

Mixing signs and bones: John Deely's case for global semiosis

Petre Petrov

Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures
Princeton University
231 East Pyne Hall
Princeton, NJ 08544, USA
Email: ppetrov@princeton.edu

Abstract. The article develops a critique of John Deely's ontological realism, specifically in its relevance for the project of global semiotics. Deely, whose theorizations rely heavily on the pre-modern philosophical systems of Thomas Aquinas and the Latin scholastics, has made the most sustained attempt to give philosophical grounding to Charles Peirce's famous intuition that "all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs". The critique develops along two main lines. Firstly, I contend that Deely's account of ontological relations is unsatisfactory, for it assumes the very fact it promises to demonstrate: the identity between patterns of physical events, on one hand, and patterns of thought, on the other. As it is never adequately explained what it means for the former to be identical with the latter, the mediating term – "ontological relation" – remains highly problematic. Secondly, I argue that even if this ontological paradigm is allowed to stand as proposed, it still fails to bridge the gap between the so-called "natural" signs and human-specific, language-based signification; for, as it posits a unity between the stipulable and the non-stipulable sign, the argument falls into a performative contradiction.

Keywords: ontological relation, John Deely, Charles Peirce, semiosis, semiotic concepts.

This article develops a critique of John Deely's ontological realism, specifically in its relevance for the project of global semiotics.¹ Deely's theorizations rely heavily on the pre-modern philosophical systems of Thomas Aquinas and the Latin scholastics, yet are offered as a radical post-modern break with the philosophical mainstream (purportedly "idealistic") that begins with Descartes and reaches up to Derrida.² Whatever the value of this ambitious claim, Deely's writings have been the most sustained attempt to give philosophical grounding to Charles Peirce's famous intuition that "all this universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs" (Peirce 1935: 448). My goal is not to criticize global semiotics *per se*, but rather to show that Deely's arguments fail to provide a firm theoretical foundation for its enterprise. I will focus primarily on Deely's *Basics of Semiotics* (1990), which develops most fully the pivotal concept of "ontological relation". I will refer to other texts to the extent to which they supplement or help elucidate the author's positions. Those familiar with Deely's oeuvre will be aware of the fact that the author's principal arguments are restated with remarkable consistency, often word for word, from one text to another.

My critique will develop along two main lines. Firstly, I will contend that Deely's account of ontological relations is unsatisfactory, for it assumes the very fact it promises to demonstrate: the identity between patterns of physical events, on one hand, and patterns of thought, on the other. As it is never adequately explained what it means for the former to be "the same as" the latter, the mediating term – ontological relation – remains highly problematic. Secondly, I argue that even if this ontological paradigm is allowed to stand as proposed, it still fails to bridge the gap between the so-called "natural" signs and human-specific, language-based signification. As it posits a unity between the stipulable and the non-stipulable sign, the argument falls into a performative contradiction for "to posit" is to stipulate. Thus the order of the stipulable sign celebrates its distinctiveness in the very moment this distinctiveness is denied.

¹ Global semiotics, as a framework seeking to unite the natural and human sciences, owes its existence to the intellectual and organizational efforts of Thomas Sebeok, although Sebeok himself would trace its beginnings to Peirce, and even further – to Locke. The framework is implicitly present already in Sebeok's notions of "zoosemiotics" and "anthroposemiotics", introduced in his work of the 1960s. See Sebeok 1986[1963], 2001 and Sebeok et al. 1964. For the most comprehensive overview of trends and research pertaining to global semiotics, see Posner et al. 1997–2004.

² "Semiotics recovers the 'Scholastic realism' of the Latins, but it does not (like Neothomism) simply go back to that achievement. On the contrary, semiotics goes forward, beyond modernity, with the theoretical ability in place to explain *both* hardcore *and* socially constructed 'reality' as a public phenomenon..." (Deely 2010: 87; emphasis in the original). For a short expose of the programme for new realism, see Deely 1995: 7–14. The author's views on the development of Western philosophical thought are expounded at great length in Deely 2001.

* * *

The problem facing global semiotics is simple to state, even if it is not simple to solve. Global semiotics could behave, in the manner of science, as if it already has access to a field of “facts”, so that all it needs to do is evaluate and organize those facts. It could, for example, cite the authority of Peirce or Morris and take it as given that *there is* semiotic activity everywhere in nature, then proceed to analyse, say, the specifics of semiosis in the world of plants as distinct (yet fundamentally similar) to that found in the world of animals and humans. The alternative road is that of philosophical self-consciousness.³ On this road, global semiotics would have to ask what makes the facts factual, what – other than the authority of Peirce or Morris – allows us to *find* semiosis beyond the human realm. The choice is, essentially, between what Heidegger (1962: 11) distinguished as the “ontical” and the “ontological” approaches, respectively. To approach things “ontically” is to approach them directly, without a general preconception of the being that belongs to them. By contrast, to approach things “ontologically” is to ask what it means that they *are*.

For global semiotics, the ontical approach would presuppose that we know in advance what this thing “semiosis” is, just as we know the domain in which we must search for it. Thus we simply proceed to locate it there and analyse its characteristics from one sub-region to another. But such a procedure may strike some as too facile. No one, for instance, would think of searching for cardinal numbers among the fauna of North America, for the obvious reason that cardinal numbers belong to a different order of being than the one proper to animals or geographic locations. And in the case we are currently considering, one may say that it is by no means evident that semiosis and nature, the sought-for phenomenon, and the domain in which the search is conducted, are ontologically concordant. The second approach would seek to resolve this problem before commencing with the search. By contrast with the ontical, the ontological view impels one to ask, first, what kind of being is proper to semiosis, on the one hand, and to nature, on the other. The ontical question is whether such and such a being *can be found* in such-and-such a domain. The ontological question, which prepares the ontical and gives it a proper foundation, is whether such-and-such a being *is findable* in such-and-such a domain.

