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Awakening to "Reality"

John Deely's The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics

Abstract: The volume under review brings together three of John Deely's most profound and original works: (1) a one hundred and thirteen page self-described "abstract" of Deely's masterful *Four Ages* project that serves as an excellent overview of, and introduction to, that work; (2) his brilliant encomium on the genius of Thomas Sebeok and the necessity of a truly post-modern semiotic realism; and (3) his tour de force version of a Socratic dialogue between a semiotician and a "would-be realist" concerning how the "sign" relation is properly, and improperly, understood. A must-have volume for any serious student of semiotics, intellectual history, or philosophy, The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics is one of John Deely's richest, and yet often touchingly accessible, works.

Keywords: history of philosophy; postmodernity; semiotic realism; the way of signs

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> The central preoccupation of semiotics, I now hold, is ... to reveal the substratal illusion underlying reality, and to search for the reality that may, after all, lurk behind that illusion.
>
> Thomas A. Sebeok (1986: 77–78)

1 The impact on philosophy of semiotics

A collection of writings published in 2003, but all first presented to the world in the period in the year surrounding the death of Thomas A. Sebeok (i.e.

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December 2000 to December 2001), *The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics* finds John Deely at the peak of his inimitable form. Having all but finished the manuscript of his masterful *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (2001), Deely was working as a Visiting Professor at the University of Helsinki during the writing and preparation of most of these texts, and the clarity and vividness of expression with which he presents his (still) radical ideas here bears the traces of a classroom professor whose commitment to teaching his material is undergirded throughout by his learned recognition of its transformative potential.

That those ideas are still today considered quite radical – and *how it is* that such actually common-sense ideas as Deely proposes here ever came to be seen as "radical" by the intellectual culture of thought that we traditionally call "philosophy" – is, in fact, the central story Deely tells here, across three entertainingly different kinds of texts.

The first entry, *The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics,* is, by its own admission, the *Four Ages* argument in a summary abstract form (Deely, 2003: 4). Readers of the current special issue will no doubt already be well acquainted with the arguments presented therein (but see also Kull's review, this issue), as Deely provides an original and illuminating exposition of the history of the "sign" concept from its earliest intimations by human beings that

> objects have or involve an existence or being *independent* of what [any given agent, be it gods or human beings] may think, feel or do. [These] philosophers, in other words, are those individuals who are credited with introducing into human thought the idea of *reality,* or something which 'is what it is' on its *own* grounds, *regardless* of what further relations it may have 'to us' or *how it may appear in experience*. (Deely, 2001: 3)

"Soon enough this thinking became reflexive", Deely continues, "and raised the question of how [and later, if] such knowledge could be possible in the first place" (ibid.). Both the *Four Ages* and its summary version in the volume under review trace the history of some of humanity's greatest thinkers as they struggle to come to terms with one singular kind of ineliminable relation – one that both fundamentally joins them to, and paradoxically appears to separate and alienate them from, what they consider to be "the real world".

Again, readers of this special issue will be well familiar with the details of Deely's brilliant *magnum opus*, a towering intellectual achievement in which he surveys human beings' three thousand year long struggle, via the circuitous tangle that is the history of philosophy, to a true awakening to ourselves, and to our essential being-in-the-world, as semiotic (and not just semiosic) animals. The draconian word limitations of the present assignment alone prevent so

much as an even cursory re-telling of Deely's superbly profound and well-told tale here. It should be stressed that while the titular section of *The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics* is, indeed, a self-described "abstract" of the *Four Ages of Understanding*, as a Deely text, it still contains much new phrasing and intellectually stimulating insight upon the source material – in addition to a newly-written twenty-one page concluding section that does not appear in this same material's incarnation as Deely's University of Helsinki created "Green Book" of the same title. Deely completists (and who isn't?) will, of course, want all three versions – while for the newcomer to Deely's work, the present tripartite volume offers an excellent introduction to its depth and joys. Nevertheless, I will devote the bulk of the present review to the two sections of "new material" that constitute the rest of this splendid volume.

