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Semiotic Anima(l)

Abstract: This review argues that the notion of the semiotic animal as the most characteristic one for human activity has a long and disputable history, not in Deely's writings only but in philosophy in general. The idea of the three co-authors of the book under review, taken from "the air", ripens and expands with unexpected meaning with respect to its origin, appropriateness, and ongoing novelty. The strongest argument for coining the new definition was found by Deely in Peirce's *semiosis* and in Poinsett's *way of sign*, a road that had not been taken in the history of knowledge.

Keywords: general philosophy; history of knowledge; human activity; semiosis; way of signs

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To co-author a review about a book, written by three, is a challenge. One cannot get rid of the feeling that a big crowd is watching all the time. Neither is there an I or we, but a multiple we, weaving more texts. Even semiosis is not singular. The three authors of the volume under review are Susan Petrilli, Augusto Ponzio, and John Deely. At the international congress in Milan in 2002 they learned that their independent work converged around the notion of human beings as *semiotic animals*. From the conclusion that communication by signs is basic for the human being, they created the doctrine of the *semiotic animal*. The name alone raises the status of semiotics as one of the disciplines that coins a name to match human nature at its most typical. For semiotics, this is sign use. Perhaps the first attempt in this lineage belongs to the Aristotelian *zoon politikon*, which typifies humans by the tendency to relate to each other and to form a community (a polis). However, Aristotle soon realized that his definition lacked specificity; many other species - bees, ants - possess the same instinct. That is why he added a second designation; a human is also a "*zoon logikon*", a rational

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being. This was the opening of the contest to define humans accurately, yet generally. The suggestions piled up: *Homo erectus*, *Homo sapiens*, *animal rationale*, *laughing being*, *Homo ludens*, *res cogitans*; yet, the main characteristic reappears – the human is a rational animal. The modifier persists too – there is always something insufficient in names. It seems that Ernst Cassirer's proposal – *animal symbolicum* – came closest to the semiotic attempt when he singled out symbol making as the key feature for humanity. Cassirer conceives human nature as producing symbolic forms in all aspects of experience. Deely, quoting Thomas Sebeok, pointed out elsewhere that Cassirer's formulae would stand "only if the definition of 'symbol' is impermissibly ensnared with the concept of natural language" (Deely, 2005: 36). Thus, *symbol* for Cassirer is not the same term as used in semiotics. Many sought to understand human activity as *representational*, also calling it symbolic, adding still further senses. To complete the picture of attempts, we have to list the theological doctrines, which explore the names of noetic entities: spirits, minds, souls, angels, demons, etc. The same shortcoming reappears in all of them – something is not enough to pin down human nature by just one, most general, yet, most specific feature.

Nevertheless, the semiotic classification of human nature was "in the air", as Deely said, and in the ensuing colloquium and congress, the three authors continued to calibrate the term "semiotic animal" from still more perspectives. At that time, they discovered a forgotten forerunner of the idea, the German scientist Felix Hausdorff (pen name Paul Mongré), who put forward the phrase 'semiotic animal' as early as 1897. This fact only strengthened their conviction that there is a need for terminologically reconsidering the essence of being human. The convergence of interest was hardly to be regarded as an accident, so they eventually decided to bring their papers together in a book. In 2005 *The Semiotic Animal*, co-authored by the three, appeared as a monograph. It opens by acknowledging Thomas Sebeok's voluminous work as a common ground for an ongoing dialogue with him on semiotics as a new phase in the development of the world, a development that seems inevitable for human society. The original plan for the book belongs to Augusto Ponzio. Together with Susan Petrilli, they proposed a felicitous name for a new extension – "semioethics". This latter implies the responsibilities of the only semiotic being on the planet. Both Petrilli and Ponzio emphasized the notion of the human being not only as a rational animal, capable of producing and interpreting signs, but also as a "responsible animal", who has to take rational care of life on the planet. This point of view shapes their extended explanation of the term "semiotic animal" in postmodern society, along with two more: semiotic globality and the dialogic nature of communication. Petrilli and Ponzio placed modern humanity within a conti-

nuous interaction with nature, with other living species and with culture within what they call “living space”. By constructing their own living space, humans have the major responsibility for the well-being of the planet and for the other living creatures. Humanity must voluntarily engage any other beings in semiotic processes of communication by imposing positive stimuli and responses. Petrilli and Ponzio’s main point consists in a question that elegantly implies its own answer: “as semiotic animals what is our responsibility towards life and towards the universe in its globality?” (Petrilli, 2005: 35).