³ It is this second road of philosophical self-consciousness that Petrilli and Ponzio (2001: 21) advocate (although it is by no means evident that their good wishes have ever come close to being realized): “[T]he doctrine of signs is the sign science that questions itself, attempts to answer for itself, and inquires into its very own foundations. As a doctrine of signs, semiotics is also philosophy not because it deludes itself into believing it can substitute philosophy, but because it does not delude itself into believing that the study of signs is possible without the philosophical question regarding its conditions of possibility”. See also Umberto Eco’s statement to the same effect quoted at the end of this essay.

What distinguishes John Deely from most other proponents of global semiotics is that he has taken the second, ontological, question seriously and found it necessary to provide an answer to it. He has sensed, though not said, that the debate in semiotics cannot deteriorate to the level of a shouting match between children, in which each insists that something is, because *it is*. When opponents question the continuity between human communication and whatever is called communication among other beings, it is not sufficient to reply that those people refuse to see what *is there*. One needs to establish, in advance, a fundamental framework that specifies the mode of being proper to signs and show that this mode of being is common to both human and non-human beings. And this is exactly what Deely sets out to do.

Taking inspiration from the writings of John Poinot, Deely declares that the world consists not only of individuals (entities, whether animate or not), but also of the patterns that obtain between bodies, events, personalities. Individuals everywhere are inserted within networks of relations. Countering Michel de Certeau's claim that a relation is "always social" (De Certeau 1984: xi), Deely (1994b: 2; emphasis in the original) writes: "The relationships by which the individuals sustain their being as such are by no means always social: they may be merely environmental and physical, as among asteroids and atoms (assuming these not to be living individuals) or also vital, as among plants, and *further* social as among some animals, or *even* cultural, as among human animals". Deely's primary task, then, is to show that all these sundry relations, despite their apparent heterogeneity, are in fact species of the same kind. This is where the concept of ontological relation makes its appearance:

Since it is a question of being at this point, and of the being, as we shall see, whence semiosis is possible as a fact of nature, we are at an appropriate point to suggest the name "ontological relation" for that pure form of intersubjective being that is indifferently physical or objective and contrasts in what is proper to it with the various forms of intrasubjective being otherwise making up the physical order of "transcendental relation" in its full extent. (Deely 1990: 44)

The passage not only introduces a pivotal notion, but also spells out what is at stake in this conceptual move. It is nothing less than laying the philosophical ground for global semiosis, that is – demonstrating the discoverability of semiosis beyond the human realm.

Ontological relation, to which Aquinas and Poinot had referred also as *relatio secundum esse*, is something like a pattern of interaction abstracted from the items participating in the interaction. It is pure mediation conceived not as an act of consciousness, but as an existent, something present in the world. The peculiarity of this existent is that it can be present "physically", "objectively", or both at the same time and in varying proportions. Physical being is the order of things as extant

independently of knowledge. Objective being is the order of everything that exists as known in one way or another (Deely 1990: 59).⁴ Apart from these two kinds of being, there is also relative being or the being proper to relation.⁵

It is easy to see how the notion of ontological relation is arrived at. I can think, for example, of the Moon orbiting around the Earth as a relation between two astral bodies. Then I can think that this relation will persist even without me or anyone else thinking it. Now, since I know that there are also relations that are intellectual without having any physical correlate, I decide to institute a general kind, relation as such, and think of the physical and intellectual relations as its subspecies or instantiations. The problem of instituting or stipulating will play significant role in the further course of my argument. At present, I would like only to point out that the entire ontological scheme rests on one condition: in order for the general kind (ontological relation) to be at all sustainable, it must be shown that its species (physical relation and objective relation) are in fact instances of one and the same thing. Without this commonality, it makes no sense to speak of some overarching form of being.

Not only is relative being in itself mediation; it also serves in Deely's greater ontological scheme to mediate between the other two orders of being. Since it can be "realized" not only through consciousness, but also in the universe of matter, it allows one to speak of the existence of semiosis – at least virtually – in every corner of that universe, "including those domains where humans have never set foot" (Deely 2004: 25). The point Deely struggles to get across, the crucial point on which his case for global semiosis ultimately depends, is that ontological relation respects not the difference between mind-dependent and mind-independent existence: "The peculiarity of ontological relation – whereby it, and it alone in the whole of physical reality, is indifferent to the source or ground of its being – underlies semiosis as a unique type of activity in nature" (Deely 1990: 46).⁶

The point is crucial, yet far from clear. In some places, it seems like all Deely wishes to establish is that a pattern conceived in thought and a pattern obtaining in

⁴ The term "objective being" harkens back to the *esse objectivum* of Scholastic philosophy. See Tweedale 2007: 71–78.

⁵ "What distinguishes relation as an accident of substance is not that it is in the substance but that by virtue of relation one substance is toward another, whether in thought or in reality or both" (Deely 2010a: 336). In his more recent writings, Deely has used the term "purely objective reality" for what in *Basics of Semiotics* is called "relative" or "intersubjective" being. For a discussion of the concept, see Ramirez 2010.

