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John N. Deely: A Thomistic Voice for Semiotics

Abstract: The article presents John Deely's philosophical critique of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* from the perspective of Catholic theology defined by the work of Thomas Aquinas, John Poinsot, and Jacques Maritain. Deely's analysis centers on the philosophical definition of *esse intentionale*. A biographical context for the critique stems from the life-long friendship of John Deely and the author. The moral force of Deely's critique is now confirmed by the recent publication of Heidegger's personal diaries, the Black Notebooks.

Keywords: Aquinas; Heidegger; Maritain; phenomenology; theology; Thomism

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1 Beginnings: Being-with [Mit-sein]

The ostensive purpose of my essay is to comment on John N. Deely's first published book: *The Tradition via Heidegger: An Essay on the Meaning of Being in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (1971). I should like to explain why I am suited particularly to this task. It is not so much for any particular scholarly reason (although there are several), but because we share a certain amount of existential biography, that is, *human being – a person* [Dasein].

Our relationship started as children (beginnings), developed in primary school (convergence), dispersed in high school (divergence), was lost altogether for some 20-plus years until 1981 (re-convergence), when we experienced *renvoi* at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The occasion was the Second International Summer Institute for Semiotic and Structural Studies (ISISS); it included a celebration of the forthcoming 1982 American English translation and publication of A. J. Greimas' *Sémiotique: Dictionaire raisonne de la theorie*

du langage (1979). During this conference on June 9, 1981, I presented a paper titled "Logic in Plato's *Sophist*" (Lanigan, 1982). When I finished, an unknown voice from the back of the room asked if I did not think Aristotle's *Rhetorica* was a more important work. I replied "no" and gave my reasons. The voice did not reply and left unidentified.

The next day, the conference focused on the Greimas dictionary. Participants broke up into topical (topics drawn from the dictionary) small groups of about ten persons under assigned leaders. I chose to attend the group assigned to discuss "rhetoric". The group leader began by saying (approximately as I recall, because I was startled by the now known "voice" of yesterday), " Hi! I'm John and we are going to talk about 'rhetoric'. As you may know, Greimas' definition of 'rhetoric' in the Dictionary only refers to Aristotle and Quintilian. I want to stress this, since I heard a Plato paper yesterday that completely missed this point!" At that moment, I said, "that was me", and an argument ensued and lasted the whole session (I do not recall the reaction of other participants!). As people began to leave the meeting, John said, "You seem very familiar to me. Where did you go to school?" I replied "Up the river (Mississippi) at Southern Illinois University, where I now teach." That wasn't it, so we talked some more about our past. Finally John asked, where were you reared? I said Albuquerque, New Mexico (USA). Where did you go to high school? I attended St. Mary High School downtown. John said, "That's not it, I went to Pious XII School. Where did you go to grade school?" I said, "St. Therese School in the Valley". John yelled, "That's it! We used to fight on the playground there"! And I replied, "Right, fights! Sixth grade dodge ball and eighth grade basketball [both incidents of physical encounter]. I guess things never change". We have been in personal and professional dialogue ever since.

2 Convergences: Being-in-on-it [Mit-dabei-sein]

Over these many years, we discovered (with recurring amazement) many other parallels that exist in our biographies and which I shall now list. My purpose is to suggest the scholarly context by which I come to praise the *oeuvre* of John Deely in general, and his work on Heidegger in particular. John began his career with a concern for convergence in philosophy and theology; I was interested in the compatibility of philosophy and communicology. We were both born into working class, Irish Catholic families and all the ethnic history in America that comes with it. We both had lots of brothers and sisters; John was one grade ahead of me in school, but our siblings shared their own version of the life-story

over many years (we also lived in the same neighborhood!). Our early school experiences in the culture of New Mexico (recall, the City of Santa Fe was founded in 1610) exposed us to a diversity of languages: American English, Spanish, Diné [Navajo], and of course, Latin in the Catholic schools. In graduate school, we both dabbled in Greek, but went on to German (John did Heidegger; I did Karl Jaspers) and French (John did Jacques Maritain; I did Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault). John's doctoral dissertation (later re-worked for the book under review here) on Martin Heidegger was quickly published; my dissertation on Maurice Merleau-Ponty was virtually simultaneous (Lanigan, 1972/1991).

