

Christopher S. Morrissey*

The Holy Grail of Semiotics

Culture as a Species-Specific Extension and Expression of Nature

Abstract: This article reviews the first volume of Deely's Poinsoot trilogy. It argues that what comes across with unique force in *Augustine and Poinsoot* is Deely's use of the technical notion of *signum formale* to explain how "only through the absence of formal signs (*species expressae*)" is it possible for there to be any "grounding in the real": i.e., that holy grail sought for by the proponents of "realism" in philosophy. Only thanks to *species impressae*, rather, which ground the existence of mind-independent reality, can critically controlled objectivity be possible for human knowledge and communication.

Keywords: Augustine; Descartes; Peirce; Poinsoot; postmodernism; sign; *signum formale*; *species impressae*

*Corresponding author, Christopher S. Morrissey: Trinity Western University, Langley, British Columbia, Canada, E-mail: morec@mac.com

Augustine and Poinsoot: The Protosemiotic Development (2009) is the first part of a projected trilogy, the third part of which John Deely was still working on as this special issue went to press. The plan of the trilogy can be understood to correspond to the semiotic reading of the history of philosophy that Deely masterfully set forth in *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001). Augustine of Hippo (13 November 354–430 August 28) stands at the division between the First Age and the Second Age, since his proposed definition of *signum*, the sign as that which is able to mediate indifferently between the realms of nature and culture, marks the beginning of the Latin Age (a.k.a. the Second Age) as the era defined

Article note: Deely, John N.: *Augustine and Poinsoot: The Protosemiotic Development* (Postmodernity in Philosophy Poinsoot Trilogy: Determining the Standpoint for a Doctrine of Signs, Vol. 1), Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2009, pp. 200, ISBN-10: 1589661737/ISBN-13: 978-1589661738.

by the search for a truly adequate definition to answer the questions raised by Augustine's proposed definition. This search may have been conducted primarily through the confessional preoccupations of biblical theology and sacramental theology but, all the same, Augustine's charter for such pursuits, embodied in his epochal work *De Doctrina Christiana* ("On Christian Doctrine"), had vast implications that carried the task as far as any kind of action of signs, and would not rest simply with those signs central to Catholic culture.

As Deely has shown in his life's work, which has revolved around the discovery in the work of John Poinot (9 July 1589–1644 June 17) of a truly adequate definition of the sign that answers Augustine's proposed quest, the understanding of the sign reached by Poinot was intellectually eclipsed by the triumph of modern science in the person of Poinot's contemporary, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642), such that the Third (or Modern) Age of philosophy may be defined by this very eclipse, and the present Fourth (or Postmodern) Age in which we live is defined by the rediscovery of the unique ontological status of the sign that was first adequately defined by Poinot.

Because a completely adequate definition of the sign was not attained in the Latin Age until the owl of Minerva flew at the dusk of Poinot, the first volume of Deely's trilogy studies the "protosemiotic" development in play between the first questioning of Augustine and the final answer of Poinot. The second volume in the trilogy, *Descartes and Poinot: A Crossroad of Signs and Ideas*, takes up, by contrast, the "cryptosemiotic" development of philosophical modernity's epistemological obsession with "ideas" rather than with Augustine and Poinot's more promising notion of "signs". The "cenoscopic", or philosophical, treatment of signs thus failed to advance in the Modern Age. Unlike the "ideoscopic", or scientific, achievements of controlled observation and experimentation, the hard-won philosophical articulation by Poinot of an adequate doctrine of signs had to lie dormant for most of the "cryptosemiotic" Third Age. Only with the rediscovery, by Charles S. Peirce, of the unique ontological constitution of the sign as irreducibly triadic, does a new Fourth Age begin, and with it the time of "semiotics" proper: the Postmodern Age, which Deely, more than anyone else, has at last defined properly, that is, according to the ascendancy in postmodern intellectual consciousness of the cultural operation of signs that had previously, in the Latin Age, been confined mostly to consideration of biblical and sacramental signs.