⁶ It is again Poinset whom Deely credits with having attained "a standpoint superior to the division of being into what exists independently of our cognition (*ens reale*, 'mind-independent being'), and what exists dependently upon cognition (*ens rationis*, 'mind-dependent being')" (Deely 1982: 169).

nature is in both cases a pattern (Deely 1990: 43). Even if I misconstrue a pattern of natural events or entities, what I have in my mind is still a pattern. In other words, there is an identity *of form* between what I think and what is to be thought. At other times, however, it appears that Deely wishes to say something more, namely, that relations formed in thought and those formed in nature can be identical *in content*. Thus when he speaks of clouds and rain as a natural pattern of causality that can also be apprehended in thought (Deely 1990: 47, 2004: 20), the suggestion certainly is that we have not only a relation here and a relation there, but the *same* relation here and there. This, of course, is an indispensable prerequisite if one wishes – as Deely most definitely does – to advocate the adequacy of human cognition to reality. But it does not follow from the much more modest assertion that intellectual and physical relations are alike in kind. The following excerpt is a good example of the ambiguous fashion in which Deely handles the difficulty: “But an intersubjective mode of being objectively represented is in principle no other than the thing it is represented to be. Both what is thought and the basis on which it is thought, both what is apart from the mind and what is conceived in the mind, are relations in the same sense, *are in their content identical*, even though and when the two may diverge” (Deely 1990: 43; emphasis added).⁷ What does it mean that the representation and the thing represented are the same “in principle”? And how are we to understand that relations in the mind and the ones apart from it may diverge, yet remain identical “in their content”? Since Deely does not provide, either in this text or elsewhere, an unambiguous account of the relationship of form to content, one has to assume that the two are run together on purpose, so as to make it seem as if identity of form implies identity of content or somehow guarantees it. Simply put, if I am merely aware that there is a pattern between phenomena A and B, I am at least on my way to figuring out what the pattern is.

Admitting that the topic of relations is quite abstract, Deely proposes a refreshingly concrete illustration drawn from human life. An ontological relation obtains between a father and his son. It is called “parenthood”. This is instantiated first as a physical relation, and then, to the extent that “the parent or anyone else thinks about it” (Deely 1990: 45), it exists also objectively. “That is to say, it is recognized as existing as well as existing” (Deely 1990: 40). This way of formulating the matter leaves a strange aftertaste. One senses that for Deely physical and objective being are not quite on the same level, that there is actually an order of priority in which the former constitutes true existence, while the latter amounts to no more than registering this true existence. Yet it is by no means evident that the brute physical fact (the moment of conception) comes first, while the knowledge of it follows. It is not difficult to imagine that two grown-ups who love each other

⁷ For a similarly ambiguous formulation, see Deely 1994: 102.

would think of themselves as potential parents much before conception actually takes place. One could certainly wonder whether it is not, in fact, the psychological pre-conception that determines the physical conception. The reader cannot help but sense in Deely's words a stealthy recourse to biological determinism which unconditionally impels the human race to procreate. Only in such wise could the act of human reproduction be seen as more primal than its cultural conditioning. Needless to say, such a determinism is its own indictment.

Deely gives the same name, "parenthood", to both the physical and the objective moments, which makes it easier for him to maintain that we are dealing with one and the same relation on both sides. But, since the "sameness" is precisely the issue here, and since the issue should not be decided by nomination, it seems more prudent to refer to one moment as, say, "genetic commonality" and to the other as "parenthood". We can then ask with appropriate clarity whether, and in what sense, can the objective relation (parenthood) be said to be identical with the physical one (genetic commonality). Most people, for most of human history, have thought of parenthood (theirs or someone else's) without thinking of DNA and without trying to visualize the exact moment and circumstances in which a child was conceived. Should we say then that in the great majority of cases the physical relation is not the same as the objective, that, as Deely puts it, they do not "overlap"?

But how can they ever overlap? For the physical and objective relations to have the same content, one must either expand the former illegitimately or reduce the latter, also illegitimately. One could either engage in intellectual contraband and smuggle cultural notions over to the side of what are supposedly purely physical causalities; or, alternatively, one can take the notion of parenthood (the objective side) and impoverish it so much that it starts to resemble the scientific procedure of ascertaining blood relations. Here is how the latter scenario plays out under Deely's pen:

Right away it is easy to see that "being a parent" or "becoming a parent", in the minimal sense, results from an action that is over and above the being of each of the individuals taken as independent biological organisms in their own right. It is true, of course, that there are also cultural notions of parent and parenthood that overlay and are in some degree detachable from this biologically rooted notion, according to which one may "be a parent" in the cultural sense by raising offspring not begotten by one's sexual actions or "not be a parent" by failing to live up to the responsibilities ensuing from one's own sexual action. But the observing of these refinements serves here to make clear the more determinate and limited sense in which we are posing our question. (Deely 1990: 37)

Do we know where to stop in this job of "detaching" cultural overlays from that curious thing called the "biologically rooted notion" of parenthood? How much is

enough? Deely gives us no reliable instructions on how to proceed in this, admittedly, very delicate operation.

Let me, then, suggest what might be at stake here through an example of my own, also on the topic of parenthood: the American television show "Maury", in which parents learn from science whether they are biological parents or not. Whatever success the show enjoys is based on the fact that its main premise leads us to believe that "parenthood means DNA", while the viewing experience itself should convince us that "parenthood means so much more". The effect is, of course, very much planned. Both propositions, "Parenthood is DNA" and "Parenthood is so much more", are cultural stereotypes, and the show exploits the passage from one to the other as a cheap modern-day version of ethical transcendence. The most interesting moments on the screen are when the parent turns out not to be a parent, after which the question becomes whether s/he is capable of transcendence or not (i.e., capable of looking past the DNA results). For my present purposes, I would like to draw attention not just to the people on the stage, but also to those we never get to see: the people in the laboratory, whose task it is to ascertain whether the child has the parent's genetic information. They are in charge of "knowing parenthood" in the sense of that minimal, biologically determined notion that Deely stipulates. It is safe to assume that, having done this hundreds of times, they now perform the requisite tests almost automatically. The results are obtained; parenthood is established. But "established" here does not mean "thought". The results simply "show up", are recorded, then sent over to the TV studio. The point I wish to make is simple: when we are in the laboratory, when "knowing parenthood" is taken at the point of ultimate reduction of all cultural content (all those thoughts, emotions, behavioural patterns, and stereotypes evidenced by the people on the stage), it is very hard to say whether we are still dealing with thinking and knowing. But in that case, the distinction between physical and objective relation threatens to collapse, which would also jeopardize the notion of ontological relation. Some moment of involvement is needed for there to be "knowing"; one needs to care at least a little whether someone else is or is not a parent. This "caring", as Heidegger would certainly testify, cannot be detached from the act of knowing without the latter ceasing to be what it is. And because knowing presupposes involvement (no less in science than in daily life), we have on the objective side something that is patently missing on the physical side. How could we ever conceive, then, that physical and objective relations may "overlap"?

