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Semiotic Animal: Waking up to Reciprocity

Abstract: This article reviews Deely's 2010 book, *Semiotic Animal*, with its argument that to embrace the semiotic animal as the core of human being is to embrace the interdependence between ourselves and everything else. The article considers other formulations of the nature of humanity aside from Deely's and finds that their explanatory power is greatly limited by comparison.

Keywords: anthropology of language; biosemiotics; interdependence; Lebenswelt; philosophy of language; Umwelt

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1 Overview of the *Semiotic Animal*

What sums up "human being"? Whatever the answer may be (and there are many), there is – as of yet – no overwhelming consensus. On the other hand, anyone who finds fault with the title *Homo sapiens* (*sapiens*) is in good company. In spite of all the credence paid and precedence lent to the fusty official descriptor, many of us still think that mere "thinking" or "discerning" or being "rational", are simply not our sum. As a result, malcontented contenders continue to generate a list of alternate titles. Hopeful proposals range from *Homo loquax* and *Homo loquens* to *Homo culturalis* and *Homo moralis* – from *Homo metaphysicus* to *Homo aestheticus*. According to some, only *Homo ludens* is capable of play; according to others, only *Homo demens* is able to go mad. And the list goes on: we are invited to consider *Homo pictor*, *Homo patiens* and *Homo poetica* – or maybe our true heritage is *Homo technologicus* – or is it *Homo sociologicus*? or *Homo excentricus*? And even so the litany of neglected species-specific capacities will continue, each one more bizarre than the next: suffering,

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warmongering, ideology, greed, superstition, curiosity, creation, empathy – even laughter. In all such modes (or many at least), we appear to be unmatched. Indeed, we are a knotty lot. Could we simply settle for *Homo complexus*? Or better, *Homo difficilis*?

Even if we could, John Deely would not allow it. In his 2010 book *Semiotic Animal: A Postmodern Definition of "Human Being" Transcending Patriarchy and Feminism*, Deely follows up on an earlier (1990) proposal to suggest, instead, that the conversation must first be shifted back to our animal roots. If we wish to identify the all-encompassing signal of human being – and its consequences – it is back to the ranks of the hominid, the mammal, the vertebrate and beyond we go. Having done so, according to Deely, we are then in a position to identify human *being* with an uncanny species-specific ability that supersedes and circumscribes all other contending distinctions such as the proposals above. Deely's answer? The animal in question is a "semiotic" animal. If he is right, here we are: 7.4 billion severely balding upright mammals who happen to be awake (or, more accurately, slowly waking up) to the nature of signs. To clarify up-front, though, Deely is emphatic in his assertions that all animals (and plants and more) make *use* of signs. The distinction, then, is that "*only human animals* come to realize that *there are* signs" (100, emphasis in the original). In what follows, I offer a thematic summary of Deely's position, and what I consider to be its most relevant contextual material, in review of the *Semiotic Animal*.

The book is organized into 12 chapters followed by an unnumbered "*Sequel*" chapter that rounds out the largely historical and philosophical discussions in earlier chapters by drawing attention to the necessarily ethical dimension of the topic. Readers acquainted with Deely's other writings will find many familiar themes and treatments framed with fresh juxtapositions and new analyses. Readers unfamiliar with Deely may well use the volume as an introduction, and to some degree a synopsis, of some his other writings. This is especially true of Chapters 4 and 7. The former supplies a concise overview of helpful distinctions between Semiotics and Semiology. The latter supplies a concise overview of the development of *Semiotic* throughout the history of western thought – something of a "microcosm" of Deely's (2001) magnum opus, *Four Ages of Understanding*.

In curious contrast with his usual practices (but squarely in-keeping with the grand tradition of *Homo ludens*) the book's arrangement is decidedly idiosyncratic and asymmetric – both in terms of chapter length and organization. One chapter spans a single page and another spans only two (Chapters 3 and 1, respectively), another is 20 pages long with three sections and ten sub-sections (Chapter 8), another is four pages long with no sections

(Chapter 6); another is 20 pages with ten sections and no sub-sections (*Sequel*). 35 pages into the text, the sixth chapter announces itself as a "preamble", by picking up on a theme introduced in the first chapter – which would itself seem to be an extension of the preface, given its focus on Deely's anecdotal description of a missed meeting with Pope John-Paul II in 2003. Finally, in lieu of Chapter 13, the concluding chapter is listed as a "*Sequel*". Since, presumably, the alternative would have been unlucky? Given his notorious affinity for puns and punch lines, I suggest that Deely be given the benefit of the doubt on the matter.