2 The quasi-error of the "external world"

The shortest of the pieces in the volume, the delightfully titled *The Quasi-Error of the External World*, comes in at a modest (especially for Deely) 37 pages, yet is in many ways the most elegant and tightly focused of the entries in the book. It begins with some anecdotes about, and a heartfelt encomium upon the genius of, the then recently deceased Thomas A. Sebeok (1920–2001), whom Deely feels "cut the Gordian knot of [the confusions over the ontological status of] 'external reality' with which modernity had paralyzed the philosophers" from the start – which is to say, since the time of Descartes' solipsist assumption in the *Meditations* that "the mind's own workings provide alone the direct objects of experience on the side of consciousness" (Deely, 2003: 125, 121).

Neither Locke nor Kant, nor any of the succeeding philosophers of modernity, were ever able to fully extricate themselves from this assumption, writes Deely, which is why he characterizes almost all of the major thinkers of the modern period from Descartes to the present as being enslaved by The Way Of Ideas. Most enslaved of all, as Latour (1999: 3–4) and some others have likewise pointed out, were precisely those contemporaries of Tom Sebeok who either claimed for themselves, or were grouped together by the general intelligentsia under, the mantle of "postmodernism". These "ultra-modernists" as Deely calls them, simply "carr[ied] to the extreme the modern proposition that the mind knows only what the mind makes" (2003: 129). More than three hundred years after Descartes' *Meditations*, in other words, these "postmoderns falsely so called" had not intellectually progressed an inch on this matter since from modernity's Day One.

If, then, "modernity" is marked by a justifiable skepticism about naïve realism that is yet countered with an unjustified (and often un-self-acknowledged) solipsistic idealism, what would a truly "post-modern" understanding or perspective consist in, asks Deely, other than:

> a view of the world which somehow managed to restore what is external to ourselves as knowable in its own or proper being, without letting go of or denying the modern realization that much, if not most, of what we directly know reduces to our own customs and conventions, according to which objects are structured and inferences made. (Deely, 2003: 126)

What Deely calls The Way of Signs offers exactly this. With the recognition that *all* of the objects of human experience are comprised exclusively not of "things" in themselves, much less of "ideas", but of *signs* – and that, as is the case with all animals, our lives are lived exclusively within and through this network of suprasubjective relationships that constitute the objects of our experience (or "objective" reality, as Deely would put it) – the "quasi-error of the external world" is revealed:

> The source of the quasi-error of the external world – if I may say so – is that, within an Umwelt, objects *are* reality so far as the organism is concerned. But without language, the animals have no way to go beyond the objective world as such [so as] to inquire into the physical environment in its difference from the objective world. (Deely, 2003: 151)

Humans, of course, *do* have the ability to posit a "reality" beyond the immediate objects of experience, notes Deely ...even if they then forget to note that this posit of a "reality" not yet fully shown or known is *itself* a sign, an object of their experience, a "mixture of *ens reale* and *ens rationis*" like all such historically accomplished objects of the human Lebenswelt – and not a self-subsisting "thing" in itself. The "external world" – i.e., the world in its dimensions beyond just that of the objects of our own experience, understood as such – "is a species specifically human representation" writes Deely, and thus:

> The quasi-error arises from the routine mistaking of objects simply for "things," leading to the confusion of "external reality" (as became the custom within [modern] philosophy) with the more fundamental notion of *ens reale*, which is neither identical with "the external world" nor the starting point as such of species-specifically human knowledge, but merely a recognizable dimension experienced *within* [human Innenwelt produced] objectivity ... as semiotics from the first [Poinsot 1632] instructed us. (Deely, 2003: 152)

Correspondingly, we awaken from the nightmare of a supposedly "external world" that is by definition lost and alien to us, when we recognize that the same semiosic processes that enable our animal survival and potential to thrive

give rise, in the species-specific human Lebenswelt, to the very semiotic recognition of the possibility of "a difference between aspects of the object given in experience and those same aspects givable [prior to, independent of, or] apart from the particular experience" (135). With this recognition we come to understand both our organismic commonality in the animal world of living being, and our human uniqueness within that world.

