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Sign, Object, Thing

An Eternal Golden Braid

Abstract: This review argues that *The Human Use of Signs* (Deely, 1994) is both pivotal and exceptional in the *oeuvre* of John Deely. It argues that the volume is exceptional because of its unusual explicatory structure and that it is pivotal because of its extended focus on issues arising from the distinction of ‘sign’, ‘object’, and ‘thing’. Among these issues are the idea of the postmodern, objectivity, relation, and the semiotic animal.

Keywords: experience; object; objectivity; Poincot; postmodern; realism; relation; sign; subjectivity; thing; *Umwelt*

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In the *oeuvre* of John Deely, *The Human Use of Signs* is both pivotal and exceptional. It is exceptional because it is so systematic rather than thematic. Much of Deely’s other writing moves back and forth between different themes such as: the anthroposemiotic, the zoosemiotic and the biosemiotic; the pre-modern, the modern and the postmodern; objectivity, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, suprasubjectivity; mind-dependence, mind-independence, nominalism and realism; semiology and semiotics; monism, dyadism and triadism; and so forth. *The Human Use of Signs* offers something much different. It consists of a preface, 4 parts, 311 numbered paragraphs (or theses), 61 glosses on those paragraphs, an appendix on the ethics of terminology and 11 figures. As Deely says in the preface, “the book has been set up in such a way as to emphasize the autonomy of the paragraphs” (1994: xii) in order to minimize the difficulty of the argument. In that way, the superficial similarities it might bear to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* – a volume that is not high on Deely’s list of the

Article note: Deely, John N.: *The Human Use of Signs or: Elements of Anthroposemiosis*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994, pp. 241, ISBN: 9780847678037.

most helpful in philosophy – are nullified immediately. Moreover, he adds:

This book is the best argument I can make to date that the perspective required to develop a doctrine of signs in the fullness of its proper possibilities implies also an understanding of human experience that will be for the first time integral and adequate to the task of providing the measure of human knowledge in the whole of its extent, as distinguished from imposing upon experience and systems of belief some ideological measure designed to dismiss large parts thereof a-priori. (Deely, 1994: xii)

The Human Use of Signs, of course, is not the only extended meditation by Deely on the ontology of the sign; but its structure makes it the most consistently focused.

The reason that the book is pivotal is sketched in the review that follows. First, note that Deely's thought is momentous for semiotics in a number of ways. His recovery of the semiotic thought of Poincot and the late Latins has not only informed sign study but should also rouse history of philosophy from the depths of its Cartesian slumber. The Peircean idea of 'logic as semiotic' similarly recasts the prevalent account of how human thought has developed. Deely's work has heralded a *properly* postmodern moment, a semiotic consciousness *after* the modern, fulfilling some promises of the pre-modern that have been shelved by the belief in *res cogitans* and its frequent companion, nominalism. With reference to these, Deely has rescued the ontology of the sign from the grasp of dualism – and even dogmatic triadic thought – through his stress on *relation* over and above the sign's components. Related to this has been his particular heeding of Heidegger's 1949 call for a total revision of understandings of the subject/object couplet, an audacious scholastic re-figuring of objectivity and subjectivity that has been sidestepped by so many others. Attendant upon these developments has been the concept of the semiotic animal, with its new understanding of the human's relation to the social and phenomenal worlds. Then there is the contested extension of these arguments to the hitherto uncharted realms of physiosemiosis. These topics are covered by other contributors to this special issue. However, the present review argues that what unites them all is Deely's own special triad and the relation therein of *sign*, *object*, and *thing*.

Many theories of signification posit a 'sign' or a 'symbol' – or, even, sometimes, a 'signal' – that is at work among sign 'users'. Then there is left the strenuous task of somehow explicating the operation of the 'sign' within 'context'. This usually involves all manner of hand wringing about what is to be taken to be germane to 'context', followed by a struggle to ascertain the possible relations between the sign and that context. Deely, without eradicating context, renders these strivings redundant in *The Human Use of Signs*. He writes:

There are signs and there are other things besides: things which are unknown to us at the moment and perhaps for all our individual life; things which existed before us and other things which will exist after us; things which exist only as a result of our social interactions, like governments and flags; and things which exist within our round of interactions – like daytime and night – but without being produced exactly by those interactions, or at least not inasmuch as they are ‘ours’, i.e. springing from us in some primary sense. (Deely, 1994: 11).

In contrast to these ‘things’, Deelyan ‘objects’ are “what the things become once experienced” (1994: 11), bearing in mind also that experience takes place through a physical, sensory modality. In this sense, even such entities as unicorns or the minotaur can be considered objects *embodied* in the physical marks of a text. But Deely argues that a “thing of experience” – an object – requires more than just embodiment: the Colosseum and the Arc de Triomphe preceded us and are expected to exist after us; but the point is that their existence as such is the product of *anthroposemiosis*. There are plenty of things – such as some metals in the earth and some things in the universe, as Deely suggests (1994: 16) – that anthroposemiosis has not yet touched. Objects are thus sometimes identical with things and can even “present themselves ‘as if’ they were simply things” (1994: 18).