A second example Deely provides to illustrate this supposed overlap is no more convincing than the first. It involves a dinosaur bone, which is first dug up by a gardener, who does not think much of it (to him it looks like a rock), before being sighted by a specialist on the Pleistocene. What for the gardener had been just a

stone is discovered to be the bone of a prehistoric animal. The moral of Deely's story goes as follows:

What has happened here? A physical relation, *recognized for what it had been*, thanks to the dynamic interaction of its fundament (the bone) producing physical changes in the student of palaeontology's optic nerves, became at the same moment also a sign of what had been. A transcendental relation, the bone of a dinosaur, which once had a physical relation to that dinosaur, but no more (the dinosaur being dead), yet gave rise to an objective relation *corresponding somewhat* with the physical relation that had been. The gardener's rock had become the palaeontologist's sign. (Deely 1990: 49; emphasis added)

This story is very important for understanding Deely's overall argument. It is important to Deely as well, judging by the fact that he goes back to it in later texts (Deely 1994a: 37, 113). Aside from what the story aims to exemplify, it could be read as allegorizing the emergence of global semiotics. In such an allegorical interpretation, the uneducated gardener would be the symbolic representative of all those who have failed to see semiosis in the world of nature. The palaeontologist, of course, would represent the opposite, much more enlightened camp, to which Deely himself belongs. And the bone would stand for non-linguistic semiosis, neglected and misrecognized over so many centuries of human history and thought. Less figuratively, the story illustrates for us the passage from physicality to objectivity. We are shown how a sign function is born: when something that has hitherto participated only in physical interactions is "taken up into experience" (Deely 1990: 47, 1994a: 26). The transformation of physical reality into objective, sign reality is the same as the transition between Peirce's categories of secondness (a binary relationship of opposition, impact, cause-and-effect) and thirdness (a triadic structure in which one item relates to another *for* yet another, the last one being the "interpretant" of the dynamic between the first two).

The trick succeeds only because one has put the rabbit in the hat beforehand only to pull it out later. Secondness is already implicitly thirdness, and the so-called physical relation is already implicitly objective.⁸ When Deely speaks about the physical relation that had once existed between the dinosaur and the bone, he

⁸ Eugene Baer provides an illuminating gloss on Deely's fable: "[In virtual semiosis] all we need have is a pattern of knowability, a pattern of potential inferences which at one point or other in time may or may not become actualized. The fossilized bone contains such a pattern. It contains a certain amount of codified information about the Pleistocene deeply buried in the garden, lying there to be discovered or never to be seen at all. When the gardener (ignorant of paleontology) finds it, this virtual semiosis is not actualized. It remains virtual until the appropriate interpretant of the palaeontologist actualizes it" (quoted in Deely 1994a: 40).

could only mean this specific bone and that specific dinosaur, let's call him Udo. But when the paleontologist shows up in the garden, this is not what she perceives. She does not know Udo, and cannot know that this bone was once part of Udo's body. Mentally, she fits the bone into a general anatomical structure, not into a specific body that she has visualized. All she knows is that this is the bone of *a* dinosaur, a hypothetical animal. But hypothetical or generalized animals do not participate in physical relations, or else the term "physical" loses all its meaning. In the parenthood example, we at least had to deal with specific individuals, and the question was whether *this* son was conceived by *those* people. But in the absence of such specificity, it is very misleading to speak that a physical relation is "being recognized".⁹

Obviously, Deely wants us to believe that the dinosaur's body contained not only bones, organs, and tissues, but also the pattern of their total interaction and that, moreover, each individual part carried this pattern as well, somehow stored within itself, through centuries and all sorts of posthumous subterranean adventures. Only in such case does it make sense to say that the physical relation has been "recognized for what it had been". The case is argued with disarming simplicity in another text by Deely: "The dinosaur, long dead, is present in the fossil bone as its extrinsic specifier, which enables the scientist – paleontologist in this case – definitely to classify a bone as belonging to a brontosaurus rather than a pterodactyl, etc." (1994a: 37).¹⁰ But if the whole is present in each part, if the species is present in each individual, if every piece of matter carries its own optimal intelligibility – then physical reality is in itself, or "virtually", already objective reality, and secondness is nothing but thirdness under false pretenses. This is what I referred to above as the rabbit trick. Deely's agenda for new realism is as old and trite as the trick itself. It prides itself on having defeated "fashionable idealism", but it has never met idealism head on. It has simply chosen to ignore one of idealism's most basic cautions: if one is to insist that there is existence outside of knowledge, then one should have the intellectual rigour of not attributing intelligibility to that existence, for this is, after all, what "outside of knowledge" implies.

⁹ In a later text, Deely is more cautious, and speaks of science "reconstructing" the physical relation that once existed. "Should that happen, a relation once only physical comes to exist again, unchanged as a relation – that is to say, in its essential rationale and structure as a relation – but now as purely objective. The bone is not the bone of a shark. It is, and was all along, the bone of a dinosaur. But for its *relation* to be realized, either the dinosaur had still to exist *or* a sufficiently knowledgeable observer had to objectify the bone. Either circumstance gives rise to the relation 'of a dinosaur', whereas in the absence of both circumstances the *relation* as such, but not indeed *the bone* as such (the bone as a physical structure of calcium, etc.), wants for existence" (Deely 1994: 131; emphasis in the original).

¹⁰ On the notion of extrinsic specifier, which derives from the Scholastic doctrine of species, see Deely 1994b: 123–143.