And it is at point, writes Deely, that our true walking upon the path to genuine post-modernity begins as "the quasi-error of the external world need no longer beguile or bemuse us, for its nature and origin have been exposed by the very clearing of the opening to the Way of Signs" (153).

3 A sign is what?

The final entry in the volume is another one with which many readers of this special issue will already be aware, as it has been presented publicly in the form of a plenary address, a printed text, a staged reading, and a YouTube video. It is the source of what may be Deely's most famous and enduring aphorism, and takes the form of a dialogue between a semiotician and his interlocutor, who in all good faith and honesty, cannot (yet) imagine what at all could possibly be interesting or hard to understand about what appears to be a very straightforward and easily understood concept – i.e., that of the everyday, ordinary, prosaic "sign." And as in many such cases in the real world (and, most acutely, in our own lives), the interlocutor will come to learn that the reason that he thought the question of "what a sign is" almost certainly must admit of an easy answer, is precisely the realization that he himself has not yet truly even understood the question.

The interlocutor that Deely has created for this dialogue is, however, and thankfully, neither a straw-man nor a buffoon, but is rather an accurately drawn depiction of the average person – whether highly formally educated, as this particular interlocutor is, or not very formally educated at all – who is intelligent and open-minded in all manner of things, but who is nonetheless all but wholly ignorant about the fundamental nature of the 'sign' relation – having never found the need for giving it any serious contemplation at all – and thorough-goingly ignorant about the discipline of "semiotics" (which, as Sebeok once caustically noted, might be "a good thing, too" [2001 : ix])

Stopping by Deely's office for a friendly inter-collegial chat, this interlocutor is cleverly identified in the script-version of the text (Deely, 2001a) as the "Realist" (for what average human being, professional philosophers

notwithstanding, thinks of themselves as anything other than a "realist" in the most everyday and unconsidered sense of the term? And Deely has already well dealt with the professional philosopher's misunderstandings of the matter in Parts 1 and 2 of the book); while Deely's own position as a realist by way of semiosis is given voice by a character called, appropriately enough, the "Semiotist" in the script text – but who we will simply identify here as Deely, since that is the manner in which the story is presented autobiographically in the book version that we are reviewing here.

"Tell me something about this semiotics business" begins the Realist, upon hearing that Deely is in the process of preparing his talk for the upcoming Semiotic Society of America conference. "What's there to say?" replies Deely, "Semiotics is the study of the action of signs, signs and sign systems", noting in a kind-of voice-over role as narrator: "I knew it would not help to say that semiotics is the study of semiosis. So I let it go at that. But inwardly I cringed, for I could see the question coming like an off shore tidal wave". And, indeed, now it comes. "Well", asks the genuinely curious interlocutor, "what do you mean by a sign?"

"Who in semiotics has not gotten this question from colleagues a hundred times?" Deely then asks the reader, in his role of narrator, astutely noting that the majority of us at this point elect to save ourselves the trouble and merely "turn the conversation elsewhere". "Maybe it was a change in mood", writes Deely, "maybe it was the fact that I liked this particular colleague", but for:

> Whatever the reason, I decided not to take the easy way out, not to play on the "common sense" understanding of sign which, useful as it is and not exactly wrong, nonetheless obscures more than it reveals, and likely as not makes the inquirer cynical (if he or she is not such already) about this "new science" of signs. … But this time I decided to go against the grain, and to actually say what I thought a sign was. So I looked my colleague in the eye for a few moments, and finally said, not averting my gaze in the least: "OK. I'll tell you what a sign is: *A sign is what every object presupposes*." My colleague's eyes widened a bit, the face took on a slightly taken-aback expression, and my ears detected an incredulous tone in the words of reply: "A sign is *what*?" (Deely, 2003: 158)

And with this query we are off and running, through 51 pages and hundreds of amusing and oft-times profound conversational turn-takings, as Deely schools his "would-be Realist" on the reasoning behind what the latter, ten pages later, still memorably characterizes as this "proposition that doesn't exactly leap out at you as true, or even as particularly sensible" (168).