For John Deely the idea of a semiotic definition of the human had already materialized in his *Basics of Semiotics* in 1990. From a vague outline of a hint, it turned into a matrix for growth and acquisition of symbolic perspectives. As his idea grew wings and spread its influence on neighboring areas in the humanities, he wrote and published three books on the same project “in progress”: *The Semiotic Animal* (2005), *Defining the Semiotic Animal* (2005), and *Semiotic Animal* (2010). In the last one, he registered nine total mentions, each different, that he made of the new term. From the initial nominalist clue to a characteristic label for the contemporary human being, the term *semiotic animal* slowly took shape as a generic name integrated into the historical lineage of usages. The outgrowth of the idea runs through the whole triad of books, with scientific results always “in progress”.

While Petrilli and Ponzio develop their thought from the perspective of the postmodern understanding of *semioethics*, Deely goes back to the Latin Age, when the human capacity of reasoning depended on the differentiation of objects, the latter having a ‘subjective’ dimension, *ens rationis*, and an ‘objective’ being, *ens reale*. However, things can become objects through the mind’s ability for interpreting them. Thus, what we consider ‘objective’ is, in truth, a phenomenon of ‘subjectivity’. The question about the human being living in-between the world of *ens reale* and *ens rationis* opens the gate for the long dispute between realism and idealism. In his part of *The Semiotic Animal* (2005), Deely studies the problem through Poinot’s and Peirce’s ideas of the sign, which takes part in two worlds simultaneously – *ens reale* and *ens rationis*. This duality brings about at least one major problem: as *rational animal*, the human belongs to *ens reale*, but modernity describes him/her as a *thinking thing* and classifies her/him as *ens rationis*. It seems that the statement is partly true and partly false. Deely rejects the dilemma and turns to the semiotics of Peirce and Poinot in search of the missing link in the postmodern definition: the mediating *Third* he found in Poinot’s and Peirce’s concepts of the semiotic interplay between nature and man. Deely also favored Uexküll’s central idea of *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt*, according to which humans live in a sphere of meaning, irreducible to the material world only. Similarly to Peirce’s three-component-sign defi-

nition, in Uexküll's conception *Umwelt* and *Innenwelt* function simultaneously and reveal their meaning through the sensations that "translate" reality to humanity. For some of his most fundamental claims, Deely leans on Jacques Maritain's conclusion that our species is the only one that displays a lifelong engagement with producing signs but is also the only one able to realize that. As Deely explains: "Now what he meant by 'human animals know that there are signs' was not that all human animals know that there are signs [...] but that only the human animal is *capable* of knowing that there are signs" (Deely, Petrilli, and Ponzio, 2005: 223). This notion of potency to having knowledge is crucial for understanding the sign relation. It elucidates the way in which external information transfers to the mind, but also stimulates us (as animals) to react specifically, for human beings may be aware of the related things but not of the relation itself. The relation is knowable by reflection, "only by distinguishing the relation from the elements or things that are related" (ibid.: 228). The human animal is the only one capable of distinguishing things from objects and being aware of the existence of signs: "to know that there are signs requires further understanding in its difference from sense perception. That's what distinguishes the human [...] the only animal capable of developing semiotics" (Deely, 2005: 239–240).

In all three books, having similar titles but different sub-titles, we can follow the ripening of Deely's idea. (Interestingly, this is possible even on the level of the sub-titles, which, in a medieval style, resemble a resume of the book to follow). Finally, Deely wanted to bring everything together and "to establish the expression *as a usage* expressly in the framework of the development of semiotics, the doctrine of signs, as the positive 'postmodern turn' in philosophy's long history" (Deely, 2010: xi). By the time of publication of the last of the three books, Deely had accumulated inquiries into the essence of human nature and in the history of the proposed terms. For both surveys, he found one uniting name – Peirce. Deely reflects on the nature of sign, arguing along with Peirce about the universal part that exists in each sign, thus encompassing the philosophical categories. Ever since the first of his books, Deely sought to elaborate Peirce's notion of *semiosis* as the nucleus of semiotics. Peirce's concept of semiosis is crucial for comprehending knowledge growth, which is just another name for thinking. This overcomes the opposition of the world of nature and the world of mind, replacing it with the notion of continuous interpretation. In the three books, Deely reproduces his *semiotic spiral*. He makes valuable clarifications about the conditions for something to become a sign and to participate in semiosis, thus filling the gap between *ens reale* and *ens rationis*. Deely's greatest contribution, in our opinion, lies in his work on the nature of relation, which draws on two mayor concepts of Poincaré and Peirce. What is the relation in itself,