The notion of ontological relation, then, rests on a distinction that is not a genuine distinction. One of its terms is a dummy: physical relation is contrasted with objective relation only to be shown, at a later point, to contain implicitly that which is supposed to be its opposite term. That “pure form of intersubjective being that is indifferently physical or objective” is nothing but a fancy way of saying that A and B have a common element insofar as A was defined from the outset as function of B. Putative difference is posited only to be abolished in favour of unity, which is then objectified as “something” that the two terms have in common.

Once the ontological scheme is set up, making a case for global semiosis becomes very easy. Semiosis is simply mapped onto the continuum of relative being, from purely material processes to the most intricate discursive constructs: “The semiotic web, thus, even through the causality proper to semiosis itself, turns out to be coextensive with the whole of nature and embraces not just the living world (the biosphere) nor even just the realm of cognizing organisms” (Deely 1990: 41). Since “intersubjective relations” are to be found everywhere, semiosis is also everywhere. Distinctions within this cosmic expanse have to do only with the different ways in which relative being is “realized”. In those times and places where animate life is not present, we are told that semiosis exists or existed “virtually”.¹¹ When life appears on the scene, semiosis exists actually, even though it is not yet apprehended as such. At last, with the emergence of humans, semiosis enters one final dimension: the stipulability of the sign.¹² Virtual signification, natural signification, and linguistic signification build upon one another in what is unmistakably an evolutionary progression. (If it were not for the framework of evolution, this gradation of semiosis, which is equally a gradation of being, will resemble those medieval hierarchies that order worldly existents according to the extent to which they reflect the divine essence.)

This nomenclature of semiosis stands or falls depending on the resolution of one fundamental issue. This issue, which has split the discipline of semiotics into

¹¹ “Before there are actually signs, there are signs virtually, that is, there are beings and events so determined by other beings and events that, in their own activity as so determined, they determine yet further series of beings and events in such a way that the last terms in the series represent the first terms by the mediation of the middle terms” (Deely 1990: 87).

¹² “And semiosis appears as the process whereby phenomena originating anywhere in the universe signify virtually in their present being also their past and future and begin the process of *realizing* these virtualities – especially when life intervenes, and, within life, when cognition supervenes. The process does not begin with the advent of cognitive organisms, but merely enters a further phase – a new magnitude of thirdness. At the level of anthroposemiosis, semiosis finally reveals itself for what it has been all along, a task that can be accomplished only in community and over the indefinitely long run” (Deely 1994a: 38). See also Deely 1994a: 67, 1982: 102.

two warring camps, is whether human language should be taken as the standard for what semiosis properly is, or whether one should look in the world of nature in order to find this standard and measure human communication by it. When one posits the existence of something like "biosemiosis", which incorporates anthroposemiosis as but one of its instances, one needs to show that the latter, while distinct from, say, zoosemiosis, is not sufficiently different to constitute a wholly separate dimension. Thus, the battle is waged on a highly volatile terrain, for there is, obviously, no objective standard for what should count as a sufficient or decisive difference. Some have claimed, for example, that the so-called natural signs cannot be classified together with conventional signs, linguistic or otherwise. For clouds "mean" rain, in a very different way than the English word "rain" means rain. And one can easily argue, as Harman (1977) has done, that an all-important difference here is covered over by using the verb "to mean" in a rather loose fashion. How is one to determine whether the difference is, in fact, all-important or not? How is one to be certain whether in these two situations one is dealing with (more or less) the same phenomenon, namely, a sign? Could it be that a sign is that which we have decided to call a "sign"?

Deely is very well aware of the difficulty. Without stating it, he knows that nothing in the things themselves would adjudicate as to whether interactions in nature are of a kind with linguistically governed interactions. The issue cannot be resolved on its own terms, but it could be preempted. That is, one could set up in advance a code for what will and what will not count as decisive difference; let us call it a "code of difference". And this is exactly what Deely's ontological meditations seek to accomplish. The framework of physical-objective-ontological relations serves as a code of difference vis-à-vis the subject matter of semiosis (what should count as semiosis and where semiosis is to be found). Above I have argued that this code, in the way it is constructed, is open to serious objections. But here I would like to lay these objections aside and focus not on how the code is constructed but on how it functions as a code. Specifically, I would like to highlight the way the code resolves the difference between natural and conventional signs.

As we saw, the code stipulates that ontological relation is something that can be indifferently physical, objective, or both at the same time. For what concerns us here, this stipulation essentially rules that it is a matter of indifference whether the sign is determined by physical causality or whether it itself determines the meaning of physical interactions. A child is a natural token of its parents' union, that is, a token of parenthood (as Deely understands it); the token has been brought about through physical causality (I refrain from challenging this claim presently). Adultery, on the other hand, presents us with a rather different situation. "Adultery" is not a token of the sexual union between two people; it is its symbol – a culturally constructed sign

designating what has occurred between them. Clearly, the sign is not determined by the physical interaction between the two bodies. The sexual act, by itself, cannot determine whether it should be taken as a case of adultery. On the contrary: the existence of the sign (itself related to the existence of something called “monogamy” in a given social world and the ethical framework proper to it) is what makes this physical interaction a case of “adultery”.

If taken by themselves, i.e., without a supervening code of difference, these two situations may strike one as being quite dissimilar, nay, opposite. One may wonder how it is possible to speak of the token (the child) and the symbol (“adultery”) as instances of one and the same thing – “sign”. The code of difference, however, serves to preempt these doubts. It stipulates that it “makes no difference” whether a relation is first physical and then “taken up” into experience or whether it is first objective (i.e., a matter of knowledge, cultural convention, custom) before being projected onto physical reality:

This peculiarity of ontological relation – whereby it, and it alone in the whole of physical reality, is indifferent to the source or ground of its being – underlies semiosis as a unique type of activity in nature. The same relation or set of relations that exist at one time purely objectively may be transferred as such into the order of physical being.

