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Semiotic Reconstructions of Reality

Reflections on John Deely's *Purely Objective Reality*

Abstract: The paper gives a critical appraisal of John Deely's book *Purely Objective Reality*. It examines the concepts Deely adopts from the Scholastics, *ens reale*, *ens rationis*, subjectivity, objectivity, and the division of the universe into signifying objects and things that do not signify in its own as well as from the perspective of Charles S. Peirce's semiotics.

Keywords: *ens rationis*; *ens reale*; objectivity; Charles S. Peirce; subjectivity; truth

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Purely Objective Reality, published in 2009, is a daring, if not provocative, title for a philosophical book at the beginning of the 21st century. John Deely is the author, an independent and original thinker and gifted teacher of semiotics and its roots in the history of philosophy. Deely is not deterred by the doctrines of the moderns who have denounced the idea of reality and even more so the one of an objective reality as a naive illusion. Nor does he join the 21st century group of realists presently engaged in rehabilitating the reality of objects in the name of metaphysics and under the designation of speculative realism (cf. Bryant, 2011; Nöth, 2015). His ambitious aim is to "solve the problem of the subjectivity/objectivity couple, making an indispensable contribution both to semiotics and philosophy" (back cover). The question whether there is such thing as a "purely objective reality" at all, as Deely postulates, has been answered elsewhere (Ramírez, 2010). Part of the answer is that a thorough redefinition of reality and objectivity is necessary to justify Deely's claim.

The philosophical framework within which Deely develops his argument is

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Ancient, Scholastic, and Late Scholastic semiotics. Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, William Ockham, and above all John Poinsot are his loadstars, but Deely also enters into dialogue with philosophers and semioticians of the periods of rationalism, enlightenment, and the 19th and 20th centuries. He quotes Descartes, Kant, Maritain, Marx, Peirce, de Saussure, Heidegger, Berger and Luckmann, Searle, as well as Sebeok, among others.

Fundamental to Deely's reconstruction of reality are two concepts from the vocabulary of the Scholastics, *ens reale* and *ens rationis*. As Deely defines them, an *ens reale* is a real being that "exists independently of human thought", whereas an *ens rationis* is a rational being that "exists only dependently on human thought" (41). The distinction is the key to the understanding of the Scholastic concepts of *object* and *objectivity*, but to understand what the medievals meant by an *objectum*, it is necessary to know how an object differs from a thing (*res*). "A thing, *aliquid* or *res*, exists whether or not anyone is aware of it, and an object, *objectum*, cannot be an object outside of or apart from awareness" (15). An object is thus an "object signified", as Poinsot called it later.

Since to be an object thus means to exist in relation to a knower or as known, the object is by definition already a semiotic object, and to be objective means to have a semiotic being. From the perspective of the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce, a semiotic being is a sign. An *objectum* is thus a sign or representation from the Peircean perspective insofar as any "object of representation can be nothing but a representation of which the first representation is the interpretant" (Peirce c.1895, CP 1.339). However, although the medieval semiotic object is a sign, it is not entirely an object of a sign in Peirce's definition because the medieval mind divides the universe into semiotic objects and nonsemiotic things, which creates a dualism that Peirce's semiotics does not admit. Only "objects signified", not things defined as nonsemiotic beings, can be objects of signs as Peirce defines them.

The medieval conception of the nonsemiotic thing (*res*) has its roots in Augustine's semiotics. In *De doctrina christiana*, under the heading "What a Thing Is and What a Sign", Augustine writes, "I use the word 'thing' in a strict sense to signify that which is never employed as a sign for anything else: for example wood, stone, cattle or other things of that kind" (397: chap. I.2). Augustine's dualism between semiotic objects and nonsemiotic things contrasts with Peirce's conviction that "the entire universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs" (1906: 394).