Popularly conceived, "postmodernism" is a worldview that eschews structural and institutional norms. Deely's surreal approach to organizing the volume may function as a multimodal pun – a sly commentary on the popular notion of "postmodern" – in contrast to his usage of the term in the book's subtitle and text. Either way, the content of the book supersedes such quibbles. As anyone familiar with Deely's writings knows, of course, his own usage of the term has little to do with popular misconstruals. For those unfamiliar with the distinction in question, the point will become clearer below.

My review of the book selects four key themes that run through the text in order to discuss the book's central argument, leaving aside much of the broader contextual apparatus. In the next section I review Deely's brief but insightful exercise in historiography, which clarifies the origins and previous coinages of the term "semiotic animal" and then further define the term. In Section 3, I discuss Deely's review of alternative titles proposed elsewhere that might otherwise contend with "semiotic animal" as adequate descriptions of the unique status of human being. In Section 4, I review a number of paradoxes that Deely highlights in places throughout the text. These paradoxes necessarily accompany an admission that human uniqueness traces back to a "semiotic" capacity. In the final section I then attempt to summarize and discuss Deely's proposed consequences for recognizing the "semiotic animal" distinction as constitutive of human being.

2 Previous coinages of the "semiotic animal"

In Chapters 3 and 5, Deely addresses the question of previous coinages of the term "semiotic animal". It should be noted up-front that his own usage of the term in the first edition of *Basics of Semiotics* (1990) is the inaugural English coinage. This instance was not a translation since Deely was unaware of either of the two previous coinages in other languages at the time of writing. Nor does

it appear that either of the other two coinages, in German and Italian respectively, were translations of each other. In other words, by 1990 there were at least three independent coinages of the term "semiotic animal" in print in three different languages.

The German coinage "*semiotisches Thier*" was made in passing by Felix Hausdorff (writing under the pseudonym Paul Mongré, 1897: 7). The Italian coinage "*animale semiotico*", also made in passing (1978: 217) by Ferruccio Rossi-Landi. The German instance devoted only a single paragraph to unpacking the idea, and the Italian token devoted even less attention to the idea. Thus, the systematic development of the specific construction according to the general thematics of the distinction it represents is currently less than 30 years old (29–31). And what does it mean for an animal to be "semiotic"?

As noted above, all animals are capable of recognizing, employing and exploiting signs to their advantage. This, however, Deely describes as "generically semiosic". Humans by contrast are "specifically semiotic" (100). Humans, as Deely clarifies, are "the only animal capable of knowing that there are signs to be studied as well as made use of to more 'practical' ends" (100–101). Among other things, this means we are able to realize two peculiar facts pertaining to the nature of signs, things and objects: First, that objects are distinct from things; second, that signs are distinct from objects. The first of these we come to know only to the degree that we recognize the world is full of entities and relations we would never have guessed at given the physical limitations and entrenched habits of our psycho-sensory existence in an animal *Umwelt* alone. The second we come to know only to the degree that we recognize relations between signs and the objects that they represent can range from pure fantasy to precise mappings. Notably, our awareness of these distinctions provides a unified account for explaining "the possibilities equally of truth and error in our interpretations of "things" (101, see also 88–89). Neither of these possibilities appears to have been remotely considered in the Italian and German coinages discussed above (see 30–31).

Recognizing these distinctions also has broader ramifications for re-routing the course of Western philosophy toward a truly post-modern era. The semiotic animal distinction is *postmodern* in that it moves the discussion of human understanding beyond the possibilities of mere realism and/or idealism (7). The position can only be called "post-modern" since it supersedes the modernist assumption that "mind-dependent" (a.k.a. *ens rationis*) being could be the only possible scenario for approaching the human cognitive-perceptual apparatus (see also Deely 2009). This assumption plays a substantial role in our currently institutionalized definition of humans as "rational animals" or "thinking things".

3 Alternatives to the "semiotic" animal

In Chapter 7 Deely addresses alternative titles that might otherwise compete with "semiotic animal" for identifying human *being*. Why not define humans as "signifying animals" or "symbolic animals", for instance? Do such designations really differ so much from his preferred term, "semiotic" animal? Would "linguistic animal" not serve just as well? Unlike many of the narrowly focused titles listed in the introduction above, these titles also cast a wide net, without reducing humanity to mental activity. Deely, however, dismantles them one by one. Some are too wide, others too narrow.