The action of signs first arises precisely from physically related environmental factors coming to be seen objectively as related, and, conversely, from objectively related factors being presented as physically related. (Deely 1990: 46–47)

On the terms of this code of difference, parenthood would be a case of “physically related... factors” (a male and female beings engaged in reproduction) “coming to be seen objectively as related”, while adultery would present us with the opposite case – “objectively related factors” (the cultural notions of marriage, fidelity, monogamy, etc.) “being presented as physically related.” But since ontological relation is “indifferent to the source or ground of its being”, these opposite cases will have to be seen as not at all opposite, but rather as instances of the same thing.

The two types of signification, which Deely distinguishes only in order to subsume them within a greater unity, are based on two different conceptions of how thirdness is constituted. To the natural sign corresponds something I would like to call “thirdness by recognition”. With this I intend the mysterious immanent sense that, according to Deely, is already present in purely dyadic interactions:

The actions and relations in such a series [of physical events] are actually at the level of secondness. But, even at that level, they anticipate the intervention

of cognition and experience: they so stand to one another in relations of determining and being determined that they constitute a *pattern of knowability*, a *virtual* thirdness, which, should it come to be actually known in some context of experience, will exhibit precisely that element of thirdness, that irreducible elemental type of representation, constitutive of the sign relation. (Deely 1990: 88; emphasis added)

Thirdness by recognition is nothing but this virtual knowability inherent in things, which only waits to be “actualized” in knowledge.¹³ Knowledge does nothing to its object. When it arrives, it simply takes the space already prepared for it. It merely brings to light the pattern, or “extrinsic specifier” latently present in the object.

On the other hand, we would have to postulate a thirdness native to the level of the stipulated sign. It is appropriate to call it “thirdness by institution”. Here we do not begin with secondness, in the hope to extract from it some latent significance. No matter how closely and expertly we observe this physical act, we will never be able to determine solely on the basis of the bodily interaction its significance as an act of adultery. It is the institution of marriage that determines the significance of this “dynamic interaction”.

One would have to assume that thirdness-by-recognition provides the basis for the natural sciences, while the study of human culture, in the broadest sense, should be grounded in thirdness-by-institution. Deely himself does not comment on this distinction, yet it follows logically from his understanding of the interplay between physical and objective relations, that is, it follows from the ontological code of difference. In so far as any physical relation anticipates its “realization” as an objective relation, we have thirdness-by-recognition. And in so far as objective relation can come about independently of physical reality and set the terms of the latter, we have thirdness-by-institution. Semiotics, being the framework within which these two species of thirdness come together, can be touted as the bridge that finally connects the natural sciences and the humanities.¹⁴

The dinosaur bone once again provides an illustration for how science knows its objects: “The element representative [of the relation to the dinosaur] was there, identical with the bone in physical being, but virtually distinct therefrom. When the paleontologist came along, however, this virtuality was actualized. The perceptual effect of the bone on the paleontologist, but not on the gardener, triggered the virtual element whereby the bone actually represents the dinosaur” (Deely 1990: 89). This description is simplistic by any intellectual measure. The moment of truth, when

¹³ As Paul Bains (2006: 44) describes the moment of cognition: “The intellect actualizes the prospective intelligibility of the known”.

¹⁴ “Semiotics... can thus be deemed as spanning or, perhaps more precisely, overarching, Locke's natural sciences and moral sciences” (Sebeok 2001: 61). See also Rauch and Carr 1989: v.

the bone is endowed with significance by the scientific intelligence, is presented as if it were itself a quasi-physical reaction (the sight of the thing “triggering” the identification). Deely must resort to such simplistic glosses in order to skirt an alarming suggestion: that the framework of preexistent scientific knowledge, which makes the identification of the bone possible, has itself the character of institution. The danger is obvious: if it is admitted that science gains access to its objects by means of institution, if it constructs rather than apprehends reality, then science would be no different, in principle, from an ethical code. It would be forever cut off from the thing-in-itself, and the realist agenda would have to be forfeited. So as to avoid these unpleasant implications, Deely must make it seem as if the cognitive models of science are nothing but actualizations of the immanent relations of things in the world.

We perforce rely on models in order to answer the question what something is, and models are systems of objective relations which may or may not be duplications of a system of *physical* relations as well. Insofar as the model is an accurate model, that is, insofar as it actually models the physical structure we seek to understand, it provides us with the essence, the “quiddity”, of the structure in question, whether this structure be natural or cultural. (Deely 1994a: 131; emphasis in the original).

This passage from a later work states outright that science uses models for knowing what is what, but goes on to stipulate immediately that these models are able to “duplicate” physical reality. What we are not told, either here or elsewhere, is how we should know that a model is “accurate”? A model is another word for a code. It is the code that decides what is true within the realm it demarcates. But what decides whether the coding itself is true? In the cultural realm, that is, in the realm of the instituted sign, the question cannot even arise. An ethical code constitutes its objects by direct stipulation: this act *is* sin. Since in this case reality and codification are indistinguishable, there are no grounds for asking whether the model “duplicates” reality. “Sin” is what is instituted and known as sin. As Nietzsche knew long ago, “sinfulness in man is not a fact, but rather the interpretation of a fact” (Nietzsche 1998: 100). We cannot regard the thing outside the interpretation and ask ourselves, “Is this *really* sin?” When the code is not there, the thing is also not there. There are no “virtualities” that wait to be brought to light.

With both the scientific and the cultural code, one needs to know the code in order to say what a particular thing is. For me to know that this thing is a fossil bone, I must know the code of paleontology. Likewise, it could be said that for me to know this thing here as a gift, I must know the cultural code of gift-giving. Yet such a way of speaking conceals a significant divergence. In the second case, the code is what

makes the object. This thing here is a gift only in an act of gift-giving and within a cultural system in which gift-giving is instituted. By contrast, Deely would maintain that this thing was a fossil bone much before there was paleontology. As an object, the bone is not created by the code, only deciphered in its essential constitution.