If the medieval object is an object only in relation to a knower, who is the knower of this object? Is it a subject? Deely informs us that this is not so, at least not primarily. In his "Preamble on Objectivity", he clarifies that it is not the knower who is the subject, but the thing, whether it is known as an object or not,

for "all *things* have a subjective constitution or being, which cares not what we think or believe in determining the effects one body will have or not have upon another" (9). Only because *all* existing things, including human beings, are subjects, the knower of the object as well as the object itself are subjects, too, "for precisely as existing in thought, things are, after all, [also] aspects of the subjectivity of the knower" (42). An example illustrating the subjectivity of things in this sense is the following: "It is because of the subjective constitution of wood and glass, respectively, that a kitchen match suffices to ignite the one but only to heat the other" (9). Hence, since all objects that are things have a subjectivity qua thing besides their objectivity, they are subjects (qua thing) and objects (qua being known) at the same time.

Any theory of reality that does not face the question of truth is incomplete. How did the medievals conceive it? Deely tells us that the medievals adopted the Aristotelian correspondence theory of truth: "The truth arises when the way things are thought to be corresponds with the way things are" (41–42). Deely speaks of the medieval confidence in reality and truth and questions it from the perspective of a postmodern mind: "But what is the basis for the prior possibility of correspondence? For precisely as existing in thought, things are, after all, aspects of the subjectivity of the knower" (42). The question remains unanswered, presumably because it was not a question for the medievals yet.

The present account of Deely's fascinating panorama of medieval semiotics must remain incomplete because of the severe restrictions imposed on its length. Reading Deely is intriguing in itself. The author has didactic and literary talents. Occasionally, however, he is carried away by his own enthusiasm and sometimes by rash judgments. For example, Deely's remark that "conceptualism differs not a whit from nominalism" (39) must sound refreshing to the bewildered beginner in medieval semiotics, but it is certainly a gross simplification that does no justice to the enormous efforts that medieval and medievalist philosophers have made to draw very subtle distinctions between the two. Furthermore, Deely goes astray when he dedicates almost a whole chapter to Saussure and the arbitrariness of the sign (84–109). Saussure was a radical mentalist and it is too evident that his ideas are utterly incompatible with medieval realism, which Deely himself admits (179).

Deely is also the victim of a rash judgment in his "Terminological Prenote". There he introduces the term *ideoscopy* (3–6), although he knows that the term, adopted by Peirce, was *idioscopy* when Bentham first introduced it. Deely introduces the spelling with an "e" in order "to connote 'ideas' rather than 'idiots', frankly" (5). Unfortunately, this spelling reform is incompatible with the ethics of terminology and results in a folk etymology as well. Just like the word *theory*, the form *-scopy* has its root in a verb whose meaning is 'to look at'.

Hence, the form *-scopy* refers to a theory or a science. So far, so good, but together with the initial form *ideo-*, a morphological variant of the Greek root *idéa*, Deely's coinage means 'science of ideas'. However, this is not what Bentham and Peirce had in mind. Their neoclassical compound *idioscopy* (with an "i") begins with the form *idio-*, which means 'special', so that the compound can designate a "special science, depending upon special observation, which travel or other exploration, or some assistance to the senses, either instrumental or given by training, together with unusual diligence, has put within the power of its students" (Peirce c.1902, CP 1.242). Notice that the Greek form *idio-*, which means literally 'own, personal, private', also serves to create words without any negative connotation, such as *idiom*.

In comparison with the great attention given to Saussure and to some less important figures in semiotics, Deely unfortunately pays little attention to Peirce. It is true that his book contains no less than 47 references to Peirce and also that he gives credit to "Peirce as the principal father or founder of semiotics as a postmodern intellectual movement [who] made decisive advance over his Latin predecessors in the doctrine of signs" (76). However, Deely says too little about Peirce's dialogue with the medievals and how far his contributions to the semiotics of objectivity, reality, and truth go beyond them.

Ens rationis and *ens realis* (the latter mostly only under the name of "the real") are terms about which Peirce writes, "The old division [is] often useful" (1870; CP 3.136). However, in contrast to the medievals, Peirce's definition abandons the criterion of existence (vs. nonexistence). Both *entia* exist, he says in 1897, although in a different way. The existence of an *ens realis* "consists in the fact that, if it were constructed, it would involve no contradiction" (CP 4.176). What Peirce calls "existent" in 1897 is more generally the "real" in his later writings. After the turn of the century, Peirce distinguishes three kinds of reality, of which the one of existence is only one. Peirce calls it reality of Secondness. The other two are the ones of Firstness and Thirdness (cf. Misak, 1991). The former is the reality of the possible, the latter the one of laws, habits, and rules. These latter two are real although they do not exist because just like the existent, they exert a real influence on our lives. With this extended conception of reality, Peirce dissolves the medieval dichotomy of *entia rationis* and *entia realis*. *Entia rationis* are now as real as *entia realis*.

