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Scholasticism

There and Back

Abstract: In his 2003 address to The International Society of St. Thomas Aquinas John Deely presented some reflections on "Intentionality and semiotics" which were later published in his 2007 book, *Intentionality and Semiotic: A Story of Mutual Fecundation*. The present paper is a personal exposition of ideas generated through my reading of this book. Deely picks up on Thomas Aquinas' insight, that "... knowledge *that* something exists is necessarily pregnant with an awareness of *what* it is that is ... " (xxiv, n.6), which implies that sensation starts as a 'prederivative' sense of being and is thus, as Deely expresses it, involved with the order of *ens reale* prior to the possibility of *ens rationis*. The crux of the matter is the direct union between knower and known; the concept of intentionality is descriptive of this *relation* between the mind and the things cognized. The important point that Deely has repeatedly made clear throughout his writing is that such a triadic relation is "unique in that it is the only positive mode and form of *ens reale,* that can also be realized in its distinctive positive being *outside* the whole order of *ens reale* ... This is the *singularity* of relation" (134).

Keywords: Relation, Intentionality, Thomas Aquinas, Ens reale, Ens rationis, Evolution, Umwelt.

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I still remember my attempt back in the mid-sixties to read Karl Marx. As a graduate student of biochemistry this was to enter a totally foreign universe, and I don't think I ever read anything that was so hard for me to understand. The book was a collection of texts by the young Marx, the philosopher, whereas

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my own thinking at the time was characterized by naive scientistic-positivistic ideas. I mention this because something similar occurred to me once again when I first tried to read John Deely. I don't quite remember when it was, but looking into my copy of *Basics of Semiotics* I find the date of July 1998. At that time I had met John several times at conferences around the world, but in July that year I must have decided finally to try to get behind his humor and charm and find the grounding of his views.

I am afraid that up to the time I read *Basics of Semiotics* I hadn't fully understood the depths of how semiosis grounds our understanding. In theoretical matters we scientists usually adopt a rather eclectic attitude and use whatever fragments of thoughts will help us in developing our understanding. But, of course, I knew that eventually I would have to dig deeper, and thus John's book became my guide to the fundamentals of semiotics. It is not John's style to make things easier than they are, but perhaps that is a necessary corollary of the ambition to deal in fundamentals. Since this first encounter with Deely's writings I have read many other texts from his hands, books and articles, and always with the same mixture of pleasure and unbelievable trouble. I am not used to the need of reading a text twice, but with Deely even thrice won't always do.

In that respect Deely's 2007 book *Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation* is even worse than normal. But it is highly worth the trouble or, I would say, I have come to consider Deely's endeavor of reviving the medieval scholastic thinkers' way of conceiving *relation, intentionality,* and *being* and reinstituting these fundamental concepts into our modern way of thinking semiotics to be no less than necessary as a grounding for a philosophy of semiotic realism, and he deserves much praise for taking up this task. But still, it is not easy to get to the core of what these medievals thought.

Deely explicitly tells us that the book is based on a paper titled "Intentionality and Semiotics" given at the International Society of St. Thomas Aquinas in 2003, and the reader must be prepared for lengthy discussions directed toward the concerns of modern Thomist or Neo-Thomists. Strangely enough, although these discussions may at times get into the most esoteric problems that don't seem obvious focal points for modern semioticians, I very much enjoy accompanying Deely into the Thomistic nooks and corners. It is not every day that we are confronted with discussions of what is implied by the "action of angels as pure spirits", a concern, I hasten to say, Deely rejects for the same reason that he rejects the idea of "things in themselves". In both cases, he says, we are dealing with concepts that are empty because such concepts are "without perceptual content" (Deely, 2007: xxi). Although I have always intuitively dismissed talks of angels as irrelevant in a scientific context, I must admit that I never paid much attention to what kinds of being angels are supposed to be in a biblical

context, or how it would feel to be an angel, and while such questions are of course without any scientific interest *per se*, the very effort of posing them in an intellectual setting nevertheless throws some unexpected light upon the phenomenon of being itself.

"Postmodernity begins," writes Deely,

> at the moment that thinkers decide to take seriously the notion that communication is a part of reality, that intersubjectivity is something real, and not simply an approximation that isolated consciousnesses appear to achieve because the mechanism of their minds is the same, and like causes produce like effects. (Deely, 2007: xx)

Readers not familiar with Deely's writings must take care not to be confused by his somewhat esoteric way of using the concept of postmodernism. In the eyes of Deely what is usually called postmodernism is in reality nothing but a continuation of modernism taken to the absurd. The above citation should therefore be read more as a definition of postmodernity than a statement about the pre-existing position. Contrary to the postmodern position, the central tenet of modern philosophy, Deely says (ibid.), is "that the world is the product of each of our minds in isolation ... [which] sets it apart from the Greek and Latin epochs, and sets it apart from what is acceptable as the 21st century marks its opening decade".