Thus the duality of the natural and the conventional (stipulated) sign implies ultimately a duality between two kinds of codes. On one side are those codes (or models) used by plants, animals, and scientists, which could be said to “duplicate” or reproduce reality. On the other side would be those codes, “secondary modelling systems”, as the Tartu semioticians would call them, that first stipulate what is reality. Even if one claims that plants and animals “interpret” their environment, they certainly do not do so by first instituting interpretive paradigms. Only humans can do this. Deely is certainly aware of the distinction, but regards it, once again, as non-decisive. The ability of *Homo sapiens* to produce codes, rather than simply act in accordance with codes, is treated as an evolutionary “upgrade” within a continuity of universal semiosis (Deely 1990: 68–69).

Once again, one might wonder whether “to produce a code”, “to institute an interpretive paradigm” has anything whatsoever in common with, say, the bees’ ability to execute (or react to) a determined set of flight-patterns. Nothing in these acts themselves would ever decide whether they are “essentially akin” or “radically different” phenomena. This can only be decided through the production of a new code, a meta-code, a code of difference. I stated this earlier, but it is necessary to repeat it here, for we have reached a rather peculiar moment: a continuity between natural and stipulated codes can only be established through a stipulated code. It is here that we see most clearly that Deely’s argument is involved in something like a performative contradiction.¹⁵ When I say that it makes no difference whether I speak or keep silent, I find myself in a performative contradiction. This fact – that “it makes no difference whether I speak or not” – can only be established if I speak. But by speaking I *make* the difference that my words seek to abolish. If I want the fact to come to light, then it *does* make a big difference whether I speak or not. The fact being spoken is contradicted by the act of speaking. Similarly, when I decree that there is no decisive difference between code-producing and code-enacting beings, I behave as a code-producing being. In the very act of codification, I make a difference that was not accounted for in the code itself.

To make the contradiction clearer, let us stage the general situation: we are at the discussion table at which the issue of global semiosis is debated. The proponents of the idea will win the day only if they succeed in showing that stipulated codes

¹⁵ Coined by Karl-Otto Apel, the concept of performative contradiction has gained currency through the theoretical work of Jürgen Habermas (1990: 80–82). On the critical debates sparked by Habermas’s argument, see Jay 1992.

are a subset of non-stipulated (natural) codes. But this fact cannot be proven; it can only be established through a prior interpretive framework that resolves the difference between physical and objective reality, thirdness-by-recognition and thirdness-by-institution, etc. In other words, the argument can only be won through the deployment of a stipulated code. Thus, in the practical context of the debate, a stipulated code *makes* a decisive difference, while those who deploy it continue to deny its phenomenological distinctiveness.

In establishing itself as a doctrine, global semiotics must be careful not to commit the same sin of which its godfather, Sebeok (2001: 71), once accused others:

Expressions such as ‘language of the bees’, even when used by such an authority as Nobel Laureate, Karl von Frisch, are metaphors. As a rule of thumb, picturesque combinations of the word *language* with *ape*, *dolphin*, the generic word *animal...*, or a category of domestic pets (*cat*, *dog*), or in phrases like “the language of flowers”, are unscientific nonsense, rhetorical tricks designed to mislead by assuming as part of the premise the conclusion that is supposed to be demonstrated (*petitio principii*).

As it happens, words like “sign”, “communication”, “message”, “code”, “meaning”, as deployed within the framework of global semiosis, fall under the same rule of thumb. And it is not clear why Sebeok believes they fare much better. No less than for “language” in reference to animals, one needs to show that these verbal labels are more than a conveniently loose way of speaking about radically heterogeneous phenomena. If the authority of Frisch was insufficient to make the reference to animal language scientific, so the authority of Peirce will not be enough in the present case. Nor will the matter be resolved by providing more “rigorous” definitions of what is meant by “sign”, “communication”, “message”. For what decides where metaphoricity ends and rigour begins? Such definitions will always be exposed to the charge that they have been fashioned explicitly for the task at hand; that is – they have been made sufficiently capacious in order to accommodate the broad range of diverse phenomena that global semiotics wishes to present as unified. There can never be a rigorous definition of what a “sign” is, since the only way to verify its rigour is by comparing the definition with the thing itself. But what the thing itself *is* is precisely the issue of contention. And while the contention lasts, “sign” will remain “just a fat word in place of a spindly question mark” (Nietzsche 1998: 101).

The starting point of my critique was the fact that global semiotics cannot behave as if the matter it deals with – signs – is something directly accessible in the manner of extant entities. It must first make signs discoverable. For this fundamental task, it needs a general theoretical framework. It will secure a universal domain of semiosis not by more rigorous scientific methods, but only by positing an *a priori* unity between

the realms of nature and culture. Umberto Eco states this realization forcefully: "When semiotics posits such concepts as 'sign', it does not act like a science; it acts like a philosophy when it posits abstractions such as subject, good and evil, truth or revolution" (1984: 10). He goes on to explain that philosophical entities exist only within an interpretive framework, which is to say, they *are* as posited, or stipulated. Through theoretical stipulation, "many scattered instances of the most different facts or acts become *the same thing*" (1984: 10; emphasis in the original).

Deely undertakes this requisite work for the project of global semiotics by positing (*après* Poinset) a form of being that transcends the old opposition between mind-dependent and mind-independent reality. As a result, physical and objective relations become "instances of the same thing". Yet, as soon as this duality is bridged, a new one immediately thrusts itself upon us: that between posited and non-posited being. The ontological account will not succeed in uniting culture and nature if it does not mediate between these two forms of being. But here a point of contradiction is reached. For to posit a unity between posited and non-posited being, stipulated and non-stipulated existence, is a self-defeating exercise. The unity itself is an instance of posited being and, as such, fails to truly resolve the difference between the two terms. It would not do to insist that relative being is prior to their opposition, that it is "indifferent" or transcendent to it. For as long as this claim – the transcendence of relative being over both posited and non-posited existence – cannot be demonstrated in any concrete way (and how could it? – it is, after all, not an empirical matter), it remains a pure stipulation. Thus the species – posited being – proves to be its own genus.