The concept of reality, in Peirce's definitions, inherited a distinguishing feature from the medieval *ens reale*, namely, that it is independent of human thought (41). In 1868, Peirce defines the real as "independent of the vagaries of me and you" (CP 5.311). In 1903, he postulates that the real "is as it is, independently of how we may think it to be" (1903, CP 7.659). Also in 1877, Peirce defines the real as independent of any knower, but in contrast to the

medieval *ens reale*, the Peircean real is not just an *ens*, a mode of being; it *acts* on our senses. "There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws" (1877, CP 5.384). While the medieval *ens reale* is a subject, the real is an agent in a sense about which Peirce says, "The real is active; we acknowledge it, in calling it the *actual*" (undated, CP 1.325).

Just as the real is not restricted to the reality of Secondness, truth is neither restricted to the "positive scientific truth" of the natural sciences (1877, CP 5.384) nor to the endeavor of achieving objectivity by "grasping the subjective constitution of the physical environment", as Deely (2009: 11) puts it. In addition, there are also the truths of mathematics, aesthetics, ethics, logic, or metaphysics (CP 1.486, c.1896), which are concerned with the reality of Thirdness. Furthermore, there is the reality of Firstness, the one of the perceptual truths that we learn from "practical life" (1901, CP 5.568). Already seeing a clean white surface involves a perceptual truth. The messages conveyed by the senses are real and true. We must accept them since we have "absolutely no [other] testimony concerning them". Insofar as sense perceptions are "indisputable", they are real. Reality and truth in this sense come to us "from the cognitions which the history of our lives forces upon us" (1902, CP 2.784).

Deely discusses the nature of sensation and perception in a semiotic framework expanded by Uexküll's *Umweltlehre*. According to Uexküll, the perceiving organism is a "counterstructure" of the *object* of perception. Deely concludes,

> The sensation is 'in' the cognitive organism, indeed, as a quality and modification of its subjectivity. [...] Sensation partially objectifies the physical surroundings, the environment [...], not entirely but only in proportion as those surroundings are adapted to the parts of the organism's body that we call its organs of sense. The outward or bodily senses, thus, are selective, but they do not interpret. [...] They remain blithely incognizant of all those aspects and energies of the environment which fall outside the range of the sense organs of the organism. (Deely, 2009: 62–63)

For Peirce, too, sense impressions are not interpreted in the same way as signs are, but for different reasons. Deely and Uexküll focus on the organism as a subject, when they describe how it selects from its environment a set of stimuli as meaningful and as blind to others. Peirce focuses of the agency of the environment, when he speaks of the resistance of reality against being ignored by the senses:

> We speak of *hard facts*. We wish our knowledge to conform to hard facts. Now, the 'hardness' of fact lies in the insistency of the percept, its entirely irrational insistency [...]. We can know nothing about the percept, – but only experience it in its totality, – except through the perceptual judgment, and this likewise compels acceptance without any assignable reason. (1903, CP 7.659)

While Deely argues with Uexküll that the organism is biologically blind to whatever it cannot sense because of its genetic *Prägung* (imprinting), Peirce argues that we are blind by logical necessity to any other *percepta* than those that we do sense. While the former account of sensation and perception is a biosemiotic one, the latter is one of "'Logic considered as Semeiotic' (or probably *Semeotic* without the i)" (Peirce, 1908, CP 8.377).

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Note: **The designation CP** abbreviates *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1–6 ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–35.), vols. 7–8 ed. Arthur W. Burks (same publisher, 1958). Dating within the CP is based on Burks's bibliography at the end of CP 8 (see Burks, 1958 above). The abbreviation followed by volume and paragraph numbers with a period between follows the standard CP reference form.
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Bionote

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