But now signs are studied everywhere – not just in culture, but also in nature – as part of a unified program of semiotics, and Deely's stunning reinterpretation of the entire history of philosophy clarifies the difference between *properly* postmodern thought (which picks up on the ontological indifference of the sign to its position in either nature or culture, which the Latin Age learned

from Augustine, and which came to its greatest moment of consciousness in Poinot) and *improperly* postmodern thought (which in fact remains mired in the dead-end epistemological mistakes of the Modern Age, despite any and all attempts to stylize itself as “post-modern”). It is from this all-surveying historical standpoint, then, that Deely projected the trilogy to culminate in Volume 3, *Peirce and Poinot: The Action of Signs from Nature to Ethics*, which would compare the man marking the beginning of the Fourth Age, the truly postmodern Peirce, with Poinot, the man who brought the Second Age to its culmination with a fully lucid definition of the triadic constitution of the sign, who is not just “protosemiotic” in that he stands at the end of the Latin Age development of semiotics, but who is also properly “semiotic” in that his definitional achievement is now a fully contemporary resource waiting to enter into wider semiotic consciousness in this present Fourth Age.

While in Volume 2 of the trilogy, *Descartes and Poinot* (University of Scranton Press, 2008) Deely explicitly contrasts the way of signs with the way of ideas (i.e., the road not taken that was nonetheless opened up by Poinot, with the dead-end road epitomized by the epistemology of Descartes), in this first volume, *Augustine and Poinot*, Deely also provides an unexpectedly comprehensive treatment of modern philosophy in Chapter 12, which anticipates that second volume. One of the great delights of reading *Augustine and Poinot* is to come across this treatment of modern philosophy’s intrinsic shortcomings, which begins on page 133 and continues on to page 177, where Deely gives a master class in the history of philosophy, enlightening the reader with an understanding of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant that is more profound than may be found in all other histories unaware of semiotics.

Deely demonstrates how modern philosophy’s epistemology, whether “subjectively” Cartesian or “objectively” Kantian, is unable to coherently account for our experience of communication; namely, because all of modernity conceives of objects as mental self-representations (a.k.a. “ideas”). The protosemiotic heritage, however, from Augustine to Poinot, offers a more promising prospect for semiotic postmodernity; namely, an understanding of the sign in its intrinsic objectivity as other-representing, thanks to its irreducibly triadic constitution.

This unique ontological status of the sign is explored by way of an extended comparison, here in Volume 1, between Augustine’s initiation of semiotics (which Deely discusses in Chapters 1–7) and Poinot’s culmination of semiotics (in Chapters 8–14, where the previously mentioned Chapter 12 serves to highlight “the protosemiotic alternative to modern philosophy” by way of modernity’s negative contrast). Chapter 15, an Afterword, looks beyond the protosemiotic development, by taking it up as a lens for understanding the moment in which we now live, proposing how “semioethics” is a “global semiotics” con-

cerned with the full action of actions, in way not previously possible for earlier ages that were mired in dead-end debates over “realism” or “idealism”, since they had not yet grasped how the sign is something that transcends such irreconcilable dichotomies.

While the book thus takes up themes familiar to readers of Deely’s other works, there are also present in *Augustine and Poinset* many unique elements that cannot be found in Deely’s other writings. For example, in Appendix C we find an index of all the references to “sign” in Augustine’s incalculably influential masterwork, *De Doctrina Christiana*, making the volume a perfect companion for the study of Augustine’s protosemiotic thought in that book, since not only can one locate the passages of most interest in Augustine, one also has Deely’s extended meditations on their significance in *Augustine and Poinset* itself. I myself made use of Deely’s book in just this way when I had a graduate student, Tyler Curll, with whom I read the Latin text of Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana*, as he prepared to write a thesis which would go on to engage with Augustine’s innovative treatment. Deely became our indispensable resource, especially as we worked through issues of optimal English translation, receiving guidance from Deely’s illuminating discussion in *Augustine and Poinset* of the difference between *signa naturalia* and *signa data* in the thought of Augustine.

