

Preface to the Special Issue

Gary Shank

The Three Voices of John Deely

In this special issue dedicated to the considerable and important books that John Deely has written in his long and distinguished career, I want to focus here on his equally remarkable voice. Or, I should say, his three voices.

I first met John at a Semiotic Society of America Meeting in 1981. At this time, I was a freshly minted Ph.D. teaching psychology in a tiny Catholic college, and John was already on his way toward becoming a major voice in semiotics. He was presenting a paper on cognition and semiotics, which seemed right up my alley. So, as I settled into my chair, I came in contact for the first time with one of John's voices.



John N. Deely

I call it the voice of John the Teacher. He was interested in making sure that he presented his rather interesting ideas on how semiotics and cognition might come together, but he was equally committed to making sure we understood what he was talking about. If you have had the pleasure of hearing this voice, then you know what I am talking about. John is an engaging and energetic speaker. He circles back and again to his main points, using the momentum of his discussion to open up new and intriguing ways to look at his theses. He also is gifted in tossing in humorous comments that nonetheless propel his arguments. I remember his commentary on Kant. He said that while everyone else pronounced Kant's name with a short A, he preferred to use the long A. Because, he pointed out, if you believe in "Kant", then you "Can't" get outside your own head. You "Can't" do decent philosophy and you "Can't" do inquiry without painting yourself into a dead-end corner. Then he chuckled mildly at his own point, and pressed on. I don't remember John the Teacher ever reading from notes or a manuscript. He had something to tell us and teach us, and he used the moment to craft his words and arguments to fit those of us who sat before him.

I was so taken with what John had to say that I ambushed him after the talk. He was gracious, and quite impressed that I taught at a school that was run by a

Benedictine monastery. I confessed that I had very little grounding in semiotics, even though I had studied at Indiana, and could he recommend things for me to read. Of course, he directed me to his own work. So I went back to my home institution and started reading articles by John Deely. This is where I came in contact with the second voice. This is the voice of John the Scholar. John the Scholar is the professional voice that he uses to write his books and articles. It is important to understand how and why John uses the writing voice that he uses. I think there are three aspects to this voice.

The first aspect is John's respect for precision. He shares this tendency with Peirce, and I think for the same reason. Peirce was not above coining neologisms at every turn. John does very little of this in his own work, but instead he creates complex conditional statements to ground his ideas. For example, consider this sentence from *The Human Use of Signs*:

Because formal causality ties intelligibility to the intrinsic constitution of an entity, whether the entity be natural or artifactual, the objective exercise of this causality in semiosis through the action specifically proper to the action of signs ensures that semiotics cannot be confined to the order of culture alone, but, like semiosis itself, constitutes an interface between the two orders of nature and culture. (Deely, 1994:38)

John the Scholar is not content in saying that semiotics transcends culture even as it describes it, because a statement that general runs the risk of being misinterpreted in a myriad of ways. Furthermore, his use of language and his problematic connections (I think in a deliberate fashion on his part) the language of semiotics through John Poinot back to the roots of Western philosophy, particularly through Aquinas.

This is the second aspect of John the Scholar. He very much sees himself as part of the long and venerable Catholic tradition of philosophers. This is not much of a revelation, frankly. The impact of Maritain, for instance, has been immense not only in John's professional life but also deeply within his personal life. His most treasured photograph is a picture of a very young John with Maritain. His great discovery of the works of Poinot as an explicit link between the Thomism of the Scholastic Age and the emerging worldview of semiotics is one that I think he feels is of major importance. Whatever John may personally think of Catholicism, his respect and desire to work within and to expand this tradition is unquestionable.

This leads to the third aspect of the voice of John the Scholar. This is the voice of the disrupter, the innovator, and the pioneer. We see this clearly in the following passage from a book somewhat ironically titled *Basics of Semiotics*:

An essential function of the semiotic point of view, what I think will come to be regarded as its decisive achievement historically, is its having grounded and given rise to a strategy for transcending the opposition in philosophy between the so-called realism of ancient and medieval times and the distinctly modern dilemma characterized by the label of idealism with its many forms (including “materialism”, “positivism”, and so forth). In other words, the requirements of semiotics cannot be fully met in terms of any perspectives already established. (Deely, 1990: 19)

In addition to grounding semiotics in the ancient and medieval work of Catholic thinking, John takes it one step further to transform, rather than merely expand, that body of work into a whole new perspective on the world. And he is not afraid to upend millennia of thought and tradition to do so.

As you read these reviews, I urge you to remember that John’s work is an interplay of these two voices. The reason that he can explicate these complex conditionals is because, *mirabile dictu*, he has no problem holding these complex ideas in his head so that he can work with and through them. He is not showing off, but instead he is making sure that, if you are willing to do the work, you will be paid off with a clear and precise understanding of what he has to say. Now and then, you can hear the teacher voice in his work, particularly in his complex but always fascinating examples. I am reminded of the objective status, for instance, of the loving wife who was struck and killed by a meteorite.

The third voice, which I have been privileged to hear personally for over three decades, is the voice of John the Friend. John is a special teacher and a special thinker, but most of all for me, he has been a special friend. He is loyal to a fault toward those whom he seeks to protect, and a fierce adversary of the faulty, flawed, and deliberately mediocre. He is dedicated to preserving the ideas of his dear friend Tom Sebeok, and extending and cementing Tom’s legacy. He has been a champion for me for my entire career, and I have benefited enormously from it.

But the best of his voice as a friend is the way that he will approach you, in all of his complexity and sincerity, and embrace you and be with you. He can be a witty dinner companion, and an equally valuable confidant. His jokes are usually terrible, but he tells them with such gusto that you don’t care. And his love for Brooke is unquestionable. As is hers for him. But my favorite picture of John the Friend is when John is with one of his beloved dogs. John has had a number of dogs over the years, and he has loved them all with deep attachment. Bruno and Bella are his current companions, and no one could ask for better dogs or a better owner.

It is important to review John’s many books, because they are important and often require some help to tap their richness. That is why this special issue is so valuable. But I want you to know something of John the friend as well. He

could not have been such a profound thinker had he also not been the best of friends.

References

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Bionote

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Gary Shank (b. 1949) is a Professor in the Department of Foundations and Leadership at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA. His books include *The Spirit of Qualitative Research* (1999), *Qualitative Research: A Personal Skills Approach* (2002), *Exploring Educational Research Literacy* (2007), and *Understanding Education Research: A Guide to Critical Reading* (2015). Currently he is finishing up *Unlocking the Potential of Qualitative Research* for Cambridge University Press and *The Semiotic Inquirer in the Age of Signs* for de Gruyter Mouton.