

"Let us not get too far ahead of the story ... A history of realist semiotics?" Review of John Deely: *Four Ages of Understanding*, in *Cybernetics and Human Knowing*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2006, 91-104

## Let us not get too far ahead of the story ...

A history of realist semiotics?

Review of John Deely: *Four Ages of Understanding. The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy From Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, 1019 pages, University of Toronto Press, 2001

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It is an amazing, an impressive, and a strange volume John Deely presents as his enormous account of the history of philosophy.

Its overall idea is simple and somewhat Hegelian in spirit: it contains a historical narrative highlighting Deely's very own selection of philosophical stars – and it does so in order to corroborate Deely's own semiotic point of view. Thus, it is no philosophy of history of the usual sort, trying to deliver an account of what has been thought in which periods, or of what have been considered important in which periods, or of what is generally, in our day, conceived as important in which periods. Rather, it picks out a strand of philosophizing leading directly up to Deely the semiotician – and this is what makes the overall layout Hegelian: it is a history of philosophy leading up to and legitimizing Deely's variety of semiotics. Deely says it like this: "... our project is to understand the actual course and state of philosophy" (449), and this actual state is no survey of the current landscape as a whole, but rather identical to the developments with which Deely himself identifies. Thomas Sebeok points to the same thing in his cover note when he compares the book to Russell's *History of the Western Philosophy* with a similar aim. No offense taken – such a project is perfectly legitimate, and in this case even to some extent successful, provided you take it exactly for what it is.

On this basis, Deely's overall periodization of philosophy is simple. It contains – pace the title – four ages, no more, no less: Antiquity, the Middle Ages – here rebaptized as "the Latin Age" – Modernity, and Postmodernity. On the surface, these periods differ only scarcely from average historical descriptions: Antiquity begins with the Greeks and approximately ends with the fall of the Roman Empire; the Latin Age begins with Augustine and reaches its pinnacle in Aquinas; the Modern Age begins with Descartes and is taken to approach its end from around the late 19th Century. Still, when you take a closer look, Deely's version differs in many crucial aspects from the household picture: the end of the Latin Age is (no wonder, knowing Deely) marked not by Ockham and 14th Century nominalism, but by the late Portuguese 17th Century scholastic Joao Poinset, and the beginning of Postmodernity is marked neither by Nietzsche nor Saussure, but rather by Peirce and, strangely, Heidegger. Thus, the royal succession of great philosophers in Deely ends up as a highly idiosyncratic series, somewhat like this:

*Aristotle – Augustine – Boethius – Aquinas – Scotus – Ockham – the Conimbricenses – Suarez – Poinset – Peirce – Heidegger – Maritain ...*

The reason behind these more or less radical anomalies is that Deely's overall periodization criteria are semiotic of nature. His main characteristic of Ancient Philosophy is its focus upon natural signs only. Ancient Greek "semeion" refers to symptoms and natural indices only, keeping a sharp terminological distance to all notions connected to "logos", referring exclusively to language and other human signification devices. Augustine, on the other hand, inaugurates the Latin Age by being the first philosopher venturing a notion of sign referring to matters natural and cultural alike – even if he never himself developed that notion of sign to any significant extent. The whole 1300 years of the Latin Age from Augustine to Poinset – very rich in Deely's conception and occupying almost half of his historical narrative – is depicted from this angle: as an age occupied with the gradual developing of a cross-natural-cultural sign concept, to terminate and reach its full development only in the little known late Iberian scholastics of the 16th and 17th Century. In this respect, Deely is in synch with the international tendency these years to reevaluate the logic, semiotics, and philosophy of mind and language of the scholastic age, but instead of placing its zenith around the 13. Century, Deely rather has it peaking towards its very end in the 17. Century. Cartesian Modernity, by contrast, is an era of philosophical decadence marked by the common Descartes-Locke insistence that all that appears for the mind be termed "ideas" and thus paving the way for all sorts of idealisms and scepticisms strangely opposing the development of modern philosophy to the realist explosion of modern science during the same period. Locke does, it is true, envisage the development of "semiotics" as a discipline, but this does not prevent the semiotic counterrevolution of Modernity which takes only human signs to be true signs, while natural processes on the other hand are taken to be purely causal events – quite the opposite of the purely natural semiotics of Antiquity. This onesidedness is what permits these Modern thinkers, be they empiricists or rationalists, to truncate the remaining human signs into merely mental "ideas", thereby cutting off their indexical relation to referential objects and leading to the unsolvable problem of ever again to make these "ideas" connect to reality, well known from the British empiricists and Kantian-post-Kantian thought and the traditions stemming from them, both in Anglo-Saxon and continental countries. Despite the exceptional growth of science in Modernity, philosophy of the same period thus generally remains nominalist, scepticist, and idealist in a subjective sense of the word, and only the reemergence of semiotics in Peirce's works opens, according to Deely, the gate of a return to the summits of scholasticism, to semiotic realism, and to a full-fledged natural-cultural sign concept – a period only really dawning gradually in the semiotics of our days, strangely nicknamed "Postmodernism" in Deely's four-step philosophy of the history of philosophy.

