Understanding the four ages of thought

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Abstract

Thinking of one's own thinking is not a favorable job even for philosophers. It seems natural for humans, unnatural for animals, and that is all. Hypotheses are used to explain the patterns of thinking, instead of the flow of thinking in different patterns. The usual approach is to attribute sense to phenomena, rather than to study them "as they are." As for sense, it is indisputably present. This has been the way undertaken by philosophers over centuries. In his thousand-page "first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twenty-first century," John Deely traces the main paths of human thought but also examines a "road not taken" by thinkers. By following a mysterious "sign-notion," abandoned in early modern times in favor of the "way of ideas," he achieves a profound insight into the skeleton of the entirety of human thought.

Keywords: *sign-notion; idea; pragmaticism Peirce; Poinsot; Bulgaria.*

"Where have you been?"
"Writing a book."
"What about?"
"The history of philosophy."
"Hasn't that already been written?"
"Not so ... Besides, I have an angle."
—Deely (2001: ix)

"Then perhaps I shall have to read your book," the lady goes on. This common sense conversation at the opening of the thousand-page "first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twenty-first century" has to convince the reader of the worthiness of reading the monstrous book. A modest motivation versus enormous ambition

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to embrace the entire history of philosophy from a single point of view. Has it succeeded?

1. How to ask

The main difficulty is how to ask a question on thinking/reasoning. What position can one take when asking such a question? We cannot step outside of or apart from thought and take an ''objective'' look at it. When thinking of thought, we think in thoughts, so how can one see this process, as it were, from outside? The historical solution is simple: put a measuring instrument in the middle of the unknown phenomenon (thought) and start measuring. It works or, at least, we have to be satisfied with the results. (Where is ''the middle,'' by the way, in this case?) The whole of human knowledge is based on this approach. There is no alternative. What precedes the appearance of thought is an unproductive question. John Deely is not only aware of this, but he ''steps in the middle,'' claiming:

> Well if, as a matter of fact, all history is contemporary history, just as all sunshine is today's sunshine, yet, which of the countless rays of the sun's light actually fall on us depends on where we stand in time and space. (Deely 2001: xxix)

We shall keep in mind that this thought is placed below a title of the preface, a title that says ''The boundary of time.'' For Deely, this boundary stretches throughout our own time, which is each individual's ''present'' one. Strange that this characteristic is called a ''broader notion.'' It seems the opposite, isn't it? Further in the book there are terms like: *reality, perception, thinking, sensation*, and many others, which are subjects of the same intellectual operation: first, they are put in a new framework, and then ''broadened.'' The reader is struck by a similarly odd claim at the very beginning of the book: ''Communication, however, is not language, although language can be *used* to communicate'' (Deely 2001: 5). It is interesting how such a grandly conceived plan starts to unfold: What general idea would be the leading one? How will it be pursued? How will it be challenged and examined to be proved true or false?

Deely's approach seems traditional at first glance: he reasons about philosophy and its task throughout the centuries, underlines its achievements, and promises to stick to the mainstream. Not quite. The usage of Peirce at the very opening of the book hints at another objective — to follow the middle-of-the-road, yes — but mainly in order to arrive by many points, *ad absurdum*, and naturally to claim, somewhere toward the end

of his work, that there was "The road not taken." Such an approach is much more "reader-friendly," as today's youngsters may notice, and for good ("Who reads these days?" is a question we will not get into, but we cannot pass by).

Let us see what Peirce had to say about the task Deely undertakes:

> The humanists were weak thinkers. Some of them no doubt might have been trained to be strong thinkers; but they had no severe training in thought. All their energies went to writing a classical language and an artistic style of expression. They went to the ancients for their philosophy; and mostly took up the three easiest of the ancient sects of philosophy, Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Scepticism. (*CP* 1.18)

Shall we proceed further? Why not? The best way would be to follow Peirce's "advice," i.e., to take up the three "recommended" sects of philosophy.

But what patterns did Deely follow in order to reveal his own theory? Several, but the first one is hidden in the last word from the previous sentence — he has a conception on the wholeness of the thought-process throughout the four ages. The person who helped him in building it is ... Peirce. Like a "thin red line," Peirce's thought, his assessment, his ideas are brought together in a secret mirror that throws back ("speculates," in the Latin sense, i.e., "reflects") others' ideas. It is moved by Deely's hand and sheds shafts of light towards outlined doctrines. In addition, Deely has a profound Thomistic training, whence his showcasing of the work of Poinsot, and his loyalty to the sign-idea. Not a few privileges were needed to undertake a Herculean deed like this!