Likewise, signs seem to be just objects of experience – the light from a candle, the scent of a rose, the shining metal of a gun; but a sign also signifies *beyond itself*. In order for it to do so, a sign must be: not just a physical thing; not just an experienced object; but experienced as “doubly related” (Deely, 1994: 22), standing for something else in some respect or capacity. It is this respect or capacity that is the ‘context’ – not a feature of the world as such, but a feature of the way that the sign signifies or ‘relates’ in contradistinction to the way that experience is implicated in an object and not in a thing. To illustrate this point Deely employs the image of an iceberg’s tip: to be sure, the tip protrudes into experience as an object; moreover, it is, as such, a thing whose full qualities exist independent of experience; but, above all, as is known by the popular phrase, the tip is a sign that there is much more below (1994: 144). An important corollary of this is that whatever is beneath the tip of the iceberg cannot be *approached* as a thing. It is possible that experience could make it an object but, even then, through the sensations it provokes, the feelings about them and their consequences, it is only available as a sign. The characteristic of the sign, then, is that it is simultaneously of the order of *ens reale* and *ens rationis*; it would be folly to bracket off one or the other orders in an attempt to render the sign as either solely object or thing – a sign, fundamentally, partakes of both orders. Its ‘relation to reality’ consists of this partaking rather than its existence in a dyadic mode of representation. Hence, Deely repeatedly cites Peirce’s famous

statement that “to try to peel off signs & get down to the real thing is like trying to peel an onion and get down to the onion itself” (see Brent, 1993: 300 n. 84; see also Deely, 1994: 19, paragraph 58).

The dyadic mode of representation is what defines objecthood. An object is an *experience* of a *thing*. Yet, if a representation refers also to something else, thus going beyond the mere rendering of an object, then it is a sign. Personal objects are common examples of this fact: the cuddly toy that has accompanied you since infancy; the watch given to you by your father; the beer stein you bought in Munich; the jar of powder that smells like the joss stick you burned in your bedroom some time during your first year at university; and so on. Deely’s outline of sign, object and thing in this way is an expansion and clarification of some of the arguments of Poinot and the late Latins regarding the “action proper to signs” (Deely, 1994: 27). Poinot introduces his definition early in the *Tractatus* (1632 [2013]: 25–26), where the object is presented as “stimulative”, “terminative”, and “stimulative-terminative”. Yet Deely has taken this initial insight of Poinot and made it into an ontology of the sign (as well as object and thing) that is far more workable for contemporary semiotics.

Poinot also provides the germ of idea for two of Deely’s key corollaries regarding human signification. Firstly, the world of humans is dominated by a “conventionalizing of objective relations” (Deely, 1994: 68); that is to say that the anthroposemiotic *Umwelt* – the realm in which a human apprehends and sends signs according to the abilities of his/her sensorium – is “cognition-independent, even if originally provenating from apprehensive action, as Poinot noted” (1994: 68). This “coding” by humans might be taken to be the whole of the humans’ world because it constitutes such a “familiar path” (1994: 70); but to take it as such is to overlook both the “zoosemiotically familiar” (1994: 70) and the fact that the human has call, for survival purposes, to look beyond its own coding into the further reaches of signs. A non-human animal, by contrast, is less likely to answer this call. As Deely recognizes, the non-human animal’s *Umwelt* is precisely its ‘objective’ world – it is where an animal relates to ‘objects’ (not as often to signs and with no conception of thinghood). This insight paves the way for the later formulation regarding the ‘semiotic animal’ (see, especially, Deely, 2010) in which Deely illustrates the specific responsibilities falling upon the human as a result of its semiotic capacities.

In the same stroke as redefining human and non-human animal worlds, ‘sign, object, and thing’ also provides the grounds for renewing the objectivity/subjectivity couplet. Customarily, ‘objective’ implies phenomena completely separate and closed off from the vagaries of subjects’ apprehensions. Commonly, in speech, an ‘objective view’ is invoked – that which is untrammelled by opinion, partisan perspectives and, particularly contradictory,

human experience. Deely, on the other hand, performs a re-figuration of objectivity. He demonstrates, logically, that the world that seems to be wholly independent of humans – ‘objective’ – can never be such. Rather, it is a specific kind of mixture of that which is independent of, and dependent on, humans. The ‘objective’ world, then, is a world of experienced things sometimes presenting itself as a world of ‘just things’. Deely offers a thorough re-orientation of what is commonly understood as the dependency of the world on its subjects, a re-orientation derived, principally, from the distinction between ‘signs’, ‘objects’, and ‘things’.

Furthermore, Deely’s effective restructuring of the objectivity/subjectivity couplet makes way for an explication of human signification as much more prone to shifts and negotiations in its relation to reality. In an extremely suggestive paragraph (number 191), of *The Human Use of Signs*, he writes:

We move from the idea of reality as an order of existence independent of the observer, no part of the Umwelt as biologically proportioned, to an idea of reality – the semiotic idea of ‘reality’ – as including also the observer in all that is dependent on the observer along with whatever in experience reveals itself as a part of something – the old idea of ‘reality’ – *independent* (‘physical being’ in its praeter-objective character as the *lining*) of experience. We move from the medieval and classical modern idea of reality as mind-independent being, *ens reale*, to the postmodern idea of reality as the text of specifically human experience. We move from communication in the service of biological ends to a communication system opening as well possible worlds beyond any species-specific objective one or any imaginary reductionistic purely physical one. (Deely, 1994: 82)

A more succinct summary of the parameters of Deely’s realist postmodernism would be difficult to find. With that in mind, this review is the best argument we can make to date that the perspective required to develop a doctrine of signs in the fullness of its proper possibilities resides in the distinction of ‘sign’, ‘object’, and ‘thing’ – an eternal golden braid informing future semiotics – in *The Human Use of Signs*.

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