For like most "moderns" (in the aforementioned Deelyesque sense of the term), the interlocutor's as-yet-unexamined idea of a "sign" goes no further than that of a traffic signal or a "exit" sign – which is to say, deliberately

human-created representamen, or "signs" so-called, as opposed to "signs" as such. It is up to the Semiotist to, in the manner of a patient teacher of undergraduate students, slowly make the interlocutor aware that literally all such objects as the interlocutor can find within his phenomenological consciousness are, in fact, "signs" of things, and not (or at least, not merely) the things themselves.

This being a John Deely text, however, none would be so naive as to presume that, even here, our Semiotist would be content to leave the explanation at the level appropriate to that of an undergraduate student. Rather, our at-times-resistant interlocutor is taken through a tour de force of Socratic dialogue wherein all of the familiar Deely themes and ideas surface: the distinction between objects and things; signs as an invisible network of relations; semiosis as the spiral of abduction, deduction, and retroduction; why such semiosis is more basic than evolution; the possibility of physiosemiois, and, of course, why the ancient Greek term *semeion* does not actually correspond to the general notion of "sign", and why Jakobson's formulation *aliquid stat pro aliqo* should more properly be amended to *aliquid alicuique stans pro alio*. Such are the consequences of stopping by John Deely's office for a friendly chat, and then innocently asking him what a "sign" is.

Yet, indeed, by the end of the discussion, our interlocutor is assenting to the definition of human being as *the semiotic animal* and proposing to Deely that, it now being lunchtime, "like good semiotic animals, let us set out in search of sign-vehicles which can lead us to objectified things pleasant to eat" (207–208).

This last bit is a particularly nice touch, recalling a reference earlier in the book that Aquinas "saw the highest fulfillment of the human vocation not in the opposition of speculative to practical life, but, rather, in the overflowing of contemplative understanding toward the transformation of the human Lebenswelt in the direction of securing the goods of human flourishing for an ever-increasing many" (102).

Gratifyingly, one of the many joys of reading *The Impact on Philosophy of Semiotics* volume for the reader who is already quite familiar with many of Deely's ingenuous arguments and enlightening historical scholarship, is that Deely has peppered these texts with what some might find to be a surprisingly light touch throughout. For indeed, it is enough for the reader new to Deely to overcome one's own initial intimidation over the size, scope, novelty, erudition, and sheer difficulty of the texts. Such light moments as there are within are likely to go unsavored by readers who are still trying to understand why objectivity should more properly be called subjectivity, and vice-versa. Likewise, those who know Deely only through witnessing some of his more combative theatrics at conferences worldwide, or of his reputation as a scholarly street-

fighter (John is fond of quoting the chorus of the Johnny Cash outlaw-praising ballad, *Hardin Wouldn't Run* as a kind of intellectual personal mantra) may be surprised to find within this text such tender teaching moments as the following:

> From the Baltic shore which lay beneath the window of the house in which von Uexküll wrote, I carry in my coat pocket a stone I fished from beneath the shore waters. This stone, thus, carries a twofold story. There is the natural one a geologist might verify. Yes, this is indeed a stone from the Baltic region. And a second story which forever eludes the geologist, the story that this stone comes from within the Umwelt wherein von Uexküll brought to light the structure of experience shared by all the animals, which differentiates them as such from the plants, and which is true of human animals as well. Both stories are true (or false). It is the best starting point to explain the human use of signs in its uniqueness, better even than the New List of Categories handed us by Peirce, even if it eventually leads to them and, as it were, semiotically presupposes them. The two stories associated with my stone as their vehicle well symbolize the dual structure of the Umwelt as an interweaving of relations which reduce on one side to mind-dependent being, and on another side to mind-independent being, but which only together constitute this stone as an item of the Lebenswelt of semiotics today, and of our role as participants in its development within a nascently postmodern intellectual culture. (Deely, 2003: 31–32)

"To be for nature is to be intelligible for the animal whose being is to understand" Deely concludes at the end of *The Quasi-Error*, updating Berkeley's *esse es percipi* for the postmodern age, and proving himself the worthy fulfiller of Sebeok's promise with which this review article began.

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Bionote

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