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Opus Magnum

Semiotics Uncovers an Order in the History of Philosophy

Abstract: This essay speaks briefly about the main argument of John Deely's book *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001), pointing to the importance of dialogue between the physical sciences and the semiotic sciences and the centrality of this discussion in the postmodern era as defined by Deely. A bibliography of the reviews of the book is also provided.

Keywords: biosemiotics; John Deely; future of semiotics; physics and semiotics

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Perhaps the best definition of semiotics would be: the study of the possibility of being mistaken.

John Deely (2001: 733; also in Deely, 1997: 235)

1 Introduction

John Deely taught philosophy in Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa for many years starting from 1976, before becoming a Professor of Semiotics at University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas in 1999, where he continued to teach until 2015. In 2015, he moved to Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. His deep and extensive knowledge of both philosophy and semiotics have made it possible for him to create a major book that is concerned with the whole of (the history of) philosophy from a point of view of semiotics, as well as with semiotics – *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* – and this is what the following

Article note: Deely, John N.: *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001, pp. xxxii+1019, Hardback, ISBN: 9781442613010.

review takes as its focus.

Deely shows us that, in order to see the development of philosophy, one should focus on the understanding of ‘sign’. Understanding what a sign is by no means the same when it comes to philosophers of different eras. The semiotic approach helps to make the steps in sign inquiry as well as making the consequences of those steps explicit: semiotics uncovers an order in the history of philosophy. Noticing this is the genius of Deely. His *opus magnum* is a description and an analysis of this observation. The earlier semioticians, philosophers, and historians of philosophy could not see this, or at least not so clearly.

Deely’s drive to do something, to carry out an idea, is powerful. He repeats the idea, and explains it to make it work, many times. His favorite topic is the comparison of Late Latin and early post-modern thought – Poinot (John of St. Thomas, or Joannes a Sancto Thoma, or João Poinot; it may be that Deely was the first to call him John Poinot) and Charles S. Peirce.

A semiotic approach to philosophy changes the whole of philosophy itself. As Umberto Eco said (when we interviewed him in Milan during January 2012): “semiotics is today the only form of philosophy”. Semiotics has been critical of the process of narrowing philosophy – its Cartesian scientization, its analytical linguization, or its postmodernist literaturization. Deely’s critical attitude towards all these processes has been marked – in particular if somebody tends to stretch semiotics under the rubric of any of these.

Deely has told the story of the making of this book many times. He wrote the main text very quickly, in one month, during his stay in Mexico City in February and March 1996 (Deely, 2001: xxvii) although, of course, much of the preparatory work was already done, in particular via writing his *New Beginnings* (Deely, 1994). He published a brief summary of the book soon after that (Deely, 1997), but it took him a couple of years to complete and edit the text, plus an additional effort had to be made to compile the incredible index of 175 pages (he even had to do this twice, as the first version disappeared due to some technical computer problem), some of it during his stay in Finland in 2000.

2 The four ages

Not much can be said about a thousand-page book in four pages. Therefore let me focus only on its main statement (cf. Kull, Salupere, and Torop 2009).

So derives the title for this work, *Four Ages of Understanding*: ancient Greek thought, the Latin Age, modern thought, postmodern thought". (Deely, 2001: xxxi)

So here is one of the ways in which the four ages of this book can be outlined: preliminaries to the notion of sign; the development of the notion itself; forgetfulness of the notion; recovery and advance of the notion. (Deely, 2001: xxx)

Following Donald Favareau (2010), who follows John Deely, the four ages can be described as:

- I. Greek – semiotics and science not yet distinguished; discovery of reality;
- II. Latin – semiotics without science;
- III. Modern – science without semiotics; discovery of physical reality;
- IV. Post-modern – science with semiotics.

With the help of a couple more formulations from Deely, we can grasp the principal steps in the evolution of understanding the sign.

Age one. "[...] In Greek philosophy, there was no such thing either as a linguistic sign or as sign in general, but only natural signs" (Deely, 2001: 217). This sentence is supplemented by Deely's footnote: "Every general statement risks oversimplification; yet without general statements, made as responsibly as we can make them, there can be no intellectual advance [...]". "Among the Greeks, [...] when we look to usage in theoretical texts, the sign belonged all but exclusively to the natural world, and was regarded as belonging above all to the province of medicine and the forecasting of weather [...]" (Deely, 2001: 156).

Age two (with a jump to age four, as Deely so often does). "In passing from "natural sign" or *σημείον* to "sign in general" or *signum*, we may say, we first cross the frontier separating the Latin Age from the original Greek florescence of philosophy. Similarly, we will see that in the later forgetfulness of *signum* the thinkers of what will become the classical modern mainstream will establish a principal boundary separating modern times from the later Latin Age. And, later still, we will see that in the Peircean recovery of *signum* semiotics will establish yet another line of demarcation, a new frontier separating authentic postmodern thought from the various idealistic pretensions to surpass modernity [...]" (Deely, 2001: 157).

Ages three and four. "In modern times, after Descartes (1596–1650), the hard-won Latin notion of sign in general disappears, to be replaced by the notion of ideas as self-representing objects, until the Latin notion is taken up again in the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) under the banner of "semiotics". Peirce brings an end to the notion of ideas as objects being the

fundamental presupposition of philosophy and initiates the new way of philosophizing, “pragmaticism”, or the way of signs” (Deely, 2001: 740).