Thus the history of philosophy, brief version, begins with a semiotics of nature, matures into a semiotics of nature and culture, falls back into a mere semiotics of culture only to be about to rise again and develop further the integrated semiotics of nature and culture.

I could not agree more with Deely's overall idea: to emphasize the development of a realist semiotics as necessary not only for actual philosophy but for the humanities

and sciences as a whole. Still, many of the specific moments of his account call for discussion. Let us take a look at some of the details of the construction.

First, it must be said that Deely's presentation is personal not only in the sense of supporting his own position, but also in the sense that it permits him to follow strange whims and lead the reader into excursions whose motivation is far from always evident. Obviously, he realizes this himself, as when he admits that there is "no end of tempting byways" (141). As Aristotle is (understandably) Deely's Antiquity hero, it comes as no surprise that the discussion of Plato is cut short – but why then does the Plato chapter conclude with a no less than 7 pages quote (largely un-commented) from the famous section of *Menon* where Socrates brings the slave boy to "remember" the problem of square root 2? The text offers no evident explanation. Similar strange tangential paths of considerable size are taken when the account for Constantine's conversion to Christianity is accompanied by a large 10-page maze about Roman imperial politics at the time, or when the account for what Deely calls a philosophical "thicket" during the years from 1349-1529 leads into an 8-page labyrinth about the Papal schisms of the period. Such sections do indeed bear witness to the author's wide reading but they do not serve any obvious goal in the present context. These are merely among the larger examples, and Deely's overall fuzzy presentations with all sorts of personal comments accompanying his narrative often makes the detailed understanding of his intentions a rather bewildering task. Number one among such excursions is without doubt the 100-page idiosyncratic discussion of Aquinas, no doubt a top three Deely hero along with Peirce and Poincaré. Most of the Aquinas presentation does not serve the overall semiotic argument of the book (or in any case only very indirectly so) – it remains rather opaque to the reader how the presented aspects of Aquinas have been selected and for what reason, as the conclusion remains that Aquinas does not much contribute to the development of the Augustinian sign concept whose perfection is left to the Thomist line eventually leading to Peirce.

One of the central turning points of Deely's version of semio-history is the marginal reflections in Augustine which form the foundation of Deely's general claim about the Latin Age as the main flourishing of the general sign concept. His references point to the early *De Magistro* (389) and the later *De doctrina Christiana* (396-426) and are not very directly given in Deely's presentation which shifts between discussing original sin in Augustine and a Peirce-Poincaré viewpoint of semiotics. The idea of Augustine as the first thinker with a general sign notion stems from Umberto Eco, and it is strange in Deely's otherwise richly-quoting work that the crucial Augustine citations are merely paraphrased: "In chapter I of book II [of *De doctrina Christiana*, fs] we learn that a sign is anything perceived which makes something besides itself come into our awareness." (221) Augustine continues with different distinctions between natural and conventional significations, signs in animal and human cognition etc. – all this, though, only in order to exclude these aspects from further consideration. Augustine thus introduces the general sign almost with his face turned elsewhere, so to speak; in some sense he does not seem to discover at all what he is doing. Deely argues that Augustine could not possibly have mastered very much Greek and thus could not have known to which extent his sign definition constitutes a break from the Greek tradition. But then it seems rather strange to attach this enormous signification to Augustine's sleight-of-hand idea – so much more as Deely himself contends that this notion of the sign "... did not even begin to sink in to the Latin mind when it was first proposed." (217) Furthermore, the sign concept quoted is

not at all so general as might seem at a first glance. Deely correctly remarks that signs – unlike what Augustine seems to presuppose - do not in every single case require perception: no thing needs to be present in perception in order for a sign of that thing to be thought of. One could add that two further aspects of Augustine’s proposal makes it less than general. One is the reference to awareness, as if the sign always required the conscious attention of a perceiver: even if uniting natural signs (such as disease symptoms) and cultural signs (such as spoken words), Augustine’s definition does not in any way include objective natural signs (disease symptoms without appearing in awareness). The other non-general aspect is, of course, the reference to *our* awareness, as if only human beings were able to use signs.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Augustine’s sign definition seems considerably less general than announced by Eco and Deely’s celebration of it.