Consequently, Deely considers Charles Peirce to be the first postmodern philosopher, and he follows up on his statement by citing Peirce's view that the "breaking forth of idealism in every direction" over the modern centuries was essentially an anti–Cartesian reaction to the fact that upon Cartesian principles the very realities of things can never be known the least (Peirce, 1868; Peirce, 1931–35: 5.310).

According to Descartes the exterior world is grasped through the mechanical work of the senses, which then requires us to introduce some intermediate entity, a concept or an idea, to stand between the outside world (reality) and the mind. Henceforward, for the followers of Descartes, the mind has lost its direct access to the world. Humans do not usually react automatically upon sense stimuli but "translate" them to a conceptual world, which then serves as the substrate for thoughts and action. What is at stake is the nature of this "translation": How can a material process be converted into a concept through a purely mechanical process? It cannot of course, and therefore there is no escape from Descartes' *res cogitans* in post-Cartesian philosophy, with the implication that realism was essentially impossible from the very beginning of modern philosophy: As long as thought is imprisoned in

its own solipsistic *res cogitans* there is no way to measure it against the world (Hoffmeyer, 2012).

Now, this way of expressing the dilemma is very much my own. Deely, the philosopher, of course, needs a more subtle course. A first important distinction here taken from the scholastics is between *ens reale* or mind-independent being and *ens rationis* or mind-dependent being. *Ens reale* is often mistakenly equaled to external reality, pure and simple, while *ens rationis* is understood as "subjectivity", thereby, in fact, reinforcing the Cartesian separateness of cognition from the thing or process cognized. These concepts should be understood rather as correlated differentiations of sensation. What escapes us, when identifying these concepts with objective being and subjective being respectively is that these two kinds of being are derived from an immediate undivided sensation, *ens primum cognitivum* in the language of Aquinas. Paul Bains has explained it well:

> [...] what comes first in experience is neither *ens reale* nor *ens rationis*. It is our experience that being divides into what is not independent of understanding (*ens rationis*) and what is independent of my understanding (*ens reale*). Thus there is a 'prederivative' sense of being, and this 'sense' of being, 'whatever it be', is prior to being in either of the derived senses; and it is this prior being – the being proper to experience – that semiotics takes as its province. (Bains, 2006: 68)

This is an absolutely central distinction since it turns upon the very "nerve" of cognition, or rather of intentionality, the basis for suprasubjectivity as it manifests itself in the sign relation.

The crux of the matter is the direct union between knower and known; the concept of intentionality is descriptive of this *relation* between the mind and the things cognized. We are aware not of the idea or concept (as modern philosophy seems to assume) but rather of that which it represents – its object. This aspect of awareness was clearly stated by Brentano when, in 1874, he proposed *intentionality* as the one "positive attribute" which "holds true of all mental phenomena generally", and summarized his understanding of mental phenomena as "such phenomena as include an object intentionally within themselves" (cited in Deely, 2007: 4). Thoughts, hopes, desires, etc. are always about something else, and we distinguish them according to what they are about. Lifeless things, on the other hand, such as stones or clouds are not – to the best of our knowledge – about anything else. The term intentionality was meant to catch this strange property of *aboutness*. Unfortunately, as Deely explains, Brentano did not stick to his own sensible formulation but instead introduced a distinction between "inner perceptions" and "external perceptions"

claiming that "the phenomena of so-called external perception cannot be proved true and real" and that "therefore, strictly speaking, *so-called external perception is not perception*. Mental phenomena, therefore, may be described as the only phenomena of which perception in the strong sense of the word is possible" (5). Or, in other words, "external perception" is not real, it is not part of "being". Husserl, following Brentano, adopted this "one-legged" conception of 'the real', and Deely cites Herbert Spiegelberg (Spiegelberg, 1965) who states: "The fact remains that for Husserl 'being' is nothing apart from the meaning which it receives by the *bestowing acts* of *this consciousness*" (in Deely, 2007: 6).