"Signifying animal" does not work for reasons already discussed above – simply put, the same is true of every animal; so the term identifies nothing distinctive about humans. "Symbolic animal" may seem to come closer, but this is true only if symbols are artificially restricted to linguistic usage (i.e., as linguistic symbols). Otherwise, as Deely details at length here and elsewhere, "while human beings are the only animals capable of thematizing signs, they are far from the only animals that employ symbols" (47). Perhaps, then, "linguistic animal" would suffice? This is a more promising possibility, since only humans possess language; but if the point is to sum up human uniqueness, even this title falls short.

To settle for "linguistic animal" (or related proposals such as *Homo loquens*) would be to sell ourselves short – and, more importantly, to cut ourselves off – not only from the animal kingdom, but also from the material world. Proposals that humans be identified as the only "rational animal" or singled out for our possession of Cartesian mental substance – the *res cogitans* – suffer from the same problem. The rational animal necessarily elevates itself above all other animals. This establishes a "false hierarchy", in which humans function in modes that are suspiciously similar to the angelic beings once presumed to govern the celestial spheres (103). The *res cogitans* model threatens to distance us even further, by setting us apart from the "material interactions of things" (103). The predilections toward angelic transcendence and ethereal aloofness implicit in modernist worldviews are perpetuated in the assumption that linguistic behavior is the sum of human being.

Deely reminds us, first of all, that – language or no language – we remain animals. Linguistic sign systems are unique, but they remain situated in, and vitally dependent on, animal sign systems. One distinctive feature of language is the ability it grants us to comment on language. This is known as a "metalinguistic" or "reflexive" capacity. Our reflexive capacity does not stop at language, however; we are also able to use signs-in-general (whether linguistic

or not) to reflect on signs-in-general (whether linguistic or otherwise). This is "semiotics". Other animals are able to use and recognize signs but are unable to recognize signs as signs – unable to use signs to comment on or study other signs. In short, only semiotics is capable of "metasemiosis" (48). Given that semiotics is a more general capacity than language (and metalanguage), and given that making this capacity focal in our quest to understand human being has the advantage of maintaining our vital link with other animals communication systems – and with the material world – Deely argues that our semiotic capacity should be recognized as the sum of our species-specific heritage (48–52).

4 Paradoxes of the semiotic animal

Notably, then, it will not do to label us "*Homo semioticus*". In making use of our capacity for semiotics (much less language), humans are not cut off from the animal kingdom or from the material world. We are semiotic *animals*; and the semiotic animal is paradoxical through and through – replete with vital tensions. Deely's distinction affirms both our animality and our "uniqueness *among* the animals" (52). In contrast to earlier views that isolate humans as *animal rationale* or *res cogitans*, the semiotic animal "*shows that what sets us apart is an awareness of the very process that ties us into nature as a whole*" (103, emphasis in the original). There is, then, an elegant simultaneity in this proposal – a kind of robust interdependence that resists reduction to either-or binaries – identifying our uniqueness in the most general way possible while simultaneously affirming our vital link to the here-and-now of planet earth and the raw-and-ready of animal behavior. Within this context, the semiotic animal discovers a new capacity for understanding that is replete with similar interdependent tensions.

Charles Sanders Peirce, arguably the most thoroughgoing semiotician to-date, identifies these very tensions in his new list of categories that mediate between the natural and cultural spheres of human experience. In Deely's estimation, "The New List was a semiotic list, the first attempt of semiotic consciousness to reclassify being from within experience as just what it cenoscopically seems to be: a confused and confusing mixture of *ens reale* and *ens rationis*" (101). Only humans are able to recognize the difference between being (*ens reale*) and non-being (*ens rationis*) (78). To be a semiotic animal, then, is to have the capacity for waking up to the confused and confusing nature of reality. As humans we are not so much "rational" and "discerning" as we are

capable of admitting that we might be wrong. The semiotic animal is in the unique – and perhaps unenviable – position of being not only capable of understanding but also capable of understanding how little we understand.

