Punctum, 2(2): 131-135, 2016

Obituary: John Deely (1942-2017)

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John Deely was born on 26 April 1942 in Chicago, Illinois and died on 6 January 2017 in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. He had staged a courageous battle against pancreatic cancer from 2015-2016, continuing to work for part of that year and coping in a fashion that he and close onlookers considered 'miraculous'. Closest of all these onlookers was his wife, the semiotician Brooke Williams.

Deely was educated at the Aquinas Institute School of Philosophy, River Forest, Illinois receiving a BA in 1965, an MA in 1966 (with his thesis published in article form the same year), and a PhD in 1967 (with the thesis published in monograph form 1971 as *The Tradition via Heidegger*). He held early positions at Saint Mary's College, South Bend (1974–1976), University of Ottawa (1968-1969), St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick (1967-1968) and St. Joseph's College, Rensselear, Indiana (1966-1967). Later, he was appointed at Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa (1976-1999), along with a number of visiting posts including Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil (Fall 1988-Spring 1989), Fulbright Professor; Pontificia Universidade de São Paulo, 22-26 May 1989, Fulbright-Garcia Robles Professor, Anáhuac University, México City (Fall 1994–Spring 1995). Since being appointed at the University of St. Thomas, Houston (1999-present), where he has held the Rudman Chair in Philosophy since (2007), he has been a visiting scholar at the University of Helsinki, Finland (Fall 2000), Visiting Fulbright Professor, Southeast European Center for Semiotic Studies, New Bulgarian University, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria (Spring 2005) and Visiting Professor of Semiotics, Tartu University, Estonia (2009 spring semester).

His book-length monographs include *The Problem of Evolution: Philosophical Repercussions of Evolutionary Science* (with Raymond Nogar, 1973), his scholarly edition of *Tractatus de Signis: The Semiotic of John Poinsot* (1985 and 2013), *Basics of Semiotics* (1990), *Four Ages of Understanding. The First Postmodern History of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the 21st Century* (2001), *What Distinguishes Human Understanding* (2002), *The Semiotic Animal* (with Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, 2005), *Purely Objective Reality* (2009a), *Medieval Philosophy Redefined* (2010a) and the 'Poinsot trilogy' (2008a, 2008b, 2015). This body of work is complemented by over 200 articles and a number of book series that Deely edited, including the yearbooks of the Semiotic Society of America (from 1980), *The American Journal of Semi-*

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2016.0018

otics (from 2001), *Sources in Semiotics* (University Press of America/Rowman & Littlefield) and *Approaches to Postmodernity* (Scranton University Press 2007–2010).

An authority on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) and a major figure in both contemporary semiotics, Scholastic Realism, Thomism and, more broadly, Catholic philosophy, Deely's thinking has demonstrated how awareness of signs has heralded a new, genuinely 'postmodern' epoch in the history of human thought. 'Postmodern' here means 'after the modern' rather than the fashionable intellectual and publishing movement emanating mainly from Paris and associated with the academic trend of poststructuralism from the 1960s onwards (the postmoderns 'falsely so called' – Deely 2003). Deely's writing on signs calls for a thoroughgoing superseding of the 'modern', proposing an understanding of humans as the 'semiotic animal' to replace the modern definition as 'res cogitans' (see Deely 2005).

Central to Deely's work, but certainly not the whole of it, is his excavating of the semiotic of João Poinsot (also known as John Poinsot and St. John of Thomas, 1589-1644). In Poinsot and the heritage of Late Latin thought, Deely saw a triadic theory of semiosis pre-dating Peirce, as well as a Thomist logic. Deely also draws on the 'antimodernism' and 'ultramodernism' of Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), the whole of Peirce's philosophy and logic, as well as the writings of the theoretical biologist, Jakob von Uexküll (1864-1944) and the work of the semiotician and 'biologist manqué', Thomas A. Sebeok (1920-2001). Tracking the development of a 'pragmaticist' realism, following Peirce, Deely's work would addresses questions of knowledge – how humans come to know (realism) and how they remember (or repeatedly forget) what they might know (the history of pre-modern, modern and postmodern thought; cf. Deely 1985, 1988). Yet he is very suspicious of the term epistemology and its deployment in philosophy and in thinking in general (see Deely 2010b). His early articles focused on the problems that the idea of evolution posed for conceptions of what it is to be human. This concern runs through all of his work, including his most recent discussions of the human as the animal possessing a semiotic consciousness.