Only with Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* (1150), Augustine’s sign conception receives the fame it (maybe) deserved, because it is here included in the fourth volume of that central textbook of Scholasticism, so in some sense Augustine’s much-claimed general sign-notion was a voice crying in the desert, a voice even not at all as clear nor as general as it might first seem. To a large extent, thus, Deely’s real Latin Age only begins in 1150.

Two other important late Antique/ early Medieval ideas involved with semiotic realism are included in Deely’s account. One is a comment by Porphyry, also made absent-mindedly in the passing, when he says that in the development of his category trees, he does not decide whether the distinctions founding those trees refer to real or imagined beings, thereby paving the road for the later Medieval attempts to determine this issue, culminating in the strife over universals. The other is a problem in Aristotle’s category table regarding the reality of the category ”relation” which is reflected in Boethius’ solution attempt of distinguishing relations in thought from relations in reality – the former named ”transcendental”, the later ”ontological” by Deely. Thus, Deely’s account of the Latin Age from the beginning highlights the issue of realism connected to the concept of relation.

The large section on Aquinas discusses, among many other things, his stance on realism and semiotics. I am not quite sure I am able to resume this section loyally, but let me give it a try. The 20 C Thomist emphasis on Aquinas’ development of or even the discovery of the concept of being is highlighted, but how this is connected to the semiotic issue is hard to disentangle. On the one hand, Deely optimistically claims that that the ”The problem of sign as it crops up in the writings of Thomas Aquinas marks a watershed in the Latin development of Augustine’s philosophical initiative” (331), on the other hand, the section closes on a somewhat more pessimistic note that ”Aquinas himself, in short, left the problem of the being proper to signs still to be confronted head-on” (363). Accordingly, it is only a small part of the Aquinas section

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<sup>1</sup> Deely, on page 222, remarks that Aquinas will also find this sign concept too narrow when he argues that angels having no bodies will communicate with signs not perceived – and when he argues, like above, that signs without perceptions exist. Deely’s summary of the development to come, on page 222, in fact supersedes many of the tangled presentations of the Latin Age in clarity, leading from Aquinas’ widening of the notion on to Scotus’ and Ockham’s further widenings and on to Peirce’s totally general sign.

which actually deals with the sign concept. Aquinas attacks, in his reading of Peter Lombard, Augustine's sign concept because "not all signs are of the order of perceptible objects", and consequently makes a distinction between signs properly speaking (connected to perception) and more general signs understood as concepts – even if this distinction according to Deely remains "schizophrenic". To that extent, it seems correct that Aquinas widens Augustine's sign concept in emphasizing that signs exist which are not directly dependent on perception. But that is as far as it goes, and the other aspects of Aquinas' thought which nevertheless, rather indirectly, seem to throw some light upon the semiotic issue are especially those regarding *being* and *analogy*, respectively. When Aristotle talks about being being said in many ways, Aquinas often translates it as "being said analogically", even if not offering any specific treatise on analogy. Deely argues, however, that the analogy concept implicit in Aquinas is epistemological only, allowing us for instance to know God through the partial imitations of his perfection scattered in nature. This notion of analogy is, according to Deely, connected to Aquinas' famous doctrine of being. Here, Deely focusses upon Aquinas' concept of "ens ut primum cognitum" – "being-as-first-known" as he translates it – and the idea seems to be that before any ontological realm of being can be outlined, a more basic epistemological – semiotic – notion of being is called for as providing the possible semiotic link between the knowing mind and man-independent being.<sup>2</sup> Thus it mirrors Deely's insistence on the distinction between object and thing<sup>3</sup>, (referring to intended entities and their real correlates (if any), respectively). "Being-as-first-known" is taken to be a privilege to human understanding and thus connected to the specifically human *Umwelt* which Deely without much discussion gives the Husserlian name of *Lebenswelt*. The notion of relation is mostly absent in the Aquinas discussion but returns with full strength in the later Latin discussion. The bottom line of the enormous Aquinas section, with its many future jumps forth and back to "postmodern" Deely heroes, remains conspicuously blurred.