In this book, Deely argues that *signa data* are coextensive with life, and therefore should not be translated as “conventional signs”, which restricts the notion to the semiological realm of arbitrary human stipulation. Rather, Deely makes a convincing case for why *signa data* should be translated as “teleonomic signs” in contrast with *signa naturalia*, which should in turn be translated as “physionomic signs” (instead of “natural signs”). Deely rightly recognizes the acumen of Tzvetan Todorov for realizing that the usual translation here, a dichotomy between “conventional” and “natural” signs, misunderstands and misrepresents Augustine’s thought. Yet Deely also shows what Todorov misses with his attempt to understand *signa data* as “intentional signs” versus *signa naturalia* as “non-intentional”.

Arguing that *signa naturalia* extend throughout the whole realm of *physiosemiotics*, whereas *signa data* may be found anywhere in the realm encompassed by *biosemiotics*, Deely is able to illuminate the full significance of Augustine’s achievement: “Signs pertaining to the living thing precisely as living, thus, would be *signa data*, while signs pertaining to bodies as such whether living or not would be *signa naturalia*.” (50) The type of causality required to explain semiosis (the action of signs as signs) transcends the original Aristotelian scheme of the four causes, which only account for the type of dyadic “brute force” characteristic of physical interactions. “So *signa data* are signs *produced in the communication or attempt at communication among living things as living*;

but they could involve consciousness of some sort only as produced by animals rather than plants.” (51)

In other words, plants are alive and emit non-intentional signs that we must still term *signa data*, thereby distinguishing them from physical interactions which, although they may later become involved with signification (in the action of signs), can still be “analyzed independently of the semiosis”, i.e., “precisely as physical” (50). In short, physionomic signs (*signa naturalia*) may be found in the order of both inorganic and organic bodies, whereas teleonomic signs (*signa data*) may be found among plants, animals, or human animals.

Teleonomic signs are “offered and conveyed by living things in their effort to survive and flourish”, whether intentionally or not (since plants don’t have consciousness), whereas the point of Augustine’s distinguishing physionomic signs was to mark off “signs not produced as signs [in the environmental struggle of all living things for survival and flourishing] but [produced] as physical effects which can and do ‘tell something’ about their source and contexts of origin.” (56) That is, *signa naturalia* are only potentially (or “virtually”) semiotic, in having the potential to enter into a semiosis, by which they may later become part of someone’s semiotic consciousness.

The significance of Deely’s insight into the texts of Augustine here is that he is showing how nature (in the sense of *signa naturalia*) is able to grow seamlessly into culture (as part of a living consciousness), whether implicitly in semiosis or explicitly in the semiotic consciousness that is species-specific to the human animal. It is this properly semiotic understanding of nature and culture, not as an unbridgeable dichotomy, but rather as being inextricably interrelated, on the basis of the *being* of the sign itself, which is intrinsically indifferent as such to either the natural or the cultural entities that it can bring into awareness for a living organism, that Deely keenly appreciates in Augustine.

Of course, he is able to do so because of his expertise in the thought of Poinot, whose 1632 writings on the sign, found in the “Ars Logica” of his *Cursus Philosophicus*, Deely published in his 1985 bilingual critical edition as the *Tractatus de Signis* (Corrected second edition: St. Augustine’s Press, 2013). From the standpoint of Poinot’s semiotic achievement, which technically distinguishes the ontological status of the sign with unparalleled rigor, we can follow Deely to appreciate culture as that extension and expression of nature that is species-specific to humans. What Augustine was first to intuit with such brilliance, Poinot is able to describe comprehensively, although it has remained until the time of the Postmodern Age for the intellectually revolutionary nature of Poinot’s historic achievement to be properly understood and appreciated, not least because of Deely’s untiring efforts to communicate the discovery.

