

# Chapter 14

## Bateson, Peirce, and the Sign of the Sacred

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**Abstract** I argue that Gregory Bateson and Charles Sanders Peirce, although holding different beliefs about God and religion, share much in common concerning how the body and mind operate as an integrative, recursive communication system. Regardless of their different points of departure on the topic of communication, their philosophic paths necessarily cross at an “interface” that constitutes an epistemological matrix between them. Herein, I explore this matrix and argue that Bateson’s epistemology of the sacred is best understood within a triadic frame of relations offered by semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce. Specifically, Bateson’s triadic relations of aesthetics, consciousness (mental process), and the sacred are understood by way of Peirce’s existential semiotic categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Hence, we come to know sacred existence as a phenomenological sign action of human semiosis. As a result, Bateson’s epistemology of the sacred becomes more accessible as a philosophy of human existence. We see that his epistemology fosters pragmatic insight concerning the relations between aesthetic perceiving and mental process that supports the characteriological growth of human beings in particular and scientific inquiry in general.

**Keywords** Gregory Bateson, Charles S. Peirce, semiotics, communication, sacred

### Introduction

In his evolving epistemological project concerning the necessary unity between mind and nature, Gregory Bateson makes the issue of *the sacred*, or the mental “pattern which connects” a central problematic, especially during his later years (Bateson & Bateson, 1987). He is convinced that by investigating the “interwoven regularities ... and necessities of communication and logic ...,” we open up new meanings for words like “god” and the “sacred” (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 142)

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that can be epistemologically heuristic. As his work progresses, Bateson becomes more confident than other theorists of his time are willing to admit that the texture of *the sacred* is deeply entwined within both “nature” and culture. Furthermore, he is sure that studying information and communicative processes of all organisms hold the key to understanding *the sacred*. He goes so far as to say “... that the communicative fabric of the living world is ordered, pervasive, and determinant even to the point where one might say of it, that is what men [sic] have meant by God” (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 151). As a theorist of human communication and a Communicologist,<sup>1</sup> I am convinced that, on many of these accounts, he is correct. Unfortunately, the full impact of his ideas have been largely ignored.

Given Bateson’s ontological framework known as the *ecology of mind*, how should we understand his notion of the *epistemology of the sacred*, especially within the current context of postmodern thought and human relations? More specifically, how, we must ask, is the process of *knowing* a sacred act between self, other, and world? And, how is *the sacred* tied to knowing, if we theoretically frame knowing as essentially a *communicative* process and event? Furthermore, how are both *knowing* and *sacrality* connected to *mind* and *nature*; connected, in other words, to both the mental and physical realms of human existence as we experience them within everyday life? All of these questions are, foremost, problematics of human communication; i.e., questions about *how relationships* between mind and nature are created, sustained, and transformed through linguistic and non-linguistic structures and processes. Specifically, the above questions call for a philosophy of communication, like Communicology, that will acknowledge the salient relationships interpersonally negotiated between cultural and corporeal aspects inherent within all human knowing and understanding (Eicher-Catt, 2005a). Put simply, it calls for an approach that reflects an integrative application of semiotics and phenomenology (Lanigan, 1992) to Bateson’s work.

Exploring these problematics within the framework of Communicology, we begin to understand that human communication is best conceived as *both* a structure *and* a process that entails information exchange but is not sufficiently created, sustained, or transformed by it. Such a theoretical position is not contrary to Bateson’s work in cybernetics, nor is it opposed to his later work on the *epistemology of the sacred*. Indeed, Bateson acknowledges that communication, at the human level of a system/environment interchange, requires interlocutors that not only succeed at exchanging “news of difference” or information (Bateson, 1972), but also are capable of together creating an identical message-to-code relationship that is mutually perceived or embodied (Ruesch and Bateson, 1987). Unlike many in my discipline in the United States who think they have reaped plenty from Bateson’s initial forays into cybernetics and information theory, i.e., the study of message

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<sup>1</sup>Communicology is a coherent theory and methodology recognized in the United States and Europe which explores the existential or phenomenological ground from which subjectivity and intersubjectivity emerge among human interlocutors as a semiotic (Peirce, 1955) process. Communicology’s historical roots lie within the *Geisteswissenschaft* (human science) tradition. See, for examples, Lanigan, 1988, 1992, 2000; Eicher-Catt, 2001, 2005a, Catt 2000, 2002.

production and exchange, I contend there is much more in Bateson's writings, especially in terms of *the epistemology of the sacred*, that can contribute to our understanding of the accomplishment (or lack thereof) of human communication, as defined above. My discussion herein thus focuses upon the following research question: How are we to understand *the sacred* as a way of *knowing* in the context of self, other, and world relationships?

Theoretically, I synthesize a semiotic perspective on language and discourse (Peirce, 1955) with an existential phenomenological (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) approach. The former engages questions of human, corporeal experience of signs and sign systems at the cultural level of existence (referred to by both Bateson and Peirce as simply "mind"). The latter perspective engages questions of human consciousness as a sign process at the level of physical/corporeal embodiment (akin, in this context, to Bateson's concept of "nature"). While Bateson theorizes his "Science of Mind" as a structural and processual *ecology of ideas*, based upon the interactions between an aesthetic conception of human agency and consciousness, semiotician and pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce conceives the workings of mind to be comprised from another triadic relation. Peirce's science is, of course, based primarily in semiotics, i.e., the study of sign processes as a communicational logic, whose phenomenological (bodily) elements he identifies as sign, object and interpretant.<sup>2</sup> These elements or categories of being, according to Peirce, constitute the semiotic process by which we come to grasp and know the world around us as a phenomenology.<sup>3</sup> In terms of our topic of *the sacred* and its relationship to *knowing*, both theorists have something to say. Bateson appreciates an ineffable "power" or sacrality that operates integratively, he believes, at a human "interface" as part of a larger matrix of mental process. *The sacred*, after all, provides the very "staff of life" (Bateson, 1991, p. 270) of which we are only a part. Although more implicit, Peirce (1955) also recognizes the same ineffable power, by acknowledging that any boundary conditions imposed by cultural signs are "... the very definition of thought" (Deledalle, 2000, p. 14) from which all life and knowledge about life spring. Read alongside one another, we come to appreciate that their philosophic paths "interface" (Bateson & Bateson, 1987). This interface constitutes, I suggest, a heuristic philosophic matrix that advances our understanding of *the sacred* or "the pattern which connects" as essentially a communicative phenomenon that is open to scientific interrogation. Exploring them together, we find that both philosophers recognize the possibilities that exist for the human condition if we honor any interface between mind and nature as a site of potential communicative accomplishment. As a result, such a synthesis allows us to explore how we might theoretically frame *the sacred* as a way of *knowing* about self, other, and world within a highly complex context of information networks and multi-layered systems of human signification and meaning in which we live as human beings.

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<sup>2</sup>See Gerard Deledalle (2000) for an insightful discussion of Peirce's categories.

<sup>3</sup>See specifically chapter six in the J. Buchler's (1955) *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* for a discussion of Peircian phenomenology.

## The Interface of Theoretical Foundations

Elsewhere (Eicher-Catt, 2003), I thoroughly interrogate their interface at the level of theory by employing an abductive logic as espoused by both Bateson and Peirce. Because this epistemological interface forms the foundation for my argument herein, I briefly summarize its main tenets.

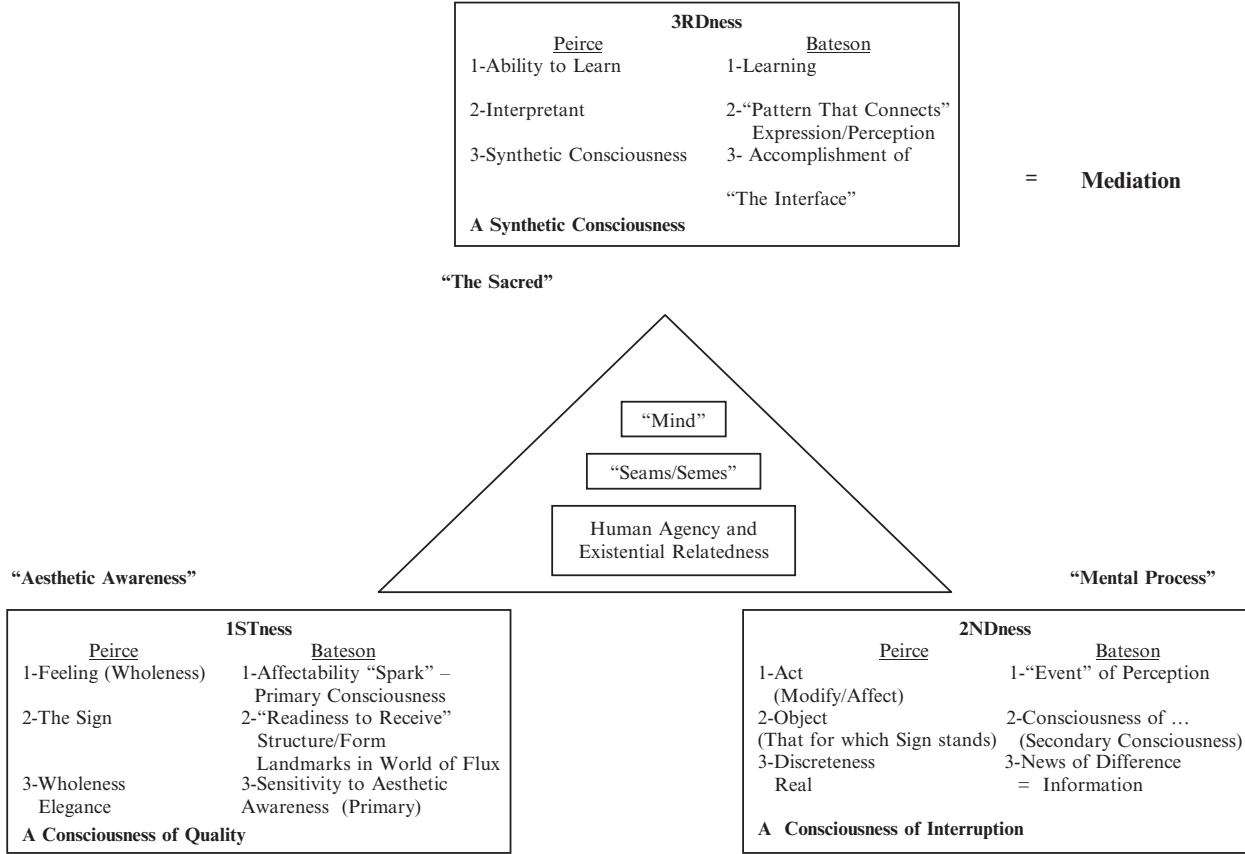
I begin by providing some context for the theories they both pursue on the essential integration of mind and body as a *communicative logic*. I compare Bateson's ecology of mind with Peirce's theory of sign actions. We find that one of the driving questions of scientific inquiry for both theorists is: what are "patterns," (in Bateson's case) or "signs," (in Peirce's case) for? In other words, both are concerned with what do signs/patterns of experience teach us about the world from which an existential pragmatics of mental process "naturally" evolves? I contend that both philosophers are troubled with the notion of human agency (at both the mental and biological level) and the pragmatics of existence as displayed within a multi-leveled, existential relatedness between self, other, and world. Most important, we find that both also construct their developing epistemologies within a triadic frame of relational understanding that successfully accounts for how the integration of body and mind is accomplished in everyday discursive and non-discursive practices.

In my comparison as Figure 14.1 suggests, I read Bateson's interpretation of the "readiness to receive" information function of organisms akin to Peirce's semiotic phenomenological category of Firstness. I see Bateson's notion of consciousness/awareness (understood as primary consciousness) as Peirce's semiotic phenomenological category of Secondness.<sup>4</sup> I interpret Bateson's pursuit of the "pattern which connects," or *the sacred*, as recognizing what Peirce describes as the semiotic phenomenological category of Thirdness. See Figure 14.1 for an account of these comparisons and their interrelationships at multiple levels of abstraction.

While Peirce and Bateson explicitly frame their scientific inquiries of mind in terms of these triadic relations, they are also aware that the very constitution of relations, in and of themselves, is a boundary-spanning activity. As humans we

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<sup>4</sup>Bateson, in particular, is careful to distinguish between what he means by consciousness and what he means by "mental process" or mind, although he stipulates that consciousness is an aspect of mind (Harries-Jones, 1995). For Bateson, consciousness is an awareness of how information moves in a communication system (Bateson & Bateson, 1997, p. 100). Typically, he separates consciousness into several levels to mark distinctions between those that are readily "accessible" to an organism's awareness and those that are not. Eventually in his epistemology, the term consciousness is reserved to represent the actions of living organisms promoted by conscious intent or purpose. He often spoke of this as a "secondary process" of mind or "prose" consciousness (Bateson, 1979, 1991). On the other hand, it does appear that Bateson's notions of the "unconscious" realm, "primary process," the "non-purposive components of mind," or what he deems "poetic/metaphoric consciousness," however, begin to speak to what phenomenologists call the primordial, pre-logical, or pre-objective aspect of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). At this level of his theory, moreover, Bateson does adequately account for an "active" consciousness (conceived as a phenomenological intentionality), even though its actions are typically inaccessible to human review.



**Fig. 14.1** Comparison of Semiosis (sign action) and the ecology of mind

bring some “thing” into relation with another “thing” precisely because there is a perceived *gap*, a discontinuity between the two that necessarily entails a *boundary* between them. Peirce thinks that the very nature of any sign’s appearance (its Firstness) automatically forms such a boundary condition for us from which we begin the existential process of semiosis or sign perception/interpretation. That is for Peirce, any sign, as an artifact of experience, sets up inclusionary and exclusionary rules by its “natural” history within a semiotic web that both possibilizes and constrains its subsequent signification and meaning constitution (as an aspect of Thirdness). Bateson, as a system’s theorist, is also well aware that the form/structure of any system/ environment within his ecological framework exists because of the inclusionary and exclusionary function of the necessary boundary that mediates the two. He writes extensively about the interface and later about “scanning the interface” as an essential route to accomplish this perception (Bateson & Bateson, 1987; Bateson, 1991).

However, to fully understand the communication dynamics of boundaries within both of their theories of mind and, consequently, to illuminate how we come to understand *the sacred* as a communicative phenomenon, we must “shift” to a higher level of awareness in our discussion. This brings me to my exploration herein: Bateson’s triadic relation of aesthetics, consciousness (mental process) and *the sacred* explicated through a semiotic and phenomenological lens. We discover within this triadic layer of theoretical thought, Bateson’s way of exposing how these three relations set in motion a new epistemology that any *sacred unity* (Bateson, 1991) entails.<sup>5</sup> According to Bateson, the recognition and preservation of this unity of relations is indicative of any organism’s survival worthiness. I begin with Bateson’s focus on aesthetics.

## Aesthetic Experience as Epistemology

Bateson theorizes that to recapture a productive sense of the “eternal verities of life and environment” that together weave the “pattern which connects,” scientific inquiry has to reclaim, from organized religions, some of the qualitative sensibilities about how to perceive the world that substantiates a recursive unity between mind and nature. Therefore, he proposes an attitude or sentiment towards inquiry

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<sup>5</sup>Now, as I begin this theoretical juxtaposition, I am fully aware of Bateson’s suspicion of our capacity to “symbolize,” or our capacity to use language and discourse to represent the world. The irony of my argument in this paper, reading Bateson through Peircian semiotics, will not go unnoticed, therefore, by those most familiar with Bateson’s work. Although Bateson refutes our capacity to symbolize because of its power to “cut things up” (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 302) in acts of representation, I hope to show that, while symbolic language certainly accomplishes this feat, a contrary “language of relationships” (Bateson, 1979) that Bateson promotes is inherent within Peirce’s triadic relations of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. In my analysis, semiosis, understood as embodied relations of signs, becomes sacramental to Bateson’s epistemology, rather than counter to it.

that espouses an aesthetic, i.e., a “perceiving for perceiving’s sake” (Hospers, 1967, p. 36) in which life’s structures and processes can be recognized as aesthetic performances and accomplishments. This way of perceiving the world is not to be confused with a cognitive focus that merely reduces objects (signs) to self-serving frames of reference. Aesthetic appreciation, for Bateson, is at once an unconscious and unaware experience fueled by primary not secondary consciousness, as he defines them. That is, it is an awareness that is non-purposive. Thus, he understands that “Aesthetic attention [toward the world] is always to the phenomenal object, not to the physical object” (Hospers, 1967, p. 38). The aesthetic experience is constituted by an appreciation for the internal/external, structure/process amalgamation of the object (sign) perceived that gleans its originary “neatness, elegance, and economy of means” (Hospers, 1967, p. 38). He recognizes, especially in all religious doctrines and sacramental activities, an ability to evoke in participants this broader appreciation for a perception of the world’s aesthetic beauty. (As a phenomenological semiotician, Peirce, of course, categorizes this state of appreciation and beingness as Firstness.) Moreover, Bateson is convinced that we, as a species, do not endorse an aesthetic attitude enough when it comes to our own ways of knowing about or understanding the world. Such a perspective, he thinks, would enhance our abilities to appreciate *the sacred* unity of mind and nature. It also would increase our survival worthiness.

Above all, Bateson understands that to invoke the aesthetic within an evolving epistemology means that science needs a degree of “humbleness,” i.e., an ability to submit itself to the process of recursive questioning which should subsequently stir, move, or pull itself out of typical modes of thinking to this new level of awareness. To use Peirce, we are able to aesthetically appreciate or value life, Bateson thinks, because of those aspects of originary Firstness which problematize the immanence and transcendence of experience *simultaneously*. Anything deemed *sacred* is, after all, that which we hold dear (immanent) because it is that which is untouchable or unspeakable (transcendent). This mental process entails, of course, an implicit appreciation (as an aspect of primary process) of the *boundary* or *interface* that necessarily exists between the two. Bateson, I believe, is fully aware of this paradoxical division and unity of perception and experience when he claims that such an aesthetic experience of inquiry requires a degree of detachment from the natural attitude of science and propagated by life’s sense of everydayness. He also understands that the drawing of the boundary is an axiological event framed by our own perceptual/expressive processes since, “the boundaries we draw are also criteria of our own taste and aesthetics” (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 226). To respond to life through aesthetic perception means it is necessary, according to Bateson, not only to recognize, non-purposively, that a boundary between system and environment exists, but to appreciate the existence of the boundary for the potentiality of information exchange and communication it provides. After all, it is the discontinuity or *gap*, as Bateson says, that is necessary in order to prevent “... recursive systems [from] dissolv[ing] into tangles of interconnectedness” (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 223). Boundaries, as Harries-Jones (1995, p. 223, my italics) explains, and their corresponding “*Gaps* are necessary in order that perceptual processes can mark

distinctions and differences in system integration. Recursiveness certainly proposes patterns of continuity. Yet gaps and discontinuities are a condition of grasping such continuities of form." This primary "conscious" experience of the boundary invokes an aesthetic. It is "wonder in face of the world," as phenomenologists contend.<sup>6</sup>

## Mental Process (Consciousness) as Epistemology

Although Bateson does not, of course, define mind or mental process explicitly as a function of semiosis, as Peirce does, we have seen how his ideas about the nature of mind run parallel with Peirce's, especially in regard to mind's essential relational components. Fundamental to Peirce's "law of Mind" is his premise that the study of sign actions offers "an account of how the mind functions, develops, and decays ..." (Colapietro, 1989, p. 54) within a "semiotic web" constituted inter-relationally. To Peirce, mind is both form and function (Bateson's notions of structure and process) and is not merely cognitive in scope. Instead, mind is mediated by a consciousness that exceeds Bateson's concept of "secondary process." Peirce theorizes that "ideas" or mental processes tend to spread through affectability so that all mental phenomena exhibit an inherent dynamic quality that is captured phenomenologically. This matches closely with Bateson's notion of mental process as an "aesthetic sensibility" (Bateson, 1979). Peirce also qualifies his three modes of being as "categories of consciousness" (1955, p. 95) where Firstness is a consciousness of quality, Secondness as consciousness of an interruption into the field of consciousness, and Thirdness as synthetic consciousness, binding all together.

With his ideas of the ecology of mind, Bateson, like Peirce, is trying to explicate mental process as a systematic account of informational and communicational checks and balances, self-corrections, growth and decay at any system/environment interface (Ruesch & Bateson, 1987). Bateson's notion of the mind thus displays a rich texture or "matrix," as he says, that seeks to account for all the "communication regularities of the biosphere" (Bateson & Bateson, 1979, p. 142) that comprise systems of thought. Bateson's theories of mind, in other words, seek to explore what Peirce calls "psychical truths," or the workings of the mind in general" (Colapietro, 1989, p. 51). Thus, for Bateson, mind or mental process is of a higher logical type or level of abstraction than his other notions of consciousness framed as conscious intent or secondary process. Peirce theorizes similarly. As Peirce remarks, "... the action of thought is all the time going on, not merely in that part of consciousness which thrusts itself on the attention ... but also in the deeply shaded [or hidden] parts" (cited in Colapietro, 1989, p. 40). To Bateson's way of thinking, mind, as a complex matrix of ideas and ideas about ideas, illuminates how ideas (news of difference) move within the system/environment interface to allow for the formation of pattern, purpose, and organization within every living organism. (Bringing these

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<sup>6</sup>This phrase is credited to phenomenologist Eugene Fink.



elements into contiguous relation does, of course, constitute Secondness according to Peirce's categories of existence.) Thus Peirce also allows for the accomplishment of Secondness from both secondary conscious purpose and "unconscious" primary consciousness.

The meeting place or *interface* at which scientific inquiry or human relations encounter "news of difference," i.e., information, or Secondness, is best understood as yet another existential boundary condition exposed by the unique relationship established between aesthetic experience (Firstness) and mental process (Secondness). Especially at this level of thinking, Bateson is quick to emphasize that the "lines" or boundaries that are drawn are a direct result of any science or human's operating premises and subsequent criteria for judgment—its operating ontology and axiology. Thus, developing mental processes as an evolving epistemology requires a scientist or an ordinary human being to appreciate comparison and metaphorical thinking that bring into contiguity two differing positions in hopes that, through their juxtaposition, new insights about the "patterns which connect" are produced.<sup>7</sup>

As Harries-Jones describes, it is at this juncture of Bateson's thinking that he corrects or improves his model of mental process as advanced in *Mind and Nature* (1979). Bateson's new concern lies in the relation between process and structure that he previously outlined on the basis of Russell's hierarchy of logical typing. That is, his previous proposal of process and structure as a "dialectical zig-zag" relation was primarily "... a cognitive reordering of relations (i.e., reordering from the 'inside,' or 'the form side'), as Harries-Jones (1995, p. 261) explains. Instead, Bateson subsequently realizes that he needs a new model that "... [will] more clearly emphasize an ability to grasp percepts of 'the process side' in addition to 'the form side,' and their patterns of interconnection" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 261). To solve this, Bateson develops his idea of "scanning" at the interface which "... requires as a minimum *a triad of relations* ... [because] ... the model of 'scanning' had to account for the way that the whole system – ecology, environment, and mind – is able to re-enter an organism's perception, enabling observation in a recursive manner, without splitting organism from environment" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 261, my underlining). Thus, he devises a structural and processual model similar to Peirce's triadic relation of sign, object, and interpretant in that his new model acknowledges, like Peirce's, a pattern of "... reflexive communication that [is] *intransitive* in its processual orientation – and one which include[s] patterns of loops within loops as a mark of its continuity" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 262). His model includes, therefore, a double articulation at the interface between continuities and discontinuities. His objective is to not only account for a "creative subjectivity" within humans in general and scientific inquiry more specifically, but also to account for how such "self-referencing systems" conjoin and couple at the interface to produce new ideas or insights. As Bateson now asserts, the coupling aspect at the boundary (its aspect of discreteness/Secondness) recognizes its recursive capabilities,

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<sup>7</sup>This constitutes, of course, Peirce's notion of an abductive logic.

i.e., “boundaries of any interface are scanned as we meet them and are themselves changed as we alter our relations to them” (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 264). Above all, Bateson’s evolving epistemology as mental process acknowledges the necessary unity of primary and secondary consciousness or mental process as well as the boundary conditions from which that unity is ultimately derived. Therefore, Peirce and Bateson theorize mind as both immanent and transcendent experiences of consciousness. Peirce thinks mind produces mental “habits” or regularities of affect by focusing upon the cultural elements of language as they are articulated and circulated in discourse. Bateson thinks mind achieves “pattern” within an evolving matrix of communicative patterns, also embedded within discursive and non-discursive frames. Both assign to mind an imaginative or creative function by recognizing its reflexive and recursive capabilities. They are simultaneously idealistic and materialistic concerning the characteristics of mind. That is, they are idealistic because they think “... matter is a species of mind” and materialistic because they think “... mind must be embodied” (Colapietro, 1989, p. 113) to move, to shape, to affect within self, other, and world relations.

Given the above, we see that Bateson’s mental process and Peirce’s concept of mind align closely with a phenomenological and semiotic understanding of human relations. The relationships between the two reveal their *mind-in-action* as it exists to enliven everyday cultural experiences, including scientific investigations. Bateson’s foci upon communication systems and with the mutual causal chains activated by “news of differences” are concerns, I contend, with the phenomenological semiotic conditions of lived experience. Although Bateson is careful not to jump onto a phenomenological bandwagon, it is not because he does not share some basic ideas about what mind or consciousness of the world entails. Rather, he misinterprets, I believe, the phenomenologists’ concept of perception by accepting the mistaken belief that phenomenologists do not recognize distinction/difference but only generalizing gestalts within the perceptual process (May, 1977, p. 80). To the contrary, existential phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) and many others clearly articulate the primacy of perception as an accomplishment of the very distinction and difference that Bateson recognizes as the relational key to knowing anything. Our final perceptual experience of the gestalt is, however, an irreducible accomplishment of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness, as a *sacred* unity.

## **Bateson’s Epistemology of the Sacred**

As Bateson’s exploration of science and human communicative action reveals, the recursive and reflexive elements of the relations between aesthetic awareness (Firstness) and mental process (Secondness) are mediated by “the pattern which connects,” what Bateson comes to call *the sacred* (Thirdness). Essential to this overall communication process (identified by Peirce as both phenomenological and semiotic) is an understanding of structure or forms (signs to Peirce’s way of thinking) that, by their very nature, instantiate boundary conditions between the relations,

i.e., the conditions of human perception/expression that engender these relations. As Harries-Jones indicates, in Bateson's posthumous publication *Angels Fear*, written with his daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, he identifies how boundaries are essential for setting the "outer limits" between living systems and non-living systems, acknowledging Jung's distinctions between *creatura* and *pleroma* in his, *Seven Sermons of the Dead* (1965). Bateson is also well aware that "... wherever a distinction is drawn which separates a unity, as with the figure of *creatura* on the ground of *pleroma*, the distinction will always require a 'third position' from which the separation of figure from ground can be contemplated" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 97, my italics). At this level of thought, Bateson identifies this third position as *the sacred*. Boundaries are, of course, the very means by which any "ordering of relations" abides at any level of human existence or scientific inquiry in general. Peirce also recognizes the existence of these implicit boundaries when he identifies his three categories of mind and the distinctions between them.

Now, Bateson envisions boundaries as Harries-Jones describes (1995, p. 99, my italics), as creating "... gap[s] in a continuum which is otherwise perceptually undifferentiated. The 'gap' then becomes a locus for contrast, this is for perceiving a difference and creating a distinction between figure and ground. *Once the boundary is perceived*, the distinctions in its levels and the characteristics of the 'gap' can be spoken about." Bateson contends, therefore, that these gaps are needed in order to maintain the possibility of *the sacred*. Moreover, Bateson theorizes these gaps within his multi-leveled communicative matrix as primarily the absence of communication or "noncommunication" (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 80). We have to conclude, at this point, that he is referencing noncommunication as the absence of any system/environment information interchange. In this specific context, however, Bateson is erroneously equating the act of *communication* with conscious purpose or intent to send a message that, by its very intrusion within the system/environment relation, may disrupt the aesthetic experience of mental process or "... alter the nature of the ideas" (1987, p. 80).<sup>8</sup> Because he wants to eliminate this intrusion, he advocates an avoidance of "communication" as a way to preserve the "secrecy" that typically surrounds anything we deem *sacred*. To Bateson, the avoidance of communication (defined, in this context, as intent to send a message or *information*), is, of course, an act of non-connection that sustains the *gaps* between patterns of thought that he thinks possibilizes *the sacred*. Hence, he subsequently admits that "silence is golden" (1987, p. 81) when it comes to understanding *the sacred*. As such, however, he defines silence as an accomplishment of conscious purpose to *not* "communicate." This act of silence would ironically, however, constitute silence arrived at through what Bateson identifies as a "self-consciousness" (1987, p. 86).

In order to correct this mis-interpretation of equating communication with conscious intent to send a message, as Bateson does in this passage, we need to accurately

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<sup>8</sup>This is not unlike many who superficially equate the sending of a message with communication. Instead, the act and process of communication needs to be understood at a different level—it is an accomplishment of mutual understanding that entails information or message exchange but is not sufficiently determined by it.

view human *communication* as an accomplishment where mutuality of signification and meaning is derived, as detailed above in my previous discussions. Accordingly, we can then view this experience of the gap as silence, as Bateson acknowledges, but it is a silence that *marks* the very accomplishment of communication between interlocutors as the establishment of mutual meaning (Thayer, 1997). If we accept the premise that information exchange is motivated by a need to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), as is popular within the literature of communication studies, then silence, in this sense, signals its accomplishment. It is the moment, in other words, when mutual signification is phenomenologically achieved between interlocutors within the sign to object to interpretant relationship. But, it is a mutuality that lacks any self-consciousness. Or, in Bateson's terminology, this structure and process signals the achievement of "balance" between system and its environment which emphasizes the boundary or unity between the two. Further on in this passage, Bateson does admit that silence, understood in the sense I am now using it, marks the experience of "approaching holy ground" (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 81) and that "... a *lack of self-consciousness* is right in the center of this business of noncommunication" (1987, p. 86, my italics). Silence, understood in this corrected way, thus manifests the gaps that in turn engenders unevenly distributed information among the interacting parts (1987, p. 85). On a human level, the result of this experience of uneven distribution of information takes the phenomenological forms of an "unknowing," "secrecy," and/or "mystery" that *the sacred* portends.

So far, we have explored the existential and semiotic relations of both Bateson and Peirce in terms of how we should appreciate human experience as an accomplishment of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness as a *sacred unity*. In order to answer fully my research question: how are we to understand *the sacred* as a way of *knowing* in the context of self, other, and world relationships, requires, however, another recursive "shift" in perspective. It requires "double vision," as Bateson contends. It requires a recursive move, in other words, from Thirdness back to Firstness in our attempt to fully explore (and perceive) *the sacred*. In doing so, we begin to expose how we existentially weave insights about *the sacred* into a typical fabric of everyday life that clearly displays *the sacrality* of human existence in its function and form.

## Weaving Sacrality into Human Existence

If we conceptualize these relations of unity and difference metaphorically as various pieces of cloth or fabric, as Bateson often does in his writing (Bateson & Bateson, 1987), then we can visualize these essential gaps as spaces that mark the distinctions between the woof (aesthetic awareness) and warp (mental process) of any fabric's weave. When successfully combined (*sacred unity*) they accomplish patterned existence. As a reminder, Bateson envisions that these interfaces, boundaries, or gaps are *essential* and thus contribute to the fabric's (organism's) integrity

because they allow the fabric or necessary unity to "... permit change to occur without disruption of the whole system, or, alternatively, without the whole system being required to adapt constantly to minor variations" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 101). Again using the power of metaphor, these essential gaps within a piece of cloth allow, in other words, for a fabric of human existence to remain flexible and less likely to shred under normal conditions of wear and tear. As Bateson acknowledges, "It is this *loss of flexibility* that would be lethal to the total process" (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 92). This idea explains why in his later writings he contends that "continuity at the interface of the recursive must be offset by discontinuity" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 223). And, while "... recursiveness certainly proposes patterns of continuity ... gaps and discontinuities are a condition of grasping such continuities of form" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 223). Unfortunately for us, we do not recognize these typical gaps in regular pieces of fabric because they are the *ground*; their purpose is to focus our attention on the *figure*, i.e., the originary wholeness of the cloth (or discourse) as a work of art (or communication). Therefore, it is in our recognition of the distinctions between continuity and discontinuity in human existence that enables us continually to weave any fabric of patterned thought, whether personal or scientific. Indeed, any fabric of life is both form and process, as Bateson acknowledges.

When we finish our weave of knowledge (or patterned thought), we often bind the edges with what a fiber artist calls a *seam*. Now, the kinship between the word *seam* and the Greek word for sign, *semeion*, or in its shortened derivative, *seme* (pronounced *seam*) is not coincidental. *Seme* is translated in a number of ways, the most relevant being as a sign, *boundary*, or divine message, as in the 'signs and tokens' of the God of the Old Testament, such as the rainbow (Wilden, 1987, pp. 142–143). Hence, a *seam/seme* or presence of a sign acknowledges a *divine boundary* that exists between continuity and discontinuity, between mind and nature, between aesthetic awareness and mental process. To Bateson's way of thinking, unfortunately every discipline within the academy is busy weaving its own pieces of knowledge and binding them with *seams/semes* or signs which, above all, keep them appearing separate and distinct from one another. This process of producing multi-layered, distinct pieces of *seamed/semed* fabric, whether in the scientific realm or the realm of human relations, runs the risk of producing too many fragments of knowledge which remain disjointed. The overall aesthetic "pattern which connects" is under-appreciated and thereby lost, especially in Western societies where the grand narrative of progress requires replacement of the old with the new. In the case of scientific inquiry, even if epistemological investigations eventually expand our ontological base at greater levels of abstraction, we do so at the risk of instituting new boundaries or seams/semes, where edges of cloth have been sewn together in a confusing patchwork way. For Bateson, it is better or "healthier" if we initially recognize the gaps (engendered by these signs of inquiry) produced by these fragments as already part of a greater matrix or necessary unity that exists between an epistemology of aesthetics and mental process. Understanding this process of boundary recognition, through sign instantiation, I argue is the very process and ultimate structure of what Bateson describes metaphorically as *the*

*sacred*. Ironically, we must come to understand that the actual establishment of these boundary conditions or *gaps* is the *necessary condition* that creates any system's relationship to its environment. Without the gaps, there are only "tangles of interconnectedness" (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 223), as Bateson reminds us.

A fuller appreciation of *the sacred* is not achieved, however, through conscious purpose or an awareness of the boundary that is, in any sense, goal directed. To the contrary, such self-conscious boundary awareness possibilizes only secular discourse, as Bateson understands it, or discourse at the everyday level of existence. Rather, it is in the silent *process* of stitching across the gaps and creating the structural element of a seam/semé that, for Bateson, begins to expose the possibilities inherent within *the sacred*. It is, in other words, recognizing within an aesthetic awareness discontinuity as a possible continuity and vice versa. Thus, the "pattern which connects" is mediated by the relationships between *form* (pattern/sign/semé) and *process* (action/stitching/expression/perception) as a phenomenological semiosis of the speaking/perceiving person. According to Bateson, all living organisms participate in this sacred triadic process although, in the case of human interaction, its accomplishment is typically repressed. Fundamentally, what *is sacred* in life is to know aesthetically, as Bateson suggests, the potentiality of "ideas" or the experience of "differences which make a difference" and the contextual cues that shape the success or failure of interactions. In an everyday sense, these ideas or epistemologies can be revelations; however, they are only produced when we effectively participate in our own determination and evolution at the existential boundary condition presented by a given sign(s). Bateson contends that this accomplishment induces both positive "pure and holy" and negative consequences "impure and unholy" seams/semes depending upon our level of awareness and responses at the boundary. In discussing this process as a sequencing of steps, Bateson and Bateson (1987, p. 159) contends that "... the outcome of the sequence will depend upon the sequence of steps, and if the sequence is in wrong order or some steps are omitted, the outcome will be changed and may be disastrous." Accordingly, in contributing to our own determination and evolution every human and scientific system has the capacity to participate and create positive sign actions or negative ones. Using Bateson, we can understand that the outcome of any sign action is signified as positive when it supports the characterological growth of our being as an integral component within a wider network of social relations. When the systemic balance is disrupted or stymied, characterological disintegration occurs and the outcome is signified as negative (Bateson, 1991).

Now, in his later writings on how this process of accomplishment applies specifically to human agency, Bateson emphasizes the importance of understanding *how* we perceive or "scan" our stitching process at this boundary/sign interface. The interface is characterized, according to Bateson, by differences of kind or qualitative differences between what is one side and the other (1987, p. 123). Accordingly, in our process of "scanning the interface" (Bateson & Bateson, 1987), if we do not, in other words, problematize or sufficiently grasp the system/environment boundary as a moment that possibilizes a sacred *aesthetic connection* between mind/body, then our interactions within the world become merely re-productions of

already thematized or existing cultural signs and embodied codes. The world becomes full of “things,” distorting the awareness of relations among things. Our overall fabric of inquiry or life may be torn, but we do not notice that we are at the mercy of signs and patterned sign systems. In such cases, all our sign actions (products of phenomenological semiosis) appear to follow the same general rule; our interactions with the world are determined, colonized, and/or naturalized by the very “nature” of cultural sedimentations of meaning (ideologies) posed by these patterned sign systems. Life, in general, and epistemology in particular, become mere duplication of culturally accepted sign processes and interpretations that separate us from future, differing interpretants that might provide other possibilities for meaning and scientific investigation. These dominant cultural codes have “reset the bias,” as Bateson says (1987, p. 134); such codes change the structure’s (or organism’s) calibration in the way it typically receives information. Bateson (1987, p. 138) argues that under such conditions the potential for pathology runs high. These dominant cultural codes “... clot together to create aggregates which become the embodiment of themes of which the individuals themselves are or may be unconscious.” Unfortunately, there is comfort at this unproblematized boundary for those who reject ambiguity, mystery, and the questioning that typically follows.

When we eclipse boundary recognitions, either at the level of primary or secondary consciousness, therefore, we merely develop “habits” and pre-“dispositions” toward the world that certainly serve to frame our existence and the questions we ask about it (Peirce, 1955). Life, in general, and scientific inquiry in particular, become pre-ordained or “ordinary.” Ironically, Peirce describes philosophic inquiry from this point of view as “seminary” (Colapietro, 1989, p. xvii), using its religious connotation. He believes it to be a sub-standard way to think. It is thinking, according to Peirce, within a pattern of ideas that is not of one’s own making. It is adopting a doctrine or pattern of signs and sign systems instead of questioning them. Again speaking metaphorically, we see how such a state of non-recognition of the boundary is produced by mistaking seams/semes at the edges of various pieces of cloth for seams/semes that unify instead of further divide. Such a perceptual process engenders various bound or seamed pieces of cloth that appear self-contained and, therefore, legitimate. In such cases, the sign or sign systems do, indeed, reign dominant and unquestioned. We mistake our part of epistemological thinking for the whole. As a result, we produce fragments of knowledge or meaning that are only familiar, i.e., fit within a logical frame of language and discourse that seeks only to represent itself. Bateson classifies such sign interpretations as “secular” experiences of the world. Such occasions only honor, appreciate, and consequently, preserve mundane existence. De-personalized, life takes on a superficiality that renders it unrewarding (Eicher-Catt, 1996). Likewise, he says this is indicative of the manifestation of the “impure” aspect of the “pattern which connects,” the other side of the coin of *the sacred* (Bateson, 1991). Furthermore, he indicates that such mis-recognitions at the boundary foster a host of pathologies, based upon essential confusions about meanings, both their type and level. Thus, not recognizing or not adequately problematizing the boundary or sign at the interface, at either the primary, aesthetic or secondary level creates pathological thinking that spins what can

become profane recursive webs of future distortion and misrecognition at both the personal and societal levels.

Thus, in order to fully appreciate *the sacred* and connect the aesthetics of experience with the consciousness of mental process as Bateson conceives them, the boundary or gaps between the system/environment interchange must be phenomenologically perceived and semiotically problematized; i.e., the gaps must be *aesthetically appreciated*. Bateson describes this process of aesthetic recognition as the perceptual “scanning the interface” (Bateson & Bateson, 1989). With this claim, he wants primarily to accentuate the very fact that the system environment relationship has an interchange that possibilizes its unity when its structure and process is fully appreciated. With this notion of scanning, Bateson is also trying to account for a process of “double vision” of the organism that transpires at the interface. As Harries-Jones (1995, p. 263) points out, with his concept of double vision Bateson proposed “... that difference must interface twice into the process of perception. In the first case, the interface is in the form of perceiving a pattern of continuities; and in the second interface, differences that make a difference are recognized in order to enable classification to take place.” I contend that Bateson’s notion of double vision describes the existential yet reciprocal movements of perception as we move from Peirce’s semiotic category of Thirdness (continuity from within the system) back through Firstness to Secondness (differences of pattern imposed from the environment) within a repetitive pattern that a phenomenological semiosis always entails. Bateson is acknowledging that there is a recursive movement (such as demonstrated by my “stitching” metaphor) that occurs along the boundary that creates new perceptual seams/semes of conscious and “unconscious” experience. Bateson is convinced, after all, that “It is at the crossing of these [semiotic categories] that creativity abides” (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 264). Thus, a problematized sign or sign system (a difference that triggers a response) provide the opportunity for a “release” from ordinary taken-for-granted discourse and perception as described above. It also highlights the fact that we are ultimately the decision makers that control this release (Bateson, 1979, p. 102). This is the very *vitality* of existence that we so often seek to experience. This is, I believe, the actualization of the “pure” sense of *the sacred*. Under such conditions, the experiences that follow appear extra-ordinary as we momentarily sense a clear, felt boundary between ourselves (the system) and our environment and that “boundary is good,” because it is of our own making. It is an evocative experience that moves us to keep traversing the boundary, to keep stitching, although it is a practice that is difficult to sustain because of life’s constant interruptions.

Therefore, from a Communicological perspective coming to *know* and understand *the sacred* is a momentary aesthetic acknowledgment of the experiential gaps between semiotic relations and the phenomenological experience of those relations as a “pattern which connects.” After all, we must come to know that gaps exist before we can attempt to sew them. Coming to *know the sacred* is, in other words, the aesthetic experience of actually phenomenologically traversing the existential boundary by stitching semiotic seams through the gaps. This stitching is done metaphorically in expressive/perceptive silence however; a silence engendered by an



aesthetic appreciation that boundaries, systems and environments, are vital accomplishments of a discursive and non-discursive, communicative whole. Coming to *know* and understand *the sacred* is aesthetically perceiving the boundary as a sign or sign system (Peirce, 1955) for “perceiving’s sake;” in other words, recognizing the fact that the gap and the instantiation of the sign that follows is beautiful because it *possibilizes* any system/environment interchange. In the case of institutions in general and scientific inquiry in particular, it behooves us not “... to treat institutions as things, as places for the transmission of information. Institutions must be imagined as boundaries from which we move, not enclosures into which we have moved” (Catt, 2000, p. 202).

The momentary experience of feeling the problematized boundary is, ironically, a sense of one-ness, of being part of a greater whole, tapping into a creative power that surpasses what any one individual agency can contrive. It is the simultaneous experience of immanence and transcendence, of feeling at one while also feeling only a part of something greater. We are “empty” while being full. It is the experience of mystery when we realize that we are able to grasp only one small piece of the larger fabric of existence that will remain unknown. The momentary experience of acting or re-acting upon the boundary is vital to our subsequent survival. After all, our interchanges can produce re-actions that are embedded within semiotic systems that deny any phenomenological integrity. As Bateson claims, *the sacred unity* has the “... potential to determine actions, thinking – [where] language and discourse can desecrate *the sacred*” (Harries-Jones, 1995). In such cases as detailed above, we wear a fabric of meanings and existence not of our own making. On the other hand, we can act to sew seams/semes that create new patterns that prove to be more “survival worthy.” The momentary experience of learning how to recognize and problematize the boundary (understood as sign), therefore, is *learning how to learn* about *the sacred unity* inherent in signs and systems. We experience *the sacred* as both momentary presence and a process of perceiving/expressing. It is something we comprehend only in its semiotic and phenomenological transformation. All of these experiences testify why the aesthetic recognition of the gap is, indeed, considered a holy act.

Allowing oneself to experience and problematize the boundary at whatever level involves, of course, a certain degree of risk and it is this risk that prevents us from lingering in its sensuousness too often and for too long. Above all, stitching a new pattern of existence means “jumping” across the gaps and this involves calibration and change. It means exposing ourselves to different ways of being that will automatically impact our lives and those within our intricate web of meanings. This is why faith is an integral part of sacred existence. Faith is the process of producing links between ideas that sustain our ability to jump. “We are defended from doubt,” Bateson contends, “by an *unawareness* of the gaps” (1987, p. 95), by a temporary alignment with faith. Sacred stitching across the gaps, above all, requires a faith that we can maintain a delicate balance between system and environment in order to create a seam/sememe that is worthy. It requires faith that we can make the necessary seam/sememe when needed, when the existential conjunction of continuity and discontinuity is apparent. We have to convince ourselves, through our exercise of

faith, that we have the proper thread and the necessary know how to complete the stitching process and the seams/semes of aesthetic experience we hope to create. This realization of faith is intricately bound up with the actualization of *the sacred*, as Bateson well understands.

In addition, to manifest a more “pure” aspect of *the sacred*, we must respond in ways that negate the negative. As communication theorist Frank Millar contends, Bateson’s concept of *the sacred* speaks to the “... idea of the negation of the negative” or what Burke described as the “perfect” (1990, p. 33). As he goes on to say, “the ‘perfect’ ... is that imaginary, utopian condition ... the ‘perfect’ is what we humans postulate as sacred – e.g., God, objectivity, fidelity... the unspeakable territory that is hinted at, pointed toward, and imaginatively constructed by some community of map-makers” (pp. 33–35). *The sacred* “pattern which connects” as the aesthetic recognition of the boundary or gap becomes, then, a higher order of abstraction and thinking that illuminates our “... ability to grasp percepts of ‘the process side’ in addition to ‘the form side,’ and their patterns of interconnection” (Harries-Jones, 1995, p. 261). Only through communicative events are the boundaries sufficiently problematized semiotically and made ready for aesthetic, phenomenological appreciation.

With this new perspective, we come to realize that what *is sacred* in human life and epistemological inquiry is our existential ability to appreciate the beauty and elegance of mental process, i.e., to discriminate among signs and signifying systems and to hold “perfect” the ideation of phenomenological sign action. This ability is our very “staff of life,” as Bateson defines it (Bateson, 1991, p. 270). This uncanny, dual nature of *the sacred* is, therefore, conceptualized as *necessarily* a binary, analogue logic of communication (Lanigan, 1988) that overall produces a positive ambiguity of existence (Eicher-Catt, 2005b). Our activation of *the sacred* always potentially exists within this lived ambiguity.

## Conclusion

Another look at Bateson’s later work, and especially his *epistemology of the sacred*, proves timely, I believe, at this juncture in postmodern thought. In a theoretical climate that appears in many ways to have all but dismissed an aesthetic for life and scientific inquiry, it behooves researchers to take a closer look at his attempts to cover new epistemological ground. Nowhere is an adequate understanding of a system’s need and ability to respond in healthy productive ways, more useful than in today’s climate of legitimate ideological suspicion and, in the case of the United States, the proclaimed “war on terror.” The need to fully explicate what makes a system/environment interchange “survival-worthy,” or the ability to successfully negotiate particular relations of domination and physical force, is all the more necessary in postmodern existence. With the fragmentation of traditional systems of thought and the resultant array of conflicting and contradictory messages endemic to postmodern life, we have, unfortunately, created societies of “saturated,”

fragmented, and confused selves (Gergen, 1991). As mental health practitioners Reiber and Green (1989) document, Bateson's epistemology seeks to account for the psychopathology of everyday life and helps to explain the frequent occurrence of anti-social behavior and incidents of social distress. Bateson's *epistemology of the sacred* reveals the very fragmentation and disjointedness of postmodern life as an inevitable process and product of ecological recursion, especially when we tear the fabric of existence by ignoring or mis-recognizing the semiotic and phenomenological boundary conditions from which we operate. Although some researchers may contend otherwise, Bateson is not representative of modernist notions. He is, instead, a critical, experientialist (Lanigan, 1992). He successfully combines, in other words, eidetic exploration (mental) with empirical reality (nature) in a semiotic phenomenology of the embodied organism. He moves us closer, as human beings, to understanding the important existential nexus point, where person and cultural experience intersect.

Bateson's triadic conceptualization of existential relations mirrors Peirce's, and thus exposes how we come to *know* and understand *the sacred* as recursive, phenomenological semiotic relations between Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness exercised within all human existence. Bateson is right to accentuate the interface or gap, because it is the seam/sign of "holy ground." The sign, however, does not construct *the sacred* as something to which we can preserve (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 149) once and for all. Rather, the boundary and the subsequent engendering of signs and sign systems constitute the necessary communicative *relationships* from which *the sacred* might emerge. Accordingly, we see that the boundary and its conditions of activation, constitution, and transformation, semiotically and phenomenologically produce the human mental process of repetitious sign actions (semiosis to Peirce, 1955) that Bateson sought so earnestly to expose as his "ecology of mind." And, as an ecology, this form and process must be continually attended to. Reading Bateson alongside Peirce, we understand that Bateson's notion of *sacred unity* is a call for us to establish new boundaries for personal and scientific thought that necessarily expose the apposition of experience, consciousness, and communication that conditions the very possibility of difference. To be survival worthy means phenomenologically attending to the signs – of discovering new and ever-evolving information and knowledge that will create new threads to be woven into the fabric constituted by the necessary apposition of mind *and* nature.

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