Reading Deely resembles reading Eco, but from the reverse side, like *The name of the rose* in a doctrinal format. Deely is at his best here, and can hardly hold back his thirst for storytelling. The plentiful titles and subtitles, notes, inserted explanations, even non-language communication like the many prompts to the reader to take a profound look at something, suggestions how to read some texts and how others, what would be the ordinary way of grasping some terms and what not — all of this is something we expect from a book like this. But step by step we understand that these lavish accompanying words and notes have another role: stage by stage to clarify the author's full concept of the work.

2. When philosophy meant "how to act"

Many chapters have names that sound like they were taken from a novel, for example, "The geography of the Latin age" (2001: 161), where Deely

speaks, among other things, of *Constantinople*. Why is this chapter interesting? One answer might be because Deely is particularly good at interpreting the transition periods in history and philosophy. There are two nicely put subheadings in this chapter: ''Back to the future: The first Christian emperor,'' and ''Foreward to the past: The last Pagan emperor.'' There is not a word on philosophy in these small subsections, but stories about historical events and documents set up as in a medieval monk's manuscript. Stories about battles won and lost, slaughters of men, punishments for religious reasons, failures and glories, births of new saints and deaths of old gods. Deely is describing how the world of the Greek culture came to be severed from the one of the new Latin age, where Christianity was to achieve its full glory. The move of Rome to Constantinople was at the same time the final separation of the East from the West. We may argue whether this separation had philosophical meaning or not, but we cannot deny that the knowledge of ancient Greek thought was first lost during this transition period. What had used to be East (India and China) then became a sign of the Greek people, and the West meant no longer Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but the Latin-speaking peoples of the old Roman Empire. A few centuries later, the times of the so-called ''Dark ages,'' which Deely prefers to call ''Latin Age,'' will arrive. We may rightfully think along with Deely's unspoken conclusion that the separation and replacing of East and West continues today.

Yet another giant separation took place: the East-West Schism divided early Medieval Christianity into Western (Latin) and Eastern (Greek) branches, which later became the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, respectively. Although dated at 1054, the schism was actually the result of an extended period of estrangement between Latin and Greek Christendom. The primary causes of the Schism were disputes over papal authority — Pope Leo IX claimed he held authority over the four Eastern patriarchs and over the insertion of the ''filioque'' clause into the Nicene Creed by the Western Church. Disunion in the Roman Empire further contributed to disunion in the Church. Theodosius the Great, who died in 395, was the last Emperor to rule over a united Roman Empire. After his death, his territory was divided into western and eastern halves, each under its own Emperor. By the end of the fifth century, the Western Roman Empire had been overrun by the Germanic tribes, while the Eastern Roman Empire (known also as the Byzantine Empire) continued to thrive. Thus, the political unity of the Roman Empire was the first to fall. Another big stream of tribes came from Far Asia and mingled with the local indigenous peoples settled around bigger Greek cities such as Thessalonica and Athens.

Many other factors caused the East and West to drift further apart. The dominant language of the West was Latin, while that of the East was Greek. The Germanic tribes regularly attacked what was the remnant of Roman Empire, the tribes from Asia and the Slavs were doing the same with the Greek cities. Soon after the fall of the Western Empire, the number of individuals who spoke both Latin and Greek began to dwindle, and communication between East and West grew much more difficult. With linguistic unity gone, cultural unity began to crumble as well. The two halves of the Church were naturally divided along similar lines; they developed different rites and had different approaches to religious doctrines. Although the Great Schism was still centuries away, its outlines were already perceptible.

It would be valuable to trace the changes in the philosophies, or rather in the theologies, which were developed within the two confessions. Philosophy was still embedded in theology, especially in the Eastern Church, but the clichés about its development in these times only considers the Western church. Deely's interpretation makes no exclusion. For example, besides the differences there are coincidences as well — in big parts of both worlds, the Roman and the Orthodox one, a long night of foreign invasion had soon fallen — first, the Arabs in the Iberian Peninsula at the beginning of the eighth century; some centuries later, before Vienna's wall — the Ottoman Turks. Thus, the age of magnificence faded quickly, and years of grief and sorrow colored the pearls of wisdom put to the amber rosary of the existing Western and Eastern philosophy.