References

- Bains, Paul 2006. *The Primacy of Semiosis: An Ontology of Relations*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- De Certeau, Michel 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Deely, John 1982. *Introducing Semiotic: Its History and Doctrine*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 1990. *The Basics of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
 - 1994a. *The Human Use of Signs*. London: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
 - 1994b. *New Beginnings: Early Modern Philosophy and Postmodern Thought*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
 - 1995. A Prospect of Postmodernity. *Listening* 30(1): 7–14.
 - 2001. *Four Ages of Understanding: The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
 - 2004. Semiosis and Jakob von Uexküll's concept of umwelt. *Sign Systems Studies* 32(1/2): 11–34.

- 2010a. Afterword: On purely objective reality. In: Copley, Paul (ed.), *Realism for the 21st Century: A John Deely Reader*. Scranton: Scranton University Press, 327–44.
 - 2010b. Realism and epistemology. In: Copley, Paul (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*. New York: Routledge, 74–88.
- Eco, Umberto 1984. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen 1990. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Harman, Gilbert 1977. Semiotics and the cinema. *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 2(1): 15–24.
- Heidegger, Martin 1962. *Being and Time*. [Macquarrie, John; Robinson, Edward, (trans.)] San Francisco: Harper.
- Jay, Martin 1992. The debate over performative contradiction. In: Honneth, Axel; McCarthy, Thomas; Offe, Claus; Wellmer, Albrecht (eds.), *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich 1998. *On the Genealogy of Morality*. [Diethel, Carol, (trans.)] New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders 1935. *Collected Papers. Vol. 5*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Petrilli, Susan; Ponzio, Augusto 2001. *Sebeok and the Signs of Life*. London: Icon Books.
- Posner, Roland; Robering, Klaus; Sebeok, Thomas A. (eds.) 1997–2004. *Semiotik/Semiotics. A Handbook on the Sign-Theoretic Foundations of Nature and Culture*. (3 vols.) Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Ramirez, Nelson 2010. Is there purely objective reality? *Semiotica* 1: 47–81.
- Rauch, Irmengard; Carr, Gerald F. 1989. Introduction. In: Rauch, Irmengard; Carr, Gerald F. (eds.), *The Semiotic Bridge: Trends from California*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Sebeok, Thomas 1986[1963]. The notion of zoosemiotics. In: Deely, John; Williams, Brooke; Kruse, Felicia (eds.), *Frontiers in Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 2001. *Global Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sebeok, Thomas; Hayes, Alfred S.; Bateson, Mary Catherine (eds.) 1964. *Approaches to Semiotics: Transactions of the Indiana University Conference on Paralinguistics and Kinesics*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Tweedale, Martin 2007. Representation in scholastic epistemology. In: Lagerlung, Henrik (ed.), *Representation and Objects of Thought in Medieval Philosophy*. Burlington: Ashgate, 63–80.

Смесь знаков и костей: Джон Дили и глобальный семиозис

В статье критикуется онтологический реализм Джона Дили, особенно в аспекте его необходимости в проекте глобальной семиотики. Дили, чьи теории во многом опираются на Фому Аквинского и латинских схоластиков, пытался наиболее последовательно подкрепить философским фундаментом знаменитое утверждение Чарльза Пирса: “весь наш мир покрыт знаками или даже полностью состоит из знаков”. Взгляды Дили критикуются в двух главных направлениях. Во-первых, утверждается, что обзор Дили онтологических отношений оставляет желать лучшего, так как его предпосылкой является тот самый факт, который автор пытается доказать – идентичность паттернов физических событий и паттернов мысли. При этом ни разу адекватно не объясняется, что понимается под “идентичностью”: разъясняющий термин “онтологическое отношение” остается весьма проблематичным. Во-вторых утверждается, что если даже оставить эту онтологическую

парадигму в предложенном Дили виде, не удастся преодолеть разрыв между так называемыми “природными” знаками и специфически человеческими, основанными на языке сигнификации, так как предлагаемая общность между конвенциональными и неконвенциональными знаками приводит к перформативной контрадикции в аргументации.

Märkide ja luude segu: John Deely toetusest globaalsele semioosile

Artiklis arendatakse kriitikat John Deely ontoloogilise realismi suhtes, täpsemalt selle olulisuse suhtes globaalse semiootika projektis. Deely, kelle teoretiseerimine toetub tugevasti Aquino Thomase ja ladina skolastikute modernsuseelsetele filosoofilistele süsteemidele, on teinud kõige järjekindlama katse pakkuda filosoofilist alust Charles Peirce'i kuulsale arusaamale, et “kogu see universum on kaetud märkidega, kui see ka ei koosne eranditult märkidest”. Kriitikat arendatakse kahes peamises suunas. Esiteks väidan, et Deely ülevaade ontoloogilistest suhetest jätab soovida, sest selle eelduseks on seesama fakt, mida lubatakse tõestada: ühest küljest füüsikaliste sündmuste mustrite ja teisalt mõttemustrite vaheline identsus. Et see, mida tähendab, et esimene on teisega identne, ei leia kordagi adekvaatset selgitust, jääb vahendav termin – “ontoloogiline suhe” – äärmiselt problemaatiliseks. Teiseks väidan, et isegi kui jätta see ontoloogiline paradigma püsima sellisena, nagu see on välja pakutud, ei õnnestu sel siiski ületada lõhet niinimetatud “looduslike” märkide ja inimspetsiifilise, keelel põhineva tähistamise vahel, sest väitega, et konventsionaalsed ning mittekonventsionaalsed märgid on ühtsed, tekib argumentatsioonis performatiivne vasturääkivus.