5 Significance of the semiotic animal

In light of these distinctions, identifying human *being* with the semiotic animal necessarily entails a vision of humanity (and *for* humanity) that is at once more humble and more integrated, more comprehensive and more coherent than current alternatives allow. Deely argues that this vision of humanity also makes us more responsible than current alternatives consider. As the old adage goes, with great power comes great responsibility. Our semiotic capacity endows us not only with an unprecedented survival advantage (thereby, ironically, posing a threat to our own long-term survival) but also a unique ethical charge (117). Deely proposes that semiotics is necessarily interdependent with semioethics, arguing that the two are "not independent developments, but reciprocal aspects of a single development: the evolution of human understanding" (124).

Although we are clearly still in the process of coming to realize the significance of both our semiotic and semioethic heritage – along with their possibilities and pitfalls, the two appear to be interdependent for the very reason that the semiotic animal is interdependent with the signifying environment inhabited by other signifying animals. According to Deely, semioethics can be "seen as an outgrowth of nature itself binding our species to nature in a new way [such that ...] we cannot afford to be indifferent and dominate as we please" (120). The position does not make us responsible in the natural world alone, but also in the cultural world – which is itself an outgrowth of nature as "the species-specifically human development of nature consequent upon linguistic communication" (8).

Consider the book's subtitle in this connection: "beyond patriarchy and feminism". These two ideologies are generated by the hyper-masculine drive toward domination and our necessary reaction against it. Deely argues that both can be traced back to a common misguided assumption – i.e., that humans are *set apart* (as *res cogitans*) from the material world and *set above* (as *animal rationale*) the rest of the animal kingdom. Since both of these worldviews on the nature of human being assume that humans are separate from nature, they encourage modes of deliberation and social construction that thrive on the generation of privileged binaries and their oppressed counterparts. Deely argues that a semiotic stance and its semioethic corollary necessarily moves us

beyond these ways of thinking toward embracing a new kind of humanism in which the other's rights are interdependent with my own (123).

This point brings us back around to the matter of "interdependence" – a point that I wish to suggest is a veritable diamond in the rough (or a whole field of diamonds in the rough) in Deely's text. Although it is a theme that surfaces and resurfaces throughout the book, as can be noted even in my brief synopses above, the theme is never foregrounded at length, beyond assertions that we need to work at "reconceptualizing the whole matter of interdependency" (123) and illustrations of interdependent dynamics. Deely remarks, for instance, that Peirce's project was "to classify the manner in which mind-dependent being and mind-independent being interpenetrate and reveal themselves objectively through the weave and pattern of human experience" (7). He muses on how the notion of relations involves "permeability" between mind-dependent and mind-independent realities (56) – between "the otherwise opposed orders of *ens reale* and *ens rationis*" (63). He references Sebeok's (1984) assertion that the mission of semiotics is "to mediate between reality and illusion". He insists that one of the consequences of semiotic understanding is that there can be no more fixed boundaries, especially where we have been conditioned to expect them most – e.g., "between sensory intuition and things-in-themselves or between concepts and noumena" (124).

As I have suggested elsewhere (Pelkey, 2013 and 2016), this aspect of semiosis is in need of far more attention, exploration, explanation, thematization and the like. Much work remains to even draw it into our awareness, much less to make it focal and then don it as our lens for insight so that we might approach the objects of reality as they really are: actively interrelated and interdependent. Otherwise, moving "beyond patriarchy and feminism" is just as unlikely as moving beyond "a misconceived objectivity and a solipsistic subjectivity" – ideologies that underlie our oscillating fixation with realism and idealism (7–8) – along with myriad other binaries.

Unless we grant interdependence pride-of-place in our theorizing and system building, we forever run the risk of going nowhere with language: endless feedback loops of circularity and tautology in which concepts and categories cannibalize other categories and concepts, and in which system-building exists primarily in order to validate the system being built. As Deely argues with force and aplomb, to embrace the semiotic animal as the core of human being is to embrace the interdependence between ourselves and everything else. The alternative is not only solipsism and nominalism but ultimately, perhaps, the very extinction of our species.

Finally then, given Deely's philosophical distaste (cf. Deely, 2012) for the many flavors of solipsism inherent in the idealist, nominalist, and naïve realist

assumptions endemic to modern (and ultramodern) epistemologies, and given his personal appreciation of puns and punch lines, let me end with a blend of these features, throwing in, for good measure, the title of the book under review:

Q: *What's the difference between John Deely and a solipsist?*

A: A solipsist's a semiotic cannibal, but Deely is a semiotic animal.

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Bionote

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