More clear is Deely's briefer renderings of Bacon, criticized for not digging sufficiently into the notion of sign, Scotus, introducing the distinction between intuitive and abstract knowledge (strangely, Scotus' famous "formal distinction" of

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<sup>2</sup> Deely finds this Aquinean being cropping up again in central notions in his two "postmodern" heroes: both Peirce's concept of *Firstness* and Heidegger's *Sein* should allegedly be close analogues to Aquinas' idea. I have a hard time in following these analogies: Peirce's Firstness is no realm of being, but only of mere possibility, it is so to speak the domain of possible qualities of any kind and this seems very far from Aquinas' allegedly epistemological notion which rather seems to indicate being as it appears unanalyzed to a human perceiver. On the other hand, Heidegger's fundamental ontological *Sein* seems much too man-independent to parallel Aquinas' epistemological notion and does not at all – as far as my Heidegger knowledge goes – have the semiotic properties Deely ascribes to Aquinas' concept.

<sup>3</sup> The roots of Deely's insistent distinction between object and thing is far from clear: it is sometimes claimed simply "medieval" (435), sometimes seen as a specific Poinset contribution (431) – and in the book, it even makes its way into contexts where it plays no role, such as in Deely's very strange translation of Scotus' "Sive res sit, sive non sit" ("whether the thing is, or is not") to "whether that object is also a thing."

which Peirce was so fond is never even mentioned<sup>4</sup>), and Ockham's fateful introduction of nominalism by means of the reduction of relation to an *ens rationis* merely..

In the other end of the Latin Age, of course, the picture is dominated by the succession of mainly Iberian Thomists: Capreolus, Cajetan, Ferrariensis, de Vitoria, Dominic Soto, Melchior Cano, Domingo Bañez, the "Conimbricenses" of the University of Coimbra, Suarez – to terminate in Deely's personal hero, Joao Poinso. Deely seemingly discovered Poinso through the 20 Century Thomist Jacques Maritain's work, and Deely cut out Poinso's treatment of signs from his *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus* to publish it in a huge bilingual Latin-English volume as *Tractatus de signis. The Semiotic of John Poinso* in 1985. Poinso thus appears in Deely's construction as the philosopher who finally realizes the problems inherent in Augustine's sign definition and who concludes the Thomist interpretation lineage by solving all of them. The tragic title of that chapter is, of course, "The Road Not Taken", and Deely's frustration over the rise of the Modern truncated sign concept of "ideas" around exactly the same time as what he sees as the perfection of Scholasticism on the Iberian peninsula is understandably enormous. Given the fact that Deely has for so many years cast himself in the role of Poinso's prophet, however, it is rather difficult to understand the short Poinso presentation here. Of course Deely realizes that in terms of normal history of philosophy and measured in strength of influence, Poinso's role is negligible, so he plays the role of a very interesting finding, representing a sign concept, unfortunately abandoned, which only returns in full scope with Peirce. On the basis of the present book, however, it remains difficult to judge whether Poinso is in fact more than that. Does his doctrine also represent genuine insights which not only surpasses those of his contemporary moderns like Descartes and Locke, but also contains valuable corrections and suggestions to Peirce and other (post-)modern semiotics? I am not convinced, and the discussion here does not add to my conviction. For what does Poinso's semiotic effort exactly amount to? Here is highlighted the resolution of the tension between signs as inferences on the one hand and signs as equivalences on the other (464). Furthermore, signs on his account (less surprisingly) transcend the Latin distinction between *ens reale* and *ens rationis*, as well as (more surprisingly) the distinction between mind-dependence and mind-independence (474) and thus between culture and nature: "not all custom is a human act, but all custom can found a natural sign" – thus animals, following Poinso, also use signs. These developments seem to rest upon Poinso's insistence that the sign relation is a basically ontological relation ("relatio secundum esse") – which may then be, in turn, mind-dependent or – independent, etc. (430) Therefore, Poinso distinguishes between representation and signification: the former refers to objects which may represent themselves while the latter involves signs characterized by representing something other than themselves. It thus seems that representations form a subset of signs, the sign simply consisting in