A person who experiences a phantom limb with an itch may illuminate the point. For while such a person certainly experiences an itch, this experience is not, according to Deely's use of the term, a true sensation. Already Aquinas was attentive to this point, stating: "if the organ of sense were not to be stimulated by a thing in the organism's outside surroundings, but instead by the imagination or internal sense powers [...] it will not be sensing" (cited in Deely, 2007*:* 7, n.9). Precisely, here we see the importance of distinguishing between *ens reale* and *ens rationis,* for, as Bains explained, sensation starts as a 'prederivative' sense of being and is thus as Deely expresses it "involved with the order of *ens reale* prior to the possibility of *ens rationis*". This understanding, in fact, is the basis of "realism" philosophically speaking. If, namely, as the phenomenology of the Husserl tradition saw it, sense and sense perception is one and the same, no proper 'being' is accorded to *ens reale,* i.e., in this conception we end up in idealism: *the mind knows only what the mind itself makes*.

Semiotics, by contrast, Deely says, depending from the start on the type of analysis that recognizes and establishes the contrast between *ens reale* and *ens rationis*, requires and establishes a whole new context for philosophy as a whole (Deely, 2007: 7–8, n.9). That this is the case shows itself explicitly in the efforts mainstream biology invests in explaining away the presence of agency, intentionality, and semiotic competence in living systems. This in spite of the fact that, as Clayton and Kauffman have observed: "It is a stunning fact that the universe has given rise to entities that do, daily, modify the universe to their own ends. We shall call this capacity agency" (Clayton and Kauffman, 2006: 504). Zoologist Ernst Mayr, who, like most other biologists, felt seriously disturbed by the implied contradiction between physics and life, introduced the concept of *teleonomy* in an attempt to get around it (Mayr, 1974). Organisms exhibit admittedly targeted behavior, but, said Mayr, we are here only dealing with an as-if-teleology, or – as he called it – a teleonomy. For natural selection is blind to the consequences of its own choices, and as long as favorable traits are carried forward with greater frequency than less favorable traits, it can still be conceived as accident-driven. By this semantic maneuver that biologists

have since repeated again and again, it might seem that the subsuming of the processes of life under the dictates of natural law has become restored. However, and apparently unbeknownst to the biologists, a "homunculus" is hiding in this attempt to explain away intentionality.[1] For without competition among organisms natural selection cannot work; but competition undoubtedly presupposes some kind of "striving" to use Darwin's own term. Intentionality cannot of course be explained away by a principle that presupposes its existence. It would be fruitful for biology to recognize this fact and start explaining the presence of intentionality instead of explaining it away. But this would require biology to accept that organisms are semiosic beings or that organisms do in some sense of the word "know of" the external world as it is in-itself, or, in other words, that *relations* are real and not just inventions of the mind. But this runs contrary not only to the received ontology of science, but also to modern philosophy in general.

Since intentionality is, as we said, descriptive of a *relation* between cognition and the things cognized, the introduction of intentionality into biological theory would imply that relations could be accepted as causative agents in their own right as relations. That our senses represent some aspect of the outer reality, e.g. as a distinct feeling of pain may represent a concrete wound, presupposes that an agency in our "soul" connects the two, or, semiotically speaking, presupposes the formation in the body-brain of an interpretant. The important point that Deely has repeatedly made clear throughout his writing is that such a triadic relation is "unique in that it is the only positive mode and form of *ens reale*, that can also be realized in its distinctive positive being *outside* the whole order of *ens reale* [...] This is the *singularity* of relation", and the point is that there is nothing in the positive structure of relation which determines whether any given relation belongs to the physical or the mental order: "only surrounding circumstances external to the relation in its proper being determines this" (Deely, 2007: 134).

Obviously, Deely does not concern himself directly with evolutionary theory but, even so, animal intentionality occupies an important position in the book's argument. This is because the animal *Umwelt*, which Deely defines as "the sum total of the world as experienced and known, an irreducible web of relations begat by the action of signs [...]" (184) challenges us to make clear what distin-

1 So-called "homunculus explanations" have come to signify theories whose explanatory power tacitly presupposes that a hidden and unexplained intelligence of some sort is operative. A homunculus, i.e. a little man, usually refers to once popular preformationist explanations of development based on the idea that a homunculus was huddled-up inside the head of the spermatozoon.

guishes human cognition from animal cognition. This difference is precisely that only humans divide their sensations into *ens reale* and *ens rationis*, only humans are aware that the object of our cognition is not the same as the thing itself, whereas "for the animal as animal, the objective world is the whole of reality" (184). We humans, on the contrary "are semiotic animals, that is to say, animals capable of understanding what is and is not, distinguishing however haplessly truth from falsity and the real from the fictive" (185). And Deely approvingly cites Jacques Maritain (1968: 79): "Whoever does not love truth is not a human being!".

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Bionote

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