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John Poinsoot Immer Wieder

Tractatus De Signis in the interpretive arrangement of John Deely

Abstract: This review addresses the noteworthy enterprise accomplished by John Deely on translating and editing the important work by John Poinsoot, *Tractatus de Signis*. I have underlined that his is not only a historiographical contribution, as important as his work may be from this point of view as well. Rather, Deely's contribution is of a highly theoretical order, concerned as he is to evidence the line of ideal continuity between Poinsoot, Locke, and Sebeok. Such continuity consists mainly in a conception of semiotics 1) as a "doctrine of signs"; and 2) as capable of overcoming the *pars pro toto* fallacy which, in modernity, presents itself in the form of *sémiologie*. John Deely has dedicated a large part of his research to John Poinsoot, producing not only two new editions of his *Tractatus*, the first published in 1985 and the second in 2013, but also numerous essays and the important trilogy with which he compares Poinsoot to St. Augustine, Descartes, and Peirce. The last part of the present text compares Poinsoot's position with Peter of Spain's, considering conceptual correspondences in both with Peirce's semiotics.

Keywords: doctrine of signs; *pars pro toto* fallacy; semioethics; semiosis; semiotic animal; semiotics

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Immer wieder (over and over again) is a renowned expression used by Edmund Husserl to indicate the process of beginning over and over again, always anew,

Article note: Poinsoot, John: *Tractatus de Signis*. Corrected Second Edition, Interpretative Arrangement with a New Foreword by John N. Deely, South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2013 (original version 1986), pp. 640, Hardback, ISBN: 978-1-58731-877-1.

in phenomenological reflection. I believe it is a good description of John Deely's continuous return to the contribution made by John (João) Poinot, John of St. Thomas (Lisbon 1589 – Fraga, Spain, 1644), from the Dominican order, with his *Tractatus de Signis*. This is a great work, certainly, but also and perhaps more emphatically in the interpretation arranged by John Deely's with his English translation and Latin original 1985 edition and refigured in a new corrected edition of 2013.

In the "Acknowledgements and Dedication" opening both editions, Thomas A. Sebeok is nominated immediately: "In the spring of 1970 this work was undertaken because of, and later sustained by, the vision of Thomas A. Sebeok" (Poinot, 1985: v). This is followed by acknowledgement of Ralph Austin Powell, whose name appears in the frontispiece after Deely's: "Interpretive Arrangement by John N. Deely in consultation with Ralph Austin Powell".

In both editions, Deely reports a now well-known passage from Locke's book, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), *on a page under the Greek title Semeiotiké* after the Table of Contents and before the start of the work. It reads as follows:

The Third Branch may be called Semeiotiké, or the Doctrine of Signs; the most usual whereof being Words, it is aptly enough termed also Logiké, Logick; the business whereof, is to consider the Nature of Signs, the Mind makes use of for understanding of Things, or conveying its Knowledge to others.

And perhaps, if they were weighed, and duly considered, they would afford us another sort of Logick and Critick, than what we have been hitherto acquainted with. (John Locke, "On the Division of the Sciences [Beyond the Speculative and the Practical]", 1690)

Tractatus de Signis by John Poinot, alias John of St. Thomas, published in the year of Locke's birth, 1632 (as Deely points out), plays an important role both in terms of historical reconstruction and on a theoretical level in Deely's own conception of semiotics. Deely places Poinot in a tradition in sign studies that includes Locke and Peirce (the "major tradition", as Sebeok claims) and leads to the constitution of semiotics as the "doctrine of signs", and with Sebeok "global semiotics". Deely merits John Poinot with, among other things, having contributed to overcoming the *pars pro toto* fallacy, that is the tendency to identify only a part of the world with the totality. With reference to the study of signs, the *pars pro toto* fallacy reduces signs to human signs which with Ferdinand de Saussure and others have been limited to intentional social signs. Deely makes a point of underlining the "common sources for the Semiotic of Charles Peirce and John Poinot", the title of his co-authored essay with Mauricio Beuchot (1995).

I first met John Deely in Urbino (Italy) during the summer conferences organized there by Giuseppe Paioni, at the “Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e Linguistica”, in July 1992. Deely was carrying his *Tractatus de Signis: The Semiotic of John Poinsoot*, which he showed proudly to conference participants. Susan Petrilli and I bought ourselves a copy immediately and ordered another for our Department library, at the time Dipartimento di Pratiche Linguistiche e Analisi di Testi, at the University of Bari (now University of Bari “Aldo Moro”), of which I was director.

I received the second 2013 edition directly from John Deely. The same large format and cover, but differently from the preceding edition, all the written part (title, author, editor, etc.) was framed in green instead of red. The new materials in this edition include a “Foreword to the Corrected Second Edition” (pp. ix–xl). There, Deely offers an exposition of Poinsoot’s thought relative to the concept of sign and to his contribution to overcoming the *pars pro toto* fallacy characteristic of “semiology” insofar as it is limited to anthroposemiosis – even here in terms that are partial and imprecise. But Deely’s main interest is stated programmatically in the title of the first paragraph in his “Foreword”, namely “1. Since 1985 a Little Before” (pp. xiv–xix), as well as in the title of the penultimate paragraph, “5. The postmodern definition of human Being in Function of the doctrine of Signs” (the 6th and last is a critical apparatus of the second edition).

With his 1985 edition Deely could rightly boast of having made Poinsoot’s seminal and foundational *Tractatus* known, or better, more known:

Thanks to the 1985 issuance of his *Treatise on Signs*, the name of Poinsoot has indeed become a familiar one in semiotics, philosophy, and related disciplines, overcoming even the reluctance of the Peirceans to concede that the triadic notion of sign had the birth among the Latins (whence Peirce himself originally glimpsed it), and its first unqualified statement in Book I, Question 3, of Poinsoot 1632).

What Deely wants to show above all is that publication of *Tractatus de Signis* is not merely an exercise in historical reconstruction. This is part of a line of research inaugurated in semiotics through the pioneering work of Thomas Sebeok and which, disentangling the *pars pro toto* confusion engendered by the late modern notion of semiology, contributes to the paradigm proper to semiotics as the *doctrine of signs*.

The concluding paragraph in the “Foreword”, “The postmodern definition of human Being in Function of the doctrine of Signs”, offers considerations presented in the “little book”, as he calls it, *Semiotics Seen Synchronically* (2010). In his discussion of the relation between Poinsoot and the doctrine of signs as developed by Sebeok, Deely also takes the opportunity to mention our co-

authored book, with Susan Petrilli and myself, *The Semiotic Animal* (2005): “The formula *semiotic animal* expresses the new understanding of human that accompanies the opening of that new era” (xxxix). In fact, to recognize that the human being is the (only) animal capable not only of using signs, but also of recognizing signs as such and of using signs to reflect on signs also means to recognize the human being as the (only) animal capable of responsibility – for itself, for human life generally and for life over the entire planet: “So, as the 21st century opens, just as we speak no longer of ‘semiology’ so much as of ‘semiotics’, so also the growing moral consciousness of our role in nature as semiotic animals has aptly been termed ‘semioethics’” (ibid. and here Deely refers to Petrilli and Ponzio, 2003; Petrilli, 2004; Deely, 2005; Tarasti, 2000). Deely continues thus:

Not to recognize Poinsoot as a Founding Father of the doctrine of signs thematically pursued, at this point in history, requires ignorance on the cognitive side, bigotry on the cathetic (of course, the race has never been wanting for either). (ibid.)

Between the first 1985 edition and the second 2013 edition, Deely published a long essay as the afterword (“Postfazione”, pp. 1349–1419) in Italian translation, included in the bilingual (Italian/Latin) edition of Poinsoot’s *Tractatus de Signis*, here indicated with the name of Giovanni di San Tommaso (John of St. Thomas) (2010a). This edition by Ferdinando Fiorentino includes an essay by myself on the relationship between Peter of Spain’s conception of the sign and John Poinsoot’s.

In his afterword, Deely repeats that Poinsoot’s *Tractatus de Signis* may be considered as “a text in semiotics”, given that he defines the doctrine of signs in the same way as John Locke in 1690, who was not familiar with the works of the Portuguese theologian. In doing this, Poinsoot takes his distances from earlier schema in the history of logic (cf. ibid.: 1364–1366). Consequently, Deely declares that his main interest in publishing the first edition of this work by Poinsoot was not of the historical order, but concerned the *doctrine* of semiotics. According to Locke as read by Sebeok, “doctrine”, because of its critical character, expresses a level or type of knowledge that is distinct from “science”. “Doctrine” unites the critical character of philosophy to scientificity (cf. ibid.: 1367). Another characteristic of “doctrine” with respect to science is its interdisciplinary or better, as Deely says, “transdisciplinary” character. Consequently, interdisciplinarity or multidisciplinary distinguishes semiotics understood as the “doctrine of signs” from merely specialized researches (cf. ibid.: 1369).

Because of the originality of his doctrine, it is difficult to locate Poinsoot's semiotics correctly in historical terms. Poinsoot's vision supersedes its sources and does not have immediate successors. There is no name in the English speaking world, as Deely says (p. 1395), that can be associated to his theory of signs, apart from that of Charles S. Peirce who came much later. If Peirce was second to Poinsoot as an organizer of the conceptual foundations of semiotics, he was at least the first to develop John Locke's approach (cf. *ibid.*: 1396). Similar to John of St. Thomas, Peirce's semiotics rests on the triadic specification of relations (cf. *ibid.*: 1398).

As anticipated, the Italian translation of Poinsoot's *Tractatus de Signis* (2010) includes an essay by myself on the relation between the conception of sign in Peter of Spain and John Poinsoot. In what follows I briefly outline the argument as a way of winding up the present text on Deely's contribution to spreading Poinsoot's semiotics, underlining likenesses and differences with respect to Peirce's semiotics.

Peter of Spain (born c. 1205 in Lisbon, died 1277 in Viterbo, eight months after his election as pope under the name of John XXI) does not focus on the sign in general, but directly on the sign's use in discourse and argumentation. Peter of Spain places the sign in the complex process of semiosis, the sign relation, evidencing fundamental aspects thereof. In my introduction to Peter of Spain's *Tractatus*, I associate the sign model he proposes there with Charles Sanders Peirce's attempting to establish a certain correspondence between the terminologies employed by these two authors. It is not incidental that Peirce should have dedicated special attention to Peter of Spain in his studies on medieval philosophy, citing him frequently as emerges in the *Collected Papers*. The correspondences evidenced are the following:

vox significativa = representamen;
 significatio o representatio = interpretant;
 res significata o representata = immediate object;
 acceptio pro = to stand for;
 aliquid (that to which acceptio refers) = dynamical object.

Such correspondences are more difficult to trace in Poinsoot, above all because of a certain tendency manifest in *Tractatus de Signis* to identifying *representation* with the concept of *standing for*; and also because Poinsoot insists on subordination, passive dependence, and representation with respect to the thing signified, even if under this aspect the distinction he establishes between *obiectus motivus* and *obiectus terminativus* is interesting. Deely focuses on this distinction in his afterword to the Italian edition of *Tractatus de Signis*.

No doubt a correspondence can be established between Peter of Spain's distinction between *significatio* and *acceptio* in *Tractatus*, or *Summule logicales*, on the one hand, and Peirce's distinction between the *immediate interpretant* (*significatio* whose *res significata* corresponds to Peirce's *immediate object*) and the *dynamical interpretant* (*acceptio*, where the *aliquid* – *acceptio pro aliquo* – corresponds to Peirce's *dynamical object*), on the other. With Peter of Spain's distinction between *significatio* and *suppositio* we have a distinction that is analogous to that proposed by Charles Morris in 1938 in his *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*. Morris doubles the *referent* as conceived by Ogden and Richards (*The Meaning of Meaning*, 1923) as part of the renowned triangle (*symbol* - *reference* - *referent*) into the concepts of *denotatum* and *designatum*.

These considerations are intended to evidence the difference for what concerns terminological specification at least, in the noteworthy contribution made to the study of signs by Poinot in his *Tractatus de Signis* and by Peter of Spain in his *Tractatus* or *Summule logicales*.

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Bionote

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