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<sup>4</sup> Peirce's fondness of the "modists" and their idea of a "grammatica speculativa" is not shared by Deely who briefly reject them by saying "It might have come to something; it just didn't in fact" (435). It is thus curious that Peirce's two most central debts to Scholasticism (grammatica speculativa and Scotus' formal distinction) do not in any way belong to the new semiotic history of philosophy Deely is trying to construct. As to the modists, the actual studies by e.g. Alain de Libera and Sten Ebbesen seem to find considerable semiotic interest in their work, see e.g. Ebbesen's work on Boethius de Dacia.

the relation between sign-vehicle and object (431). This relation is interpreted as crucial, even to the extent that "With this identification of signs with pure relations as such medieval semiotic reaches its highest point of development." (434).<sup>5</sup> But is this really true? - and is it really Poinot's idea, no quote is given, and in general the Poinot presentation is strangely lacking in references in a book which is otherwise very generous in quoting? Are there not relations which are not signs? A corollary seems to be the (implicit, that is) sign definition here highlighted by Deely: "a sign is that which any object presupposes" (ibid.), that is, an object in Deely's epistemological use of the word, and again this is taken to imply that signs constitute every strand in the web of real and unreal relations between nodes in the network making objects to appear. It is very difficult to judge from the section whether this claim is Poinot's own or whether it is motivated by Deely's own pan-semiotism (that any process in the universe as such is semiotic). Deely does not hesitate to add Peirce's famous exclamation in some of his absolute idealism whims that all of the universe is perfused with signs or maybe even exclusively consists of them.<sup>6</sup>

Personally, I tend to find such pan-semiotism a grave threat to the sign concept rather than the definitive triumph of it - it might easily signal its exhaustion to complete meaninglessness. But I have a very hard time in seeing here whether this conclusion is Poinot's or it is Deely's and Peirce's. The idea that relations are indifferent to the *ens rationis / ens reale* distinction and thus covers both, to transcend the opposition of idealism and realism, is fine with me - but this does not automatically seem to imply that all relations are signs and thus automatically must contain representations and interpretants.

On the other hand, immediately after the given quote, the notion of the object is connected to *psychological* states, without which the object can not appear (435). These states do not refer to a Peircean mind-concept present in varying degrees in all of the universe. Rather they seem to be human states only - just like the "ens primum cognitum" was reserved for the specifically human *Umwelt* only. I fail to see the connection between these claims: Is all of the cosmos according to Poinot and Deely perfused with signs? Or is it only the "objects", populating the specific human *Umwelt*, which are perfused with signs? In that case, signs would reduce to be a mere human psychological notion mediating physical things and epistemological objects of human experience?

Be all this as it may, I lack an answer to the obvious question in the present context does Poinot's work in any way have something substantial to add to actual semiotics which is not in, e.g., Peirce's work in much larger detail - and if so, what?

Thus, all in all, the enormous account for the Latin age which might easily have been a whole book of itself, is somewhat strange, despite the huge amount of learning and interesting information conveyed. The beginning of the semiotic Latin age is hard to pin down - is it Augustine in 4C or is it rather Peter Lombard in 12C?

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<sup>5</sup> Signs as pure relations is, of course, what makes the sign so general, seemingly indifferent to the distinctions between real and imaginary, truth and falsity, culture and nature. But is this generality achieved at a prize too high - is there now anything left which is not signs?

<sup>6</sup> Peirce is not himself consistent on this point, of course - in his mature classification of the sciences, e.g., semiotics form but one subspecies of the normative sciences which are, in turn, subsumed under the more general sciences of mathematics and phenomenology. We shall return to this below.

The pinnacle of that age remains, understandably, Aquinas, but his semiotic importance is hardly really substantiated here, apart from his passing on the torch to the Iberians who, again, seem to form a strong culmination indeed but at the same time a historical dead end of Latinity. So what is really, bottom line, to be learnt from that Latin Age? Are there genuine semiotic insights which should be dug out and reinterpreted from our point of view such as would argue some recent scholars in the field – or is it one huge blind alley, admirable, rich and overlooked, but which is long since overtaken by Peirce and modern semiotics? Such questions are prompted by Deely's presentation, precisely because of its double aim: it is not only to chart the history of shifting sign conceptions but also to do it with constant reference to the development of actual semiotics – as is made obvious by Deely's constant references to later developments and actual problems. When discussing a given period, time and time again he divulges into future excursions, only to stop himself and say "But do not let us get ahead of our story". So when he claims that "... our project is to understand the actual course and state of philosophy." (449), we must measure his account for the Latin achievements on this end.