I need to mention that my doctoral examination committee had *nine members,* four from the Department of Communicology, four from the Department of Philosophy (including the distinguished American expert on "perception", Lewis E. Hahn), and because I provided my own translations of Merleau-Ponty, one from the Department of French (Clarisse Zimra – a childhood neighbor of Jacques Derrida). After my oral examination at Southern Illinois University in 1969, I sent the dissertation manuscript to Tom Sebeok. He telephoned me two months later, saying: "I read it, then mailed it to Julia [Kristeva] in Paris for review. She agrees with me. We are sending it directly to the publisher [Paris, France: Mouton] for production – no editing necessary". I was astounded, speechless.

Continuing on, John and I both became university professors and went on to teach all over the world. Both of us have been Senior Fulbright Fellows more than once, both of us stopped counting "visiting" appointments years ago when the list exceeded "20". I was elected to the American Philosophical Association, but John joined The American Catholic Philosophical Association (back in the day when a Member had to nominate you and you were elected at the annual conference by majority vote!). We have been fellow officers in many national and international semiotic associations, but our shared fondest memory was being at the formal founding of the Semiotic Society of America in 1976 – for which John was the driving force (Secretary General) in league with Thomas A. Sebeok (Lanigan, 1994). At that meeting was another close, life-long, Irish friend of ours, James Gough, Jr. (1965, 1967), a philosopher at the Georgia Institute of Technology, who also worked on Heidegger's use of German, but his focus was communicology, i.e., the human interface with computational linguistics and machine translation.

3 Divergences: Being-there [Dasein]

The other essays in this special issue account for the many directions that John's research scholarship took over the years of his highly productive career up to the present day. In consequence, I want to give a *brief layperson's view* of John's book on Heidegger. An analytical review would require more space and an expert reader because the book is about Thomas Aquinas versus Martin Heidegger as viewed by John Deely (using Jacques Maritain) over against William Richardson (using Martin Heidegger). John's text cites the original Latin (for Aquinas), the original French (for Maritain) and the original German (for Heidegger). Philosophers trained in the Roman Catholic tradition have those languages; most others do not.

John's *The Tradition via Heidegger: An Essay on the Meaning of Being in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (1971) is concerned with technical issues that center on the question: Did Heidegger have something new to say about ontology – the study of what it means to be human? This question immediately raises a theological question: How can a human know anything about god? The answer to this question is the whole history of Medieval and Renaissance philosophy, the core of which is the study of the work of Thomas Aquinas (Thomism = "the Tradition"). John's historical view of Thomism is grounded in the interpretative work of John Poinsot [John of Saint Thomas] and Jacques Maritain. For philosophers, especially phenomenologists, this problematic focus on the "human" is refined as the question: What is Being? Heidegger puts it this way:

> Everything we talk about, every thing we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way, is being; what we are is being, and so is how we are. Being lies in the fact that something is, and in its Being as it is; in Reality; in presence-at-hand; in subsistence; in validity; in Dasein; in the 'there is'. (Heidegger, 1926: 26)

We can say simply that Heidegger's thesis appears already to be settled by the work of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1258–1264; c. 1266–1273) and the long tradition of Medieval thought. Lest the connection to semiotics be lost here, recall that one of John Deely's first interests was in French philosophy with Jacques Maritain (1924, 1937). And, one of John's main interlocutors was Umberto Eco, a medievalist of the first order! I recall with fondness that conversations involving Umberto, John, and me inevitably became narrowly focused on the preferred English translation of Latin phrases (*sacred* or *secular* = the problematic of *Greek "Middle Voice"* as actual *being;* see Lanigan, 1995/2015). Within Medieval

(and especially French) philosophy there is the contextual semiotic distinction in the *Trivium* (Joseph, 1937; Chenu, 1950) between:

1. Logos (Speaking = Discours; Greek "Active Voice" translates / codes):

Rhétorique générale: How does the intellect use speech (parole) to translate reality?

Grammaire générale: How does the intellect use dialect (langue) to translate reality?

Logique générale: How does the intellect use thought (mythos/logos) to translate reality?

2. Lexis (Writing = Langage; Greek "Passive Voice" symbolizes / signifies):

Rhétorique spéciale: How does the intellect use speech (parole) to symbolize reality?

Grammaire spéciale: How does the intellect use dialect (langue) to symbolize reality?

Logique spéciale: How does the intellect use thought (mythos/logos) to symbolize reality?

Table 1 provides a guide to the *Trivium* as the traditional model for the philosophical investigation of *discourse* as Semiotic (especially as the pedagogical paradigm used in French and German universities in the Medieval and Renaissance periods) that shows the linkages among European Semiology and the applications made by Charles Sanders Peirce in the United States.