3 The fourth age

“If there is one notion that is central to the emerging postmodern consciousness, that notion is the notion of sign” (Deely, 2001: xxx). Redefinition of the concept of postmodernity is a central suggestion in Deely’s program. As he says, “if we wish to situate our preoccupation with semiotics with the larger framework of the history of philosophy, then it is not by reducing our preoccupation to some subordinate status within a larger history, but only by recognizing that we add to that history a whole new age – the fourth age” (Deely, 1997: 236).

However (and this is important), the postmodern age is not only “the way of signs” (Deely, 2001: 611ff); it is also the way of co-existence of signs and non-signs. Physics and semiotics (as John Locke defined them) are just these two unique approaches that have both expressed their ambition to be able to describe everything in the Universe – physics on the basis of the laws of nature, semiotics on the basis of knowing (i.e. of rules established by life). Indeed, “a proper understanding of the being proper and peculiar to *relation as a physical modality* [my emphasis] [is] opening the way to the possibility of mind-dependent being and to the action of signs on both sides of the divide between nature and culture” (Deely, 1997: 233). However, is it not *life* that is there in both and in between? Deely does not say much about life itself – because the scholars he is drawing on did not yet know in depth what life itself is (see also Kull, 2014). The 21st century, with its semiotics of life, is still young. As Deely believes, “Jakob von Uexküll and Juri Lotman [...] the heritage of these two figures have proved to be the foundation-stones, in some ways more important even than the, so far, more widely recognized figures of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce – for the future of semiotics within university life and intellectual life generally” (Deely, 2012: 214). But even these two authorities do not say much about the difficult problem of semiotics – the beginning of relations, or the movement between sign and non-sign (which is beyond the movement between nature and culture).

The methodologies of natural science (physics) and semiotics are mutually opposite and complementary in many aspects. Centered far away from each other, one in non-sentient matter, the other in human culture, the two interact in their full strength in the field of biology, in the explaining of the organism. This is also why biosemiotics has found itself drawn into the most fundamental

discussions about the role of semiotics in science, and science in semiotics. These dialogues between semiotics and the sciences will make a difference for the future of semiotics – thus a semiotic understanding of life is very much responsible for this.

Semiotics is the core of post-modernity; however, this age has not yet arrived in many areas of science. This is well reflected in the ways in which science is evaluated using quantitative parameters as if it were possible to measure knowing. Therefore, the dialogue between semiotics and science has both a crucial importance and a high creative potential for our future.

In physical science, the age of discoveries may have an end. When the laws of nature are completely described, the rest is just calculating the consequences. In semiotics, the codes of life are and will be appearing unpredictably.¹ Nothing in life can be really fixed. Therefore – semiotics never ends. The world is locally plural (Kull, 2009). The science of a plural world is endless, whereas the science of a single world is finite. These co-exist.

4 Earlier reviews

Four Ages has been extensively discussed; numerous reviews and essays have been published on this book. Deely himself has also been active in initiating or arranging such discussions, at least some of them. Despite the book having over a thousand pages, all in all at least as many pages have already been printed *about* this book.

A special issue of *The American Journal of Semiotics* 21(1/4), 2005 (titled as “Getting the postmodern perspective”), published the edited script of a meeting chaired by Douglas Rasmussen (2005) and including three speakers: Benedict Ashley (2005; see also Ashley, 2003), W. Norris Clarke (2005; see also Clarke, 2003), and Peter Redpath (2005; see also Redpath, 2010). The transcription includes Deely’s “Response to the speakers”, and “Open discussion” (p. 53–65), and there is an “Afterword” by Deely (2005; 2005a). The same issue of the journal published also a book review of *Four Ages* by Chamizo Domínguez (2005).

¹ Interestingly, this is what Deely (2010: 732) says on the concept of code: “I think there can be no doubt of the need to work the notion of code into the fabric of the Peircean notion of semeiosis, and of the Latin notion of *signum* on which semiotics relies, to achieve a viable notion of textuality coextensive with the possibilities of objectification seen in the full scope of its dependence on the action of signs”.

The journal *Semiotica* published two consecutive volumes – 178 and 179 – as special issues on *Four Ages* (2010). The entire collection was edited by Susan Petrilli and John Hittinger (2010). Volume 178 includes 13 essays by Clarke, Danesi, Hancock, Hawthorn and Prewitt, Hoffmeyer, Houser, Jeffreys, Liszka, Logopoulos, Manetti, Martinelli, Miller, and Mladenov (all 2010). Volume 179 published 12 essays by Osborne, Pencak, Petrilli and Ponzio, Ramírez, Redpath, Sadler, Schmitz, Sommers, Sonesson (more than 100 pages!), Sparks, Waal, Zimmer (all 2010), as well as a commentary and brief reflection on the whole two-volume set by Deely (2010).

In addition to these collections of reviews, several others have been published separately in various periodicals (Ashley, 2003; Clarke, 2003; Ivanova, 2003; Martin, 2003; Noone, 2004; Stjernfelt, 2006, etc.), occasionally with Deely's response (Deely, 2006).

John Deely's passion for semiotics uncovered the age of semiotics in ourselves. As he says, "realism leads to semiotics" (Deely, 2008: 83, quoted also in Copley, 2009: vii).

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Bionote

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