This was not the entire truth for Iberian peoples. Many centuries under the Arabs deepened and enriched Iberian culture and philosophy, while upon their coming across the Mediterranean, in Southeastern Europe, the Ottoman Turks had found a much more advanced civilization, the promising development of which they virtually froze. The invasion had interrupted the process of attaining and collecting knowledge, which was long under way. Thus, the Western line continued in rapidly sprouting universities, mainly in the Latin language, while what happened to the East, next to the borders of the Great Byzantine Empire, remained a mystery. The passage above shows how Deely is telling the stories, and the one below may hint at similar processes, which are constantly missing from the archives of the Western chronicles. Let's try to undrape a little the curtain before them.

3. Rome, Constantinople, and ...

In the ninth century, the two learned brothers of Thessalonica, Cyril and Methodius, had devised an alphabet[1] and undertaken the translation of

many fundamental Christian texts for Slavic groups living in Central Europe. Although their work there was eventually obliterated by invading Magyar hordes, their disciples managed to escape to Bulgaria. During this period, Bulgaria was a prosperous medieval state that won great victories over its glorious neighbors (Byzantium), expanded its territory, and garnered much respect. From those times, the rule of Khan Krum (803–814) is to be remembered. Under him, Bulgaria became the third greatest power in Europe after Byzantium and the Frankish Empire. One of the oldest states in Europe, Bulgaria had its time of glory when it challenged the great Byzantine Empire and obtained tribute from it. In 865, after complicated diplomatic negotiations, the Bulgarian king, Boris I, accepted Christianity from the Eastern Orthodox Church in Constantinople.

At the court of King Boris, and especially of his son, the learned Symeon, Cyril and Methodius' disciples found a warm welcome. Literature in Old Church Slavonic (or Old Bulgarian, as it is usually called in Bulgaria), much of it translations from the Greek but with some important original works as well, flourished in what has come to be known as the "Golden age of Bulgarian culture" from 893 to 927 in the time of Czar Simeon. He was the first to obtain the title "Czar" (a son of the emperor) in 913, more than half a millennium before the Russian Czars. Czar Simeon twice besieged Constantinople, and defeated the Byzantines at Aheloi in 917. During his reign Bulgarian literature became the first medieval European literature written in the vernacular. In the court of the new capital of Veliki ("Great") Preslav the king gathered many monks who continuously copied out old manuscripts, illuminated holy books, composed poems, and wrote saints' lives.

This ecclesiastical literature spread far and wide, reaching Serbia, Romania, and Russia, and helped for the consolidation of Slavdom in the tenth century. Other arts flourished as well, such as icon painting in the rich Orthodox tradition, carving wooden altars, producing and decorating pottery, mural painting, etc. A number of monasteries, including the Rila monastery were founded during that period. The great contemporary Russian scholar Dmitrii Lihachov called the epoch of the brothers Cyril and Methodius down to the fall of the Second Bulgarian state in 1393 "a kingdom of the spirit." Recent Slavic scholars refer to this time as Preslav Bulgaria. Despite some setbacks occasioned by the restoration of Byzantine power in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, medieval Bulgaria remained a culturally productive society until the very end of the fourteenth century. The frescoes of the small church of Bojana outside Sofia, painted in 1259, the magnificent illuminated Gospel manuscript commissioned by Tsar Ivan Alexander in 1355 (and now in the British

Museum in London), and the profound and enduring impact of Bulgaria on Russian culture, which can still be felt today, all bear witness to the achievements of old Bulgarian artists and scribes.

Unfortunately, at the very end of the fourteenth century heavily armed Ottoman hordes attacked the quarreling Bulgarian kings. In 1393, the last Bulgarian tsar Ivan Šišman was defeated near his grand capital of Tarnava. During the long years under Ottoman rule Bulgarians did not build new cities, palaces or libraries. Their promising literature withdrew into churches and monasteries, behind whose stone walls some of Bulgaria's art was preserved and prepared for a much-delayed Revival. Many churches were destroyed by the Ottomