

Semiotics as Science

Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen

ahti-veikko.pietarinen@helsinki.fi

Professor, University of Helsinki

Department of Philosophy etc....

8.2.2011

Some attempts to characterise...

1. "Its the study of signs." (this is very common...)
No: Semiotics is not a study of signs.
2. "Life of signs in a society" (F. de Saussure)
3. "Study of the distinction between illusion and reality"
(T. Sebeok)
4. "General science of signs and metascience about science"
(C. Morris)
5. Study of "signs by knowing which we know something more" (C. S. Peirce)
6. *Study of meaning, reasoning and interpretation* (Pietarinen)
 - How new discoveries are possible?
 - Where do (good) ideas come from? Where do they go?

Topics in My Introductory Course

1. Meaning and Interpretation
2. Signs and Significance
3. Information and Communication
4. Function, Structure, System
5. Text; Hermeneutics
6. Rhetorics; Narratives
7. Metaphors; Paradoxes
8. Fiction and Possible Worlds

Between Inter- and Crossdisciplinarity

1. **Multidisciplinarity:** *Bring together disciplines*
 - Universities, faculties, departments, projects...
 - Some common research problems and areas
 - No genuine, deep interaction
2. **Interdisciplinarity:** *Disciplines communicate*
 - Some scientific intergration emerges
3. **Crossdisciplinarity:** *Methodological intergration*
 - Shared concepts and methods
 - Theories applicable to all analyses
 - Disciplinary boundaries disappear

So Where is Semiotics?

- Seems to accommodate a range of contemporary scientific disciplines which study meaning, action, practices, representation... And in many areas semiotics is simply just not named as such...
 - Philosophy of Language, Mind, Science,...
 - Linguistics (Semantics & Pragmatics)
 - Biology (Ethology, Evolution theory, Sosiobiology)
 - Communication and Media Studies
 - Sociology
 - Informatics, Computing and Cognitive Sciences
 - Cultural and Art Studies
 - ...
- Depends on the theory & method whether it exists!

Seriously, dude, where is semiotics

1. The most interesting research questions have been sucked into these other disciplines
2. Their methodologies were better established
3. The left-over was a handful of curiosities
 - to see all cultural/historical/social phenomena as textual
 - to study the meaning of linguistic as well as non-linguistic signs in isolation
 - to construe explanations of biological phenomena from units of meaning with little evidence

So semiotics kinda bought the farm...