The German philosophical/historical context in which Deely and Heidegger are debating is summarized by Ernst Cassirer and, I think, explains what John's book is all about:

> Language is not confined to the sphere of the intuitive and tangible but attempts to grasp what is ultimate and highest in the realm of thought. However, of course, the limits of language become visible in this attempt. For even where language is elevated to the expression of pure relations, the sensory coloration still adheres to the expression. Language repeatedly attempts to grasp expression of purely logical determinations and relations in images, which it takes from the immediately intuitable sphere. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the most universal expression of relations, the copula of the predicative sentence. The pure "is" of predicative statements is designated in the majority of languages, including highly developed and refined ones, in such a way that a clearer auxiliary meaning adheres to it so that logical "being" is replaced by the spatial being-there [*Da-Sein*] and being-over-there [*Dort-Sein*]. The validity of a relation is, therefore, replaced by an existential statement, a proposition about a particular existence [*Dasein*], and the character of this existence. A basic characteristic of language shows itself in this

kind of substitution, which it cannot abandon without forfeiting its own nature. (Cassirer 1927 [2013]: 264–265)

Table 1: The *Trivium* model of discourse philosophy

PHILOSOPHY OF COMMUNICOLOGY		
Linguistic Synthesis Hierarchy: *Langage* → *Langue* → *Discours* → *Parole*		
GRAMMAR	**LOGIC**	**RHETORIC**
Code of Discourse	*Meaning of Discourse*	*Medium of Discourse*
Eidetic—Empirical Synthesis	Self — Other Synthesis	Embodiment Synthesis
Induction* ***Charles S. Peirce Definitions**	**Deduction***	**Abduction*** (particular; *a posteriori*; Token > Tone) **Adduction*** (universal; *a priori*; Type > Token)
Case + Result = Rule	Rule + Case = Result	Rule + Result = Case
CODE CONSTITUTION, NOT Message Construction	CODE SYNTHESIS, NOT Message Analysis	CODE MEDIUMN (Embodiment), NOT Message Channel
Methodology Descriptor Terms		
Husserl: Horizon Heidegger: Mitsein Merleau-Ponty: Description Foucault: Archaeology Peirce: Object	Husserl: Field Heidegger: Da—Sein Merleau-Ponty: Reduction Foucault: Genealogy Peirce: Ground	Husserl: Core / Focus Heidegger: Dasein Merleau-Ponty: Interpretation Foucault: Critical Methodology Peirce: Interpretant
Discourse Descriptor Terms		
Husserl: *Noema* Heidegger: Discourse [*Rede*] Merleau-Ponty: .Language/Discourse [*Langage > Discours*] Foucault: Utterance [*Énonciation*] Peirce: Speculative Grammar	Husserl: *Noesis* Heidegger: Social Discourse [*Gerede*] Merleau-Ponty: Speech Spoken [*Langue > Parole Parlée*] Foucault: Uttered Knowledge [*Énonciation; Connaissance*] Peirce: Exact Logic	Husserl: Transcendental Ego Heidegger: Communication [*Kommunikation*] Merleau-Ponty: Speech Speaking [*Parole > Parole Parlante*] Foucault: Expressing Understanding [*Énoncé; Savoir*] Peirce: Speculative Rhetoric
Information Theory Merleau-Ponty: *Sensibility* *Either* Signifier *Or* Signified *Digital Logic*	**Communication Theory** Merleau-Ponty: *Regulation* *Both* Signifier *And* Signified *Analogue Logic*	**Communicology Theory** Merleau-Ponty: *Transformation* *IF* (both Sr and Sd), *THEN* (either Sr or Sd) *Binary Analogue Logic*

In this summary, we are partially the victims of translation (Roman Jakobson's intersemiotic transformation), because the *lexis* of English subverts the *logos* of German. Plainly speaking, Heidegger is arguing that *there-Being* [Dasein] is *process-in-time,* not place-in-space, as "Being-there" (English trans.). Therefore, says Heidegger, a human Being experiences (there) consciousness (Being) as moving in a continuous "now" [Husserl's internal time consciousness]. Merleau-Ponty calls this a temporal "spatiality of *position*". The *process* that is always present in experience is consciousness of *Being-there-Being [Dasein / Da—Sein]* (Pascal, 2004), hence Heidegger's book title: *Being and Time* [Sein und Zeit]. Let me provide John's own summary account of his book's argument. First, John provides the *problematic* of the philosophy of Being:

> Our re-trieve of the original Heideggerian problematic has achieved its finality. We have touched in sequence on the need for such a re-trieve (Chs. I & II); the experience of the forgottenness of Being which such an effort must begin by re-calling (Ch. III); the difficulty of formalizing this experience in a definite question serving to guide further inquiry (Ch. IV); the double set of considerations necessary to analytically adequate the ontic-ontological structure of Dasein presented in *Sein und Zeit* (Chs. V & VI) – pointing out with some care (Ch.VII) that the contribution of Heideggerian thought to the progress of philosophy stems principally from thematizing the dimension of Dasein which gives the notion its "objectively scientific priority"; the priority of the phenomenological *Seinsfrage* as a presuppositioned priority, inasmuch as it is essentially involved with the *Da des Seins,* to that extent dependent on a consideration of whatever the notion of Dasein itself can be shown to structurally presuppose, – or, more exactly, *structurally imply* (Ch. VIII); the discovery of Phenomenology as the philosophical attitude alone proportioned preclusively to the thought of Being (Ch. IX); a means of testing philosophically the integrity of our understanding of the inner élan of Heidegger's thought (Ch. X); and finally, we were able through this programmatic development to locate within the perspectives of Thomistic thought the proper sense of Heidegger's reinterpretation of the question of Being. (Deely, 1971: 171).

Second, John provides his *thematic* of the philosophy of Being.

> What traditional philosophizing has failed to take sufficient account of, and what Heidegger demonstrates the need for considering thematically, is the possibility of understanding the irreducibility of the order of *esse intentionale* strictly and consistently as the sphere and level wherein man's historical existence is worked out and his "self-identity" in the properly human sense consequently maintains itself. (Deely, 1971: 172)

I must ask you, the reader, to go back and re-read the thematic (as would Merleau-Ponty and Foucault) with "a care for the self" by focusing on the emergent definition of Being (*esse intentionale*) as (1) *comportment* [*Dasein*], in

(2) *historical existence* [*Mit-sein*] that (3) *maintains itself* [*Da-Sein*]. John Deely argues:

> Heidegger opens the way for a properly philosophical, that is, ontological consideration of the decisive formalities of historical, cultural, social, and personal data which are primarily intentional, that is *inter*subjective, and only derivatively or 'secondarily' subjective, that is, entitative. 'Foundational thought ... therefore is a profoundly historical thought'. (Deely, 1971: 183)

In short, John Deely detects a *moral flaw* (via a Thomistic critique) in Heidegger; the failure to adhere to Edmund Husserl's (1929) definition of *esse intentionale* as the maxim: "Subjectivity is Intersubjectivity" as *cultural, social, and personal position* in process, i.e., Husserl's "consciousness of ...". I turn now to that moral flaw [*Logique spéciale*] in Heidegger's writing [*Lexis*].

4 Horizons: There-being [Da-Sein]

Consider the phenomenological method of Horizon–Core–Ego (*esse intentionale*) in Husserl's (1929: *CM,* 64, n. 1) mature thought: "Time-constitution, immanency and transcendence. Single subjectivity – intersubjectivity". The *Paris Lectures* assert both an (1) existential and (2) semiotic proposition that grounds the human science **facticity** of *Ego* to be found in the thematic (Thomistic) work on the **sacred** *Core* in Jacques Maritain (1924, 1937) and work on the **secular** *Horizon* of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault. Husserl explains the phenomenological as communicological to us:

> (1) "Everyone of us who has been guided back, through phenomenological reduction, to *his* absolute ego discovered himself, with apodeictic certainty, as an actual existent" (*PL,* 27).

> (2) "The essential characteristic of the ego is persistently to form systems of intentionality, as well as to possess systems already formed, whose indices are the objects which the ego means, thinks, values, handles, imagines, or could possibly imagine, and so forth" (*PL,* 25).

> (3) "In this manner, transcendental subjectivity is expanded to become intersubjectivity, to become an intersubjective transcendental community, which in turn, is the transcendental ground for the intersubjective being of all ideal objectivities" (*PL,* 35).

Why did John Deely (and Edmund Husserl!) sense very early on that Heidegger's phenomenology represented a positive methodological advance in

philosophy, yet also detected an *aberrant sense of human care* for others? Heidegger argues, "Ontological inquiry is indeed more primordial, as over against theoretical inquiry of the positive sciences" (1927: 31). "Only as phenomenology, is ontology possible"(60). Indeed, we must note that in taking up the ontology of *Logos,* he argues (following Hegel and Kant) that the Logos is Discourse [*Rede*]: an ontological synthesis that is speaking [*Sprechens*], i.e., Merleau-Ponty's *être-au-monde.* "Discourse which expresses itself is communication" (1927: 211). In line with Jean-Paul Sartre's "being and nothingness", Heidegger's Germanic problematic of the ontology of speaking (Rhetoric: 178) is *essentially negative for the Other.* Heidegger's expression of historical existence and self care is a *negative comportment:* "Proximally, and for the most part, Dasein *is* in terms of what it is concerned with" (ibid.: 179–182). What is Heidegger concerned with? The short answer is: "The Care of the Self" that is *Being–there-Being [Dasein–Da-Sein].* Deely argues that the *moral* answer should be: The Care of the **Self of the Other**" that is, a comportment of moral concern that expresses *there–Being-there* [*Da-Sein¸–Dasein*].

Bourdieu (1977, 1988) calls Heidegger's failed moral orientation the "academic logocentrism, whose limit is set by the verbal fetishism of Heideggerian philosophy". My own view is less charitable. In 2012, I made a visit with Polish colleagues to the German concentration camp complex known as Auschwitz-Birkenau. I still live the memory of that horror. I used to think Martin Heidegger was an apologist for German nationalism; I now believe he was a central part of the cause of moral failure on a national scale.

While historically suspected, we now know for certain that Martin Heidegger was clearly anti-Semitic and a devoted Nazi [member of the German National Socialist Party led by Adolf Hitler]. While John Deely came to recognize the Heidegger shadow of evil early on, principally in disputation with an early Heidegger defender, William Richardson (1963), I came to the debate quite late, taking a sabbatical leave in 1982 as a Research Associate in the Department of Philosophy at the University of California (Berkeley). At Berkeley, I participated in Herbert Dreyfus' "Heidegger Seminar" which formed my understanding of Heideggerian philosophy. For an explication of my current thinking, as context to the present essay, see Lanigan (2015, 2015a). By comparison, John Deely was inspired by his dissertation director, Father Ralph Austin Powell (1952, 1983), to directly engage the evil shadow of "proximal Dasein" named "Martin Heidegger". History has judged John's moral concern to be valid in the most unsettling way with the publication of the *schwarze Hefte* [Black Notebooks], i.e., personal diaries. These autobiographical notes in Heidegger's own "ready-to-hand" narrate the profound moral failure of racism and fascism embodied in the

Rhétorique spéciale of "Martin" as a *Dasein—Da-Sein* in terms of "what it is concerned with" (Bourdieu, 1988; Gordon, 2014; Wolin, 2015).

With the moral caveat on *Being and Time* engendered by the *schwarze Hefte,* I shall conclude my remarks about John N. Deely by saying that I experienced his true mentor. I did meet and come to know Father Ralph Austin Powell for many years through his connection with John Deely. Father Powell embodied the morality of human kindness and concern for others, and, he was a serious and talented scholar. He embodies the Husserl maxim that "subjectivity is intersubjectivity" that is "manifest in signs", albeit in a Thomistic light. John could not have had a better role model than Father Powell! It is easy to see why and how John became concerned with Heidegger's philosophy and the resulting re-orientation of Husserl's phenomenology as a method relevant to semiotics. For years, I have called this synthesis *semiotic phenomenology*.

Let me conclude my commentary with a thematic statement from Jacques Maritain with which John N. Deely began his philosophical journey, via Heidegger, into semiotics:

> No problems are more complex or more fundamental to the concerns of man and civilization than those regarding signs. The sign is relevant to the whole extent of knowledge and of human life; it is a universal instrument in the world of human beings, like motion in the world of physical nature. ... *Signum est id quod representat aliud a se potentie cognoscenti*. For the Scholastic philosophers sign is that which renders present to knowledge something other than itself. A sign *manifests* or makes known, and it manifests or makes known something other than itself, whose *place it takes* and in regard to which it has a ministerial function to perform, and on which it *depends* as on its measure. (Maritain, 1937: 1)

Because Jacques Maritain was a semiotician, and Father Powell was his teacher, John Deely was inspired to take the moral measure of Martin Heidegger – to my mind, no higher praise can be given for a book well written.

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