apart from its object, or the relation to the sign, but not to the thing? These are just a few examples of the fine distinction Deely draws. When is a sign a sign, and next – only a condition for something to become a sign? These are consequences of the above-mentioned differences that end up embroiled in much larger issues such as: what is the entirety of Descartes' *res cogitans*? How is the latter different from the proposed semiotic animal? Is *res cogitans* an all-embracing name? Is it not wiser to view rationality as “a capacity for reasonableness, quite compatible with a *res cogitans*” (Deely, 2010: 115)? Drawing together the ratiocinations of Uexküll, Peirce, and Poinot, Deely makes them sound “pragmatist” in the following examples: “Yet this same capacity viewed in the context of a semiotic animal cannot be separated from the ability to grasp the reason of *things* [...]” (Deely, 2010: 115). This is a great argument against the *res cogitans* definition, one that considers the semiotic animal able to commit mistakes and correct them within sign action – semiosis.

It is hardly an accident that most of Deely's books bear titles such as *Basics of Semiotics*, *New Beginnings*, *The Semiotic Animal*. In all his articles and books, from the small private publications (for example, *Defining the Semiotic Animal*) to his *opus magnum*, the colossal, one-thousand page *The Four Ages of Understanding*, he is re-writing the history of philosophy from the standpoint of semiotics. No boundaries or demarcation lines limit his groundbreaking idea for “the road not taken” as one of the subtitles in *The Four Ages of Understanding* states (Deely, 2001: 441). The road of the sign, not of the idea. Apart from his insight, Deely is enormously persuasive in introducing and defending his arguments. Deely understands the history of philosophy as today's *history of philosophy*, meaning that we actually *make* the history of philosophy while writing it. Thus, in response to the question about the boundaries of modernity and post-modern times, Deely does not hesitate to point to Peirce's 1867 *new list of categories* as such a boundary. For him this is the true beginning of postmodernity, where the limits of both sensation and reason are dropped in favor of an *ad infinitum* semiosis.

Yet, the nature of semiosis is not easy to grasp. One effort is worth mentioning, namely, Deely's underestimated article titled “The semiosis of angels” (2004). Here he uses a giant abductive syllogism examining a *case* (a premise) that angels may exist, then scrutinizes the consequences (the *results*) in order to achieve the probable *rule* – that there is a specific semiosis among them. It occurred to us, half-jokingly, to visualize this process by a slight manipulation of the name's components. Following Poinot, Deely writes: “The intellectual soul, as a soul, is the substantial form of a body” (2004: 218). We interpret signs because we have bodies while souls and angels receive their knowledge *in full* by way of God's energies. In concordance with Augustine, the individual human

being is a body-soul composite; but in keeping with his Neo-Platonism there is an asymmetry between soul and body. As a spiritual entity, the soul is superior to the body, and it is the province of the soul to rule the body. While it is true that the human being is a semiotic creature, it is the *ratio* that does this. Any information, even that transmitted by the organs, is interpreted by the human mind. As Deely points out:

What can act without a bodily organ can exist without a bodily organ: and so the human soul, which is the principle whence the intellectual power emanates, exists, and acts must itself be capable of surviving the failure of all bodily organs. (Deely, 2004: 218)

Going back to the older usage of mind as a synonym of soul (*anima*) it might be more correct to refer to this character of humans as basic, rather than referring to the animalistic one. Besides, *anima* is the deepest anthropomorphic archetype, embracing the unconscious as well as the conscious mind. Of course, the traditional usage of *animal* is much older but, despite some psychological nuances, it seems that *anima* reflects semiotic better. Therefore, *semiotic* as the *differentia specifica*, *soul and body* as dealing with information and interpretation – all resumed in a new triad – semiotic anima[*l*].

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Bionotes

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