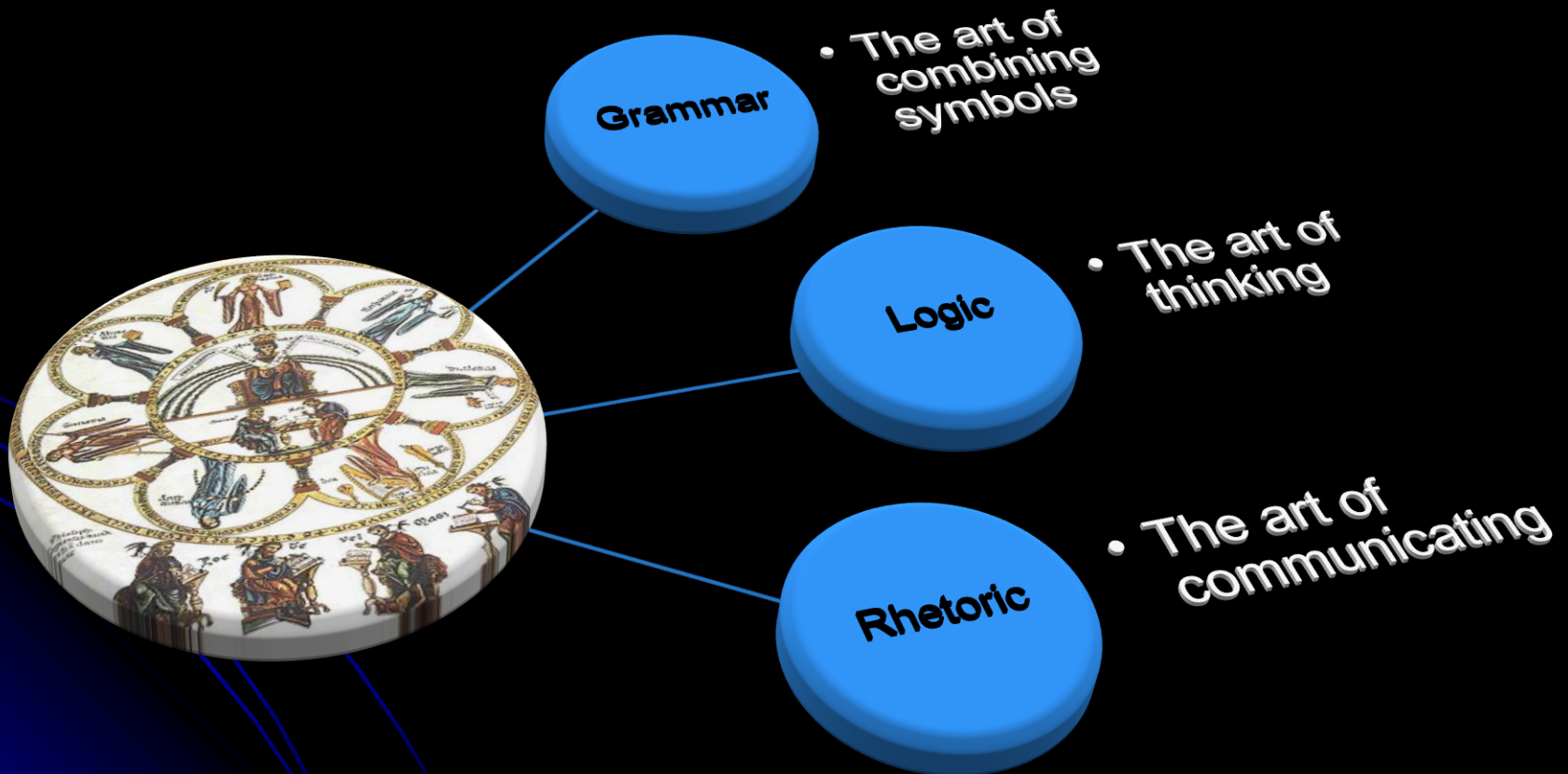
Crisis in Methodology...

- No cumulative, objective research findings
- Elaborate classifications but little empirical data
- Little evidence for its interpretations
- Non-systematicity, redundant terminology
- Analyses applied only to selective data; lack of predictability; no general enough observations to lead to theories
- ...

No wonder it was checking out...