Also noteworthy in this volume, *Augustine and Poinot*, is Deely's discussion of the technical notion of *signum formale* ("pure sign") in Poinot. Deely shows how Todorov was wrong to think that there are no such things as "pure signs" and that nothing sense-perceptible could be said to exist playing this role. The weakness in this line of thinking stems from Augustine's own original (but inadequate) proposal for the definition of a sign as a sense-accessible structure that makes present the awareness of something else: "*Signum est enim res prae-ter speciem quam ingerit sensibus aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire*" (*De Doctrina Christiana* II.1.5-7).

Yet "pure signs" would be those interior or psychological states that would not exist except by being intrinsically bound up with triadic relations (44). Hence Augustine's definition needs to be refined to include "pure signs", as Poinot realized, and the study of such signs was the historical path by which the Latin Age attained consciousness, especially in Poinot, of the *signum formale* as the best clue to the intrinsically triadic nature of the sign itself. Hence Deely updates Augustine's definition by stating: "a sign is anything that stands for another than itself to yet some third: *aliquid alicui stans pro alio*" (43).

While Deely has of course discussed this definitional refinement elsewhere, most notably in the *Four Ages of Understanding*, what comes across with unique force in *Augustine and Poinot* is his use of this technical notion of *signum formale* to explain how "only through the absence of formal signs (*species expressae*)" is it possible for there to be any "grounding in the real": i.e., that holy grail sought for by the proponents of "realism" in philosophy (79 n.25). Only thanks to *species impressae*, rather, which ground the existence of mind-independent reality, can critically controlled objectivity be possible for human knowledge and communication.

The painstaking attention to philosophical detail by Deely on this point is what allows him to write his brilliant contrast in Chapter 12 between modern philosophy and the protosemiotic development of Augustine and Poinot. For it is at the conclusion of his brilliant exposition there that we find this pithy technical formulation of the common epistemological error that defines every instance of modern philosophy: the erroneous assumption that "the *species expressa* terminates sensation just as it terminates perception and intellection" (173). Therefore, for the reader who takes the time to read carefully and let Deely guide him through the argument, the reward is nothing less than an unmatched philosophical grasp of why both modern philosophy and *improperly* postmodern ("ultramodern") philosophy alike must commit their fatal error of "reducing the whole of whatever is discovered or could be discovered along the way [of inquiry] into a construct of the inquirer's mind" (173).

Also noteworthy as uniquely highlighted in this book is Deely's use of the Latin Age distinction between *signum ad placitum* (a conventional sign directly involving stipulation) and *signum ex consuetudine* (one that involves mainly habit and custom) to explain how the "arbitrariness of signs" cannot be taken as something to species-specifically define human thought, since biologists have discovered such arbitrariness at work in the semioses of other animals. Deely magnificently explains, using this distinction, how habit can often be at war with institution, as well as reinforce it. Every act of stipulation still requires collective behavior in order for the stipulation to succeed. Hence, "the primary modeling system is generically zoösemiotic", and therefore linguistic communication (in the species-specifically human sense) "provides a secondary, not a primary, modeling system" (95) which is, in the end, precisely what allows humans, as the only semiotic animals, to transcend sensation and perception and to attain an intellectual understanding of signs in their very ontological constitution as being triadic relations. This understanding is the intellectual legacy of Augustine and Poinsett, and yet it is that for which must thank John Deely, on account of his heroic conservation of our intellectual heritage.

References

AUGUSTINE of Hippo.

c.397–426. *De doctrina Christiana libri quattuor* ("On Christian Doctrine") in J. P. Migne (Ed.), *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Latina (P.L.), vol. 34, cols 15–122.

DEELY, John N.

2001. *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Toronto Studies in Semiotics) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).

Bionote

Christopher Morrissey

Christopher Morrissey (b. 1967) lectures in logic and philosophy at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, Canada. His publications include translations of Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days* in one volume (2012), "A logic without nominalism" (2016), and "Aquinas on polysemy and *The Elusive Covenant* revisited" (2014). His research interests include logic, metaphysics, and the philosophy of nature.