As with Jakob von Uexküll, what unites human and non-human animals for Deely is the habitation of both in an *Umwelt*. An animal's *Umwelt* is its 'objective' world: it is the world that the animal lives in, how it apprehends everything around itself (and even within itself); yet, at the same time, that very apprehension takes place on the basis of the sensory apparatus that it possesses and, consequently, the signs that it is able to emit and receive (Deely 2009b). A dog's hearing, for example, a key part of its sensory apparatus, is much more honed to high frequencies than a human's; for this reason, a dog inhabits a different *Umwelt* to a human and uses largely different signs. If an animal's *Umwelt* is its 'objective' world and it is where an animal relates to 'objects' then there is a need to distinguish 'objects' from 'signs'. Customarily, 'objective' implies phenomena completely separate and closed off from the vagaries of subjects' apprehensions. Commonly, in speech, there is reference to an 'objective view' or that which is untrammelled by opinion and partisan perspectives. Deely, by contrast, performs a logical re-figuration of objectivity. He demonstrates that the world that seems to be wholly independent of humans — 'objective' — can never be such

(see Deely 2009a). Deely offers a thorough re-orientation of what is commonly understood as the dependency of the world on its subjects, a re-orientation derived, principally, from the distinction between 'signs', 'objects' and 'things'. As Deely maintains (1994a: 11),

> There are signs and there are other things besides: things which are unknown to us at the moment and perhaps for all our individual life; things which existed before us and other things which will exist after us; things which exist only as a result of our social interactions, like governments and flags; and things which exist within our round of interactions — like daytime and night — but without being produced exactly by those interactions, or at least not inasmuch as they are 'ours', i.e. springing from us in some primary sense.

Objects, on the other hand, are 'what the things become once experienced' (1994a: 11), bearing in mind also that experience takes place through a physical, sensory modality. In this sense, even such entities as unicorns or the minotaur can be considered objects *embodied* in the physical marks of a text. But Deely argues that a 'thing of experience' — an object — requires more than just embodiment: the Colosseum and the Arc de Triomphe preceded us and are expected to exist after us; but the point is that their existence as such is the product of *anthroposemiosis*. There are plenty of things — such as some metals in the earth and some things in the universe, as Deely suggests (1994a: 16) — that anthroposemiosis has not yet touched. Objects are thus sometimes identical with things and can even 'present themselves "as if" they were simply things' (1994a: 18). Likewise, signs seem to be just objects of experience — the light from a candle, the scent of a rose, the shining metal of a gun; but a sign also signifies *beyond itself*. In order for it to do so, a sign must be: not just a physical thing; not just an experienced object; but experienced as 'doubly related' (Deely 1994a: 22), standing for something else in some respect or capacity (or, for short: in a context).

To demonstrate the sign/object/thing relation and the shift in dependency, Deely employs the image of an iceberg's tip: to be sure, the tip protrudes into experience as an object (a mind-dependent entity, in the order of *ens rationis*); moreover, it is, as such, a thing (mind-independent, in the order of *ens reale*); but, above all, as is known from the popular phrase, the tip is a *sign* that there is much more below (1994a: 144). An important corollary of this, though, is that whatever is beneath the tip of the iceberg cannot be *approached* as a thing. It is possible that experience could make it an object but, even then, through the sensations it provokes, the feelings about them and its consequence, it is only available as a sign. It is simultaneously of the order of *ens reale* and *ens rationis* and it would be folly to bracket off one or the other in an attempt to render it as either solely object or thing. Hence Peirce's statement that "to try to peel off signs & get down to the real thing is like trying to peel an onion and get down to the onion itself" (see Brent 1993: 300 n. 84).

This realism of Deely implies, in consonance with von Uexküll, that non-human animals inhabit a world of objects. Humans, by contrast, in their awareness that there are such things as signs – as opposed to simply responding to or emanating signs – are compelled to inhabit the bio/semiosphere ethically. This is developed in Deely's later work (especially 2010c). As a whole, Deely's work has been most closely concerned with the definition of signs and the sign/object/thing distinction may yet be his most enduring contribution – among many – to the technical aspects of semiotics (Cobley and Stjernfelt 2016). Certainly, his theory of signification, while also being crucial to general semiotics, was absolutely indispensable to biosemiotics (see Cobley, Favareau and Kull 2017). However, he contributed so much more than this that will be equally enduring. His work ranges over analytic concerns in the history of philosophy (for example, 'relation' and 'intentionality') as well as the general history and historiography of ideas. Many will see the pinnacle of Deely's work in the volume, *Four Ages of Understanding*. Yet, unlike many scholars who produce a single landmark work, Deely has repeatedly published books and articles that have broken new ground (see Cobley 2016). These include *Introducing Semiotic* (1982 – an extension of his groundbreaking 1981 article, 'The relation of logic to semiotics'), *New Beginnings* (1994b), *Intentionality and Semiotics* (2007) and, of course, the aforementioned bestselling, *Basics of Semiotics* (1990). While Peirce is acknowledged as the greatest American philosopher, John Deely in his wake, will be remembered not just as one of the greatest thinkers in the history of semiotics, but will be recognized as the most important American philosopher of the last hundred years.

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