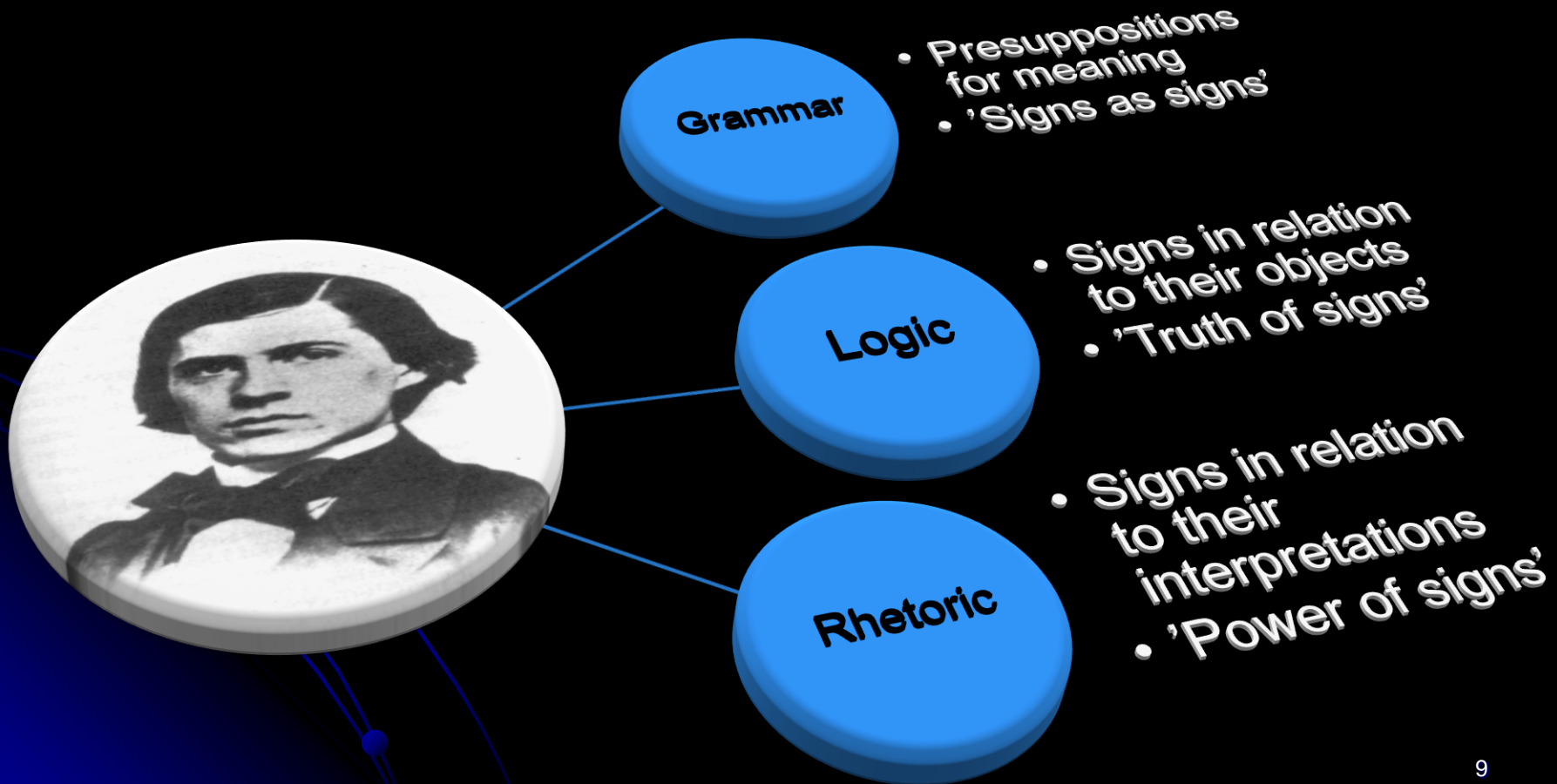
Resurrection

- Go back to the *Trivium*, to the Liberal Arts



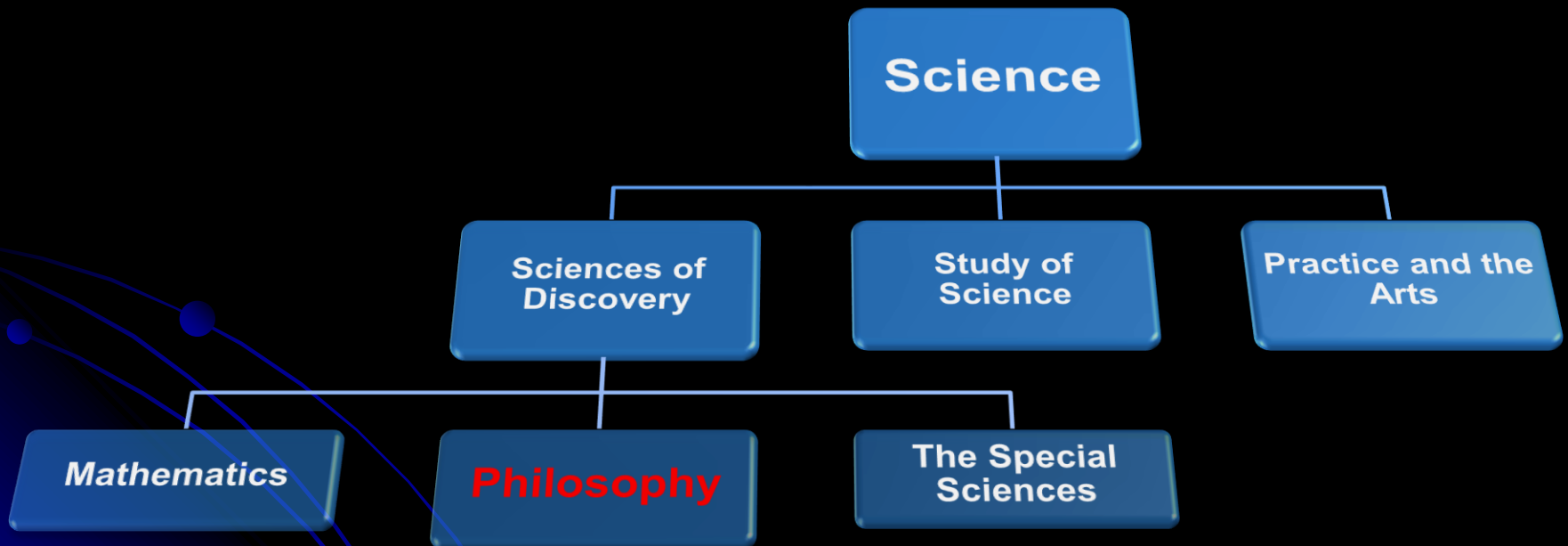
Peirce's Semiotics

- The general science of meanings (pragmatism)



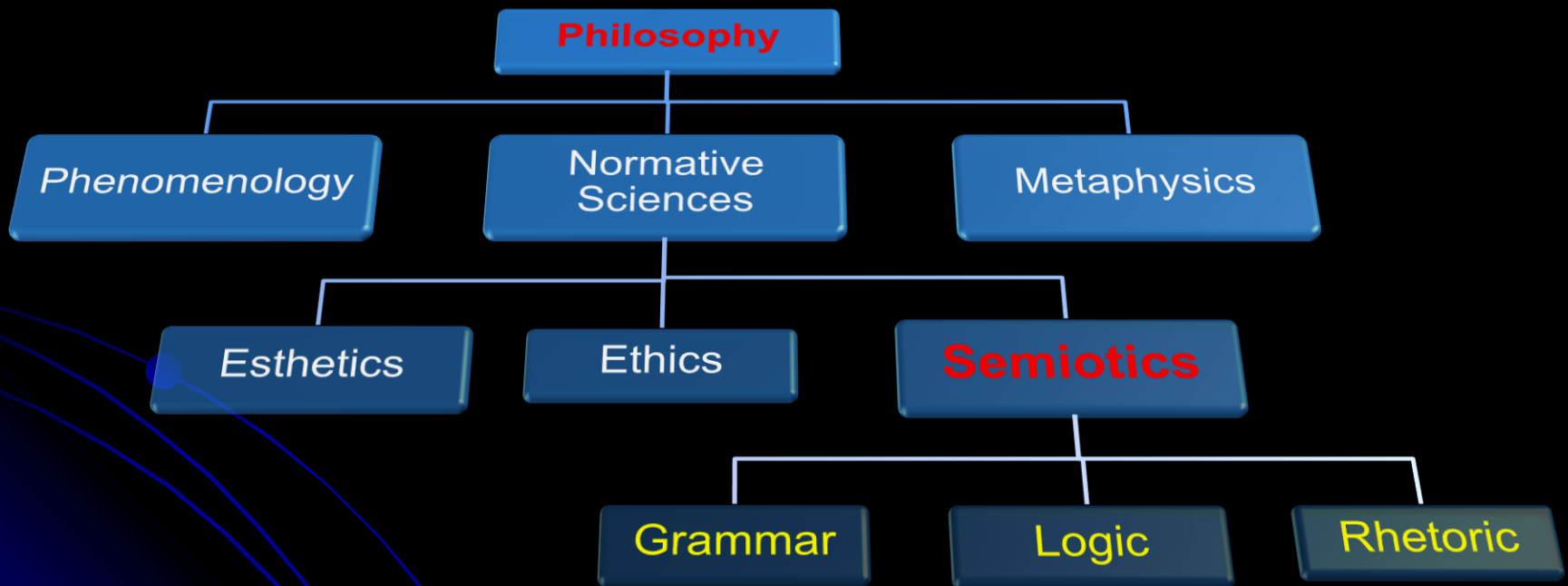
Where is it then

- The Classification of the Sciences (Peirce 1903):



Where is Semiotics

Semiotics, a normative science about meaning



So How to Study Meaning?

1. We cannot study 'signs' as such
2. Signs are given through the **objects of sign-vehicles** in relation to their **interpretants**
3. Meaning not in the language, thing, structure, concept, or representation, but pertains to the contexts of use
4. Meaning is the general **habit of action** connected with the signs...

But so much the better.

