant" with the meaning of "significatum" as defined by Morris without realizing that for Morris, instead, the term "interpretant" indicated the effect of a sign on the interpreter. However, despite such misunderstanding and quoting from Dewey's *Logic*, in which he speaks of a preparatory disposition to act in a certain way toward the sign, Morris underlined how even Dewey in other contexts stressed this same aspect of the concept of sign.

It should now be clear that the sort of behaviorism supported by Morris was different from the mechanistic behaviorism of Watson, and from other approaches such as that of Bloomfield (who ousted the concept of meaning from the study of language) or Skinner, whose mechanistic conception as expressed in 1957 was heavily criticized by Chomsky (1959), among others.

In his 1964 book, *Signification and Significance: A Study of the Relation of Signs and Values*, Morris at last united the two main areas of his lifelong research: he had worked on values almost as much as he had worked on signs, and he rejected the idea that the mere fact of working on signs gave one the right to judge about values. A large part of his research had been dedicated especially to the problem of ethical and esthetic value judgments; in fact, after *Foundations of a Theory of Signs* and *Signs, Language and Behavior*, where such topics were already proposed within a semiotic framework, and almost ten years before *Signification and Significance*, Morris had already focused specifically on the theory of value in his 1956 book, *Varieties of Human Value*.

In *Signification and Significance*, Morris analyzed the two senses in which the expression "to have meaning" may be understood: that is, as having value and of being significant on one hand, and of having a given linguistic meaning, a given signification on the other. The term "meaning" is doubled into "signification", the object of semiotics, and "significance", the object of axiology. In considering signs and values together, Morris faced the problem of identifying a direct link between semiotics (signification) and axiology (significance) insofar as the two are concerned with different aspects of the same process (human behavior), as well as the problem of rediscovering the semiotic consistency of the signifying process to which the very ambiguity of the term meaning testifies (cf. 1964a: vii).

In *Signification and Significance* Morris introduced terminological innovations relative to the identification of the components of semiosis. He listed five:

– *Sign* (or better, sign vehicle). This term refers to the object acting as a stimulus to sign behavior.

– *Interpreter.* This term indicates any organism acted on by the sign vehicle. Such an extension of the concept of interpreter to include any organism whatever, and therefore, any kind of sign behavior beyond the human, gave semiotics the possibility of not limiting itself exclusively to the social behavior of man, and therefore of reaching beyond the limits established by *semiologie* of Saussurean matrix. This kind of orientation in semiotic studies was to find original development in the research of one of Morris' direct successors, Thomas A. Sebeok.

–*Interpretant.* This term covers the disposition to respond to a certain type of object as the result of a sign stimulus.

–*Signification*. The object to which the interpreter responds through an interpretant–that is, the signified object which as such, specifies Morris, cannot function simultaneously as a stimulus. Signification here replaces what Morris had variously called *denotatum* (1938) and *significatum* (1946), while the concepts of interpreter and interpretant remain constant. That the object of signification cannot function as a stimulus does not mean, explains Morris, that what gives itself over to direct experience cannot be signified. The point is, rather, that only a part of such objects can be perceived directly; and it is this part that functions as the stimulus or sign vehicle. The part that is not fully perceived functions instead as the signified object, as the object of signification. When we say "this is a desk", we do so on the basis of our limited experience of the object in question, of that part that is perceived directly and interpreted as a sign of the fact that we are dealing with a desk on the basis of the hypothesis (with all the risks of possible error) that there exist parts we do not actually see; the back of the desk, its underside, the drawers, etc.

–Finally, *Context.* This term refers to the set of circumstances in which semiosis takes place.

Another important specification in this section on the identification of the fundamental components constituting semiosis concerns, albeit indirectly, the role of definition in the cognitive process. Morris explains that it was not his intention to give a definition of sign, but to establish the situations in which something may be recognized as a sign. Such an operational or pragmatic attitude toward the cognitive object serves to demystify the role generally assigned to definition. In fact, it is not a question of defining the object as the condition of its knowability, but of describing situations in which we deal with signs. Authors like Welby and Vailati, who criticize the excessive trust in the cognitive import of definition, had already worked in a similar direction.

In his effort to establish a link between the axiological dimension and the sign dimension of behavior, Morris began by describing signification as designative, prescriptive and appraisive,

respectively exemplified with the terms "black", "ought" and "good". Following Mead, he then classified action as perceptual, manipulatory and consummatory. These three types of action and signification were then made to correspond reciprocally in the order indicated. Morris' research on the relation between signs and values is turned to identifying correspondences between notions established in the context of sign theory and notions established in the context of action analysis (Mead) and value theory. Such correspondences relate the two faces of the same process as though we were looking at the correspondences in writing on the two sides of the same sheet of paper. Morris' research concerns a fact of communication: communication among the order of signs and of values, and therefore, among the practitioners of fields concerned with such aspects of behavior.

Let us recall then Rossi-Landi's conclusion in its definitive formulation as expressed in his 1978 essay, "On some post-Morrisian problems": it states that Morris' behaviorism is best understood as a form of "social behavioristics" in which everything designated as "behavior" may be interpreted in terms of "social practice".