Deely's portrayal of the Modern Age, now, is generally informed by his insistent criticism of the strong tendency of that Age to cut off mental ideas from their sign relations to the outer world and thus ending in various subjective idealisms, so strangely in opposition to the same period's scientific triumphs. I strongly agree with Deely on this point, but still I think he paints the picture in a more somber tone than necessary. The main villains are, no wonder, Descartes and Locke, to be followed by German idealism, represented by Kant and Hegel (who get the credit, at least, of realizing the reality of relations). This, in any case, completely overlooks strong realisms of the modern age, such as for instance the strong current of Austrian realist philosophy from Bolzano, Brentano, Husserl, Stumpf, Meinong, Reinach and Gestalt Theory.<sup>7</sup> Maybe they would rather belong to Deely's Post-Modern than his Modern period, but in any case their absence in this context is conspicuous. Later in the (Post-) modern period, very important versions of non-skepticist semiotic philosophy – Cassirer, Merleau-Ponty, cognitive semantics, for instance – are also strongly missed, and the whole of analytical philosophy is absent from the discussion.

Post-Modernity now, Deely's strange name for the fourth and most promising Age of philosophy, is highlighted by three figures, those of Peirce, Heidegger and Maritain. The latter two do not have separate chapters while a critical *Auseinandersetzung* is undertaken with the still-modern parts of semiotics, personified in Saussure and Umberto Eco. The former is (too) crudely dismissed as "Modernity's Attempt to Treat the Signs" (669), and even if I agree with Deely's overall criticism of the semiology stemming from Saussure, I still think a bit more credit to its achievements might have been given. Especially strange is that the realist sides of that tradition, spearheaded by Roman Jakobson, are also all but absent, the same going for the semiotic tradition leading from Greimas and René Thom to Jean Petitot, also with realist leanings. A mirror picture is painted in the long discussion with Eco's early classic *Trattato di semiotica generale*, definitely a work in the Saussurean tradition, and not the most sophisticated one at that. Here, Deely is strangely patient with the many rather crude

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<sup>7</sup> Husserl is only intermittently mentioned and misunderstood as "rationalism's answer to Locke" (581), while Gestalt Theory is rejected as "more or less completely" (!) anticipated by Aquinas.

arguments of that book, because he wants to save it as "one of the most important twentieth-century steps along the way", a claim to a large extent counterargued by Deely's own many (rightful) criticisms of it. The absence of Eco's later and much more semiotically interesting *Kant and the Platypus* with its involvement with the actual tradition for cognitive semantics would be much more interesting, given Deely's own perspective.

The Peirce chapter hails him as the "founder of postmodern times", and his insistence that relations may be subjective as well as objective, continues Deely's rendering of Poincaré, thus tying the knot of the strings laid out since the beginnings of the book with Aristotle. I have a very hard time, though, in following Deely's insistence on Heidegger as his second hero of Post-Modernity: "... what Heidegger does contribute at the foundations of the postmodern age is an uncompromising clarity and rigor that exceeds Peirce's own in focusing on the central problem of human understanding vis-a-vis the notion of *Umwelt*." (667). I think it is the first time I saw anyone crediting Heidegger for exactly clarity, let alone rigor, but the strange thing is, of course, that *Umwelt* is not Heidegger's notion – but von Uexküll's, the German-Baltic biologist absent from Deely's book except from his borrowing of his omnipresent *Umwelt* concept. Deely seems to seriously believe that Heidegger's quasi-theological notion of "Seinsvergessenheit" is really "the ground and soil of the doctrine of signs." (667). I fail to see this, just as I fail to see how Heidegger's generally anti-scientific philosophy (not to speak about his Nazism, cf. Emmanuel Faye's recent revelations) could be wedded to as scientifically oriented a doctrine as Peirce's. Maybe Deely the former monk is seeing some deep theological connections here (his identification of Aquinian being with Heideggerian *Sein* might seem to suggest this), but I am definitely unable to subscribe to the semiotic importance of these ideas. Heidegger's contribution, if any, seems rather to lie in his early phenomenological descriptions, to the extent that they may be separated from his basic ontology and his negativist vitalism. Maybe Heidegger's notion of *Lichtung*, "clearing" (in a forest), as the notion of humankind being the place in *Sein* where being reflects itself, throws some light upon Deely's special emphasis on the human *Lebenswelt*. Again, however, I fail to see how this quasi-revelatory concept of "clearing" could really be instrumental in distinguishing the human *Umwelt* from animal *Umwelten* – this important distinction ought to be described in semiotic terms rather than in such metaphorical quasi-theology. So, in general, I find the introduction of Heideggerian metaphysics to form a large step back into obscurity rather than any plunge into Deely's fourth optimistic age.

The book concludes with a brief resume highlighting the idea of going beyond the realism-idealism distinction – into a universe perfused with signs. At the same time, Deely wants to preserve Sebeok's notion of semiosis as criterial of life (737). I simply do not see how Deely is able to reconcile these two very different views. "Wherever the future influences a present course of events, we are confronted by semiotics", he adds as a new definition (ibid.), and this is of course the recycling of the old definition of teleology which is here drawn forth. But is there teleology outside of biology? Deely does not answer this question, but his claims about the omnipresence of signs seems to suggest it. Teleology in non-biological physics is a hard one for at least me to swallow, and I have a hard time so see how it could be admitted without appeals to any underlying theology. We shall return to this.

Given his explicit adherence to Peirce's Ethics of Terminology, some of Deely's terminological choices seem rather strange. Throughout the book, he uses concepts like von Uexküll's *Umwelt*, Husserl's *Lebenswelt*, Peirce's notion of the triadicity of the sign, without properly introducing them as technical terms. What is more, he uses well-known concepts in strange meanings. This is the case, most confusingly, with the word pairs of subjective/objective and thing/object, respectively. Deely returns to a scholastic use of the former couple so that objective means what has been taken as the object of an intention while subjective refers to the matter of the case itself – that is, almost directly opposite to normal use of those words. As it is probably impossible to change the ordinary use of the words where subjective/objective refers to mind-dependence/-independence, respectively, such a choice seems idiosyncratic to say the least, and Deely's want for change of terminology might have been better supported by a choice of completely different terms. Related to that is his insistence that things are mind-independent, objects not so. If it should really be necessary with such terminological changes, they should be argued thoroughly and explicitly which is not the case here which makes parts of the book's terminology stand out as yet one more of Deely's personal (I dare not say "subjective") whims. A similar complaint, finally, can be made with regard to Deely's choice of the notion of "postmodern" for the fourth and present age of understanding. That word has been put to so many different uses during the last decades (take the confusing bouquet of Charles Jencks, Jean-François Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, Zygmunt Bauman and many others) so that it hardly makes sense to use it without explicitly discussing that background of the word. Even more so, because Deely's attempt at using the word runs directly counter to some of the main ideas connected with that fluffy concept – so his idea that the fourth Age of understanding reintroduces semiotic realism.

To sum up, I have strangely mixed feelings about Deely's book. It is a volume of high learning involving many less-trodden paths of the history of ideas. I have most certainly learnt a lot from it. On top of that, I even, to a large extent, agree with Deely's ideas taken on the general level: the advocacy of a semiotic realism surpassing the confining of signs to man only, and surpassing the sad modern conception of the mind being enclosed within its own ideas. So in many senses I regard it as an important book. Still, many problems remain present in it – I have listed some of them in the course of this review. I admit that I may myself have constructed some of them due to my own comparative ignorance of the Latin Age – or because of Deely's not always completely evident chartings of those Latin mazes. But other among them I believe constitute genuine theoretical problems.

Maybe the most serious of them are those which pertain to the extension of the central concepts used – for instance "objects" or "signs". The former has to do with the special role played by human signs. Here it is a strange fact that human language is all but absent in Deely's discussion of the specificity of the human being. It seems like Deely reserves the notions of "object" and "being-as-first-known" as specific characteristics of the specifically human *Umwelt* called *Lebenswelt*, but I see no reason why animals do not have objects (perceptions giving access to things) in Deely's epistemological sense of the word, and I have a hard time so see which animal signs remain if they do not.

As to the sign concept, Deely's volume adds to the ongoing discussions in the nascent discipline of "biosemiotics" on the role played by signs in biology. As this gives rise to some of Deely's conclusive ideas, it may be fitting to conclude this review with a note on this issue. As to the extension of the sign concept, Deely is

attracted to some of Peirce's most pan-semiotic statements – at the same time as he seems to subscribe to a Sebeokian idea of semiotics as coextensive with biology. But both cannot be true. Some of the reason behind this might be the fact that Peirce is not himself exactly unambiguous on the issue. Deely quotes (the last part of) Peirce's famous claim that

"The October remarks [i.e. those in the above paper] made the proper distinction between the two kinds of indeterminacy, viz.: indefiniteness and generality, of which the former consists in the sign's not sufficiently expressing itself to allow of an indubitable determinate interpretation, while the [latter] turns over to the interpreter the right to complete the determination as he please. It seems a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning; but the explanation of the phenomenon lies in the fact that the entire universe -- not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as "the truth" -- that all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs." (CP 5.448, note, fra "The Basis of Pragmaticism", 1906)

Most often, only the last, audacious claim is quoted. Peirce's idea seems to be that indeterminacy is generic in sign use because indeterminacy, following Peirce's ontology, is generic in the universe as such. Strictly spoken, it does not follow from the idea that indeterminacy exists in the universe plus the idea that indeterminacy exists in signs that all universal indeterminacy has a sign character. But the idea thus seems to be that the objective existence of generality gives the cosmos a sign-like structure, because individuals embodying generals function as signs for those universals. But this runs counter to other ideas in Peirce. Take for instance the claim that

"In short, the problem of how genuine triadic relationships first arose in the world is a better, because more definite, formulation of the problem of how life first came about; and no explanation has ever been offered except that of pure chance, which we must suspect to be no explanation, owing to the suspicion that pure chance may itself be a vital phenomenon. In that case, life in the physiological sense would be due to life in the metaphysical sense." (CP 6.322, "Some Amazing Mazes, Fourth Curiosity", 1909)

Here, a more Sebeokian idea is produced: the growth of genuine triadic relationships seems to be coextensive with biology. Again, indeterminacy, now in the guise of "pure chance" plays the decisive role, but in order to mend the obvious gap between biology and all of the universe, a metaphysical distinction is made, that of biology in a metaphysical viz. a physiological sense. Peirce's idea here seems to be that while biology proper should be taken in a restricted, physiological sense, referring to existing organisms, biology in a wider, metaphysical sense should be taken as referring to the conditions of possibility for life inherent in cosmos as such. But the fact the such "vital" conditions must in some sense exist in prebiological physics is not the same as to claim that the cosmos as such is alive or that the cosmos as such consists of signs. A discussion of these issues is lacking in Deely's account – and it is, of course, an issue which can not in any way be solved by resort to mere Peirce philology – the solution of that issue requires huge progress in empirical biophysics as well as ontology. But if we stick to Peirce's doctrine, the problem is connected to the

issue of the status of thirdness. In Peircean phenomenology (at a more general level than semiotics), thirdness is defined as habit, generality, tendency, etc. – but at the same time it is often claimed that thirdness and genuine triadic relations are in themselves semiotic and possess a sign structure. If that be the case, and if thirdness is generic in the universe, then all of the universe is semiotic. As already mentioned, I do not belong to those who see a great metaphysical point in this idea. I see no interesting semiotic aspects in the mere fact of events governed by laws or tendencies, so I prefer the restriction of the whole terminology of semiotics to biology proper, biology in Peirce's "physiological" sense of the word. I have nothing against, to be sure, the idea that physical processes may be described in semiotic vocabulary, but I just do not see that vocabulary adds anything to our knowledge of such processes. Thus, they seem to constitute a sort of semiotic zero-case where semiotic terminology may be added or not. Rather like you could describe colorlessness as a zeroth degree of coloring or you could describe the absence of mind as a zeroth degree mind – without assuming that this implies that colorlessness is a special sort of color or that matter is a special sort of mind.. Quite the contrary seems to be the case in biology where more or less explicit semiotic vocabulary seems positively indispensable, where even the most die-hard reductionists invariably use it and seemingly are unable to avoid it. I would not hesitate to support Peirce's argument that biological nature must, of course, possess conditions of possibility in pre-biological physics, but I think it is to go unnecessarily much too far to claim that these conditions should, in themselves, in any non-trivial way make all of physics alive or vital or semiotic in any acute sense of the word. This leaves open, in Peircean terminology, the task of accounting in more detail for the intricate relations between thirdness and semiotics, to be sure.

John Deely thus so to speak inherits this huge metaphysical problem from Peirce, and he can not be blamed for not solving it. It will require much further research, not only of semiotic nature. But some of the historical prerequisites to its solution are indeed outlined in John Deely's huge and strange philosophical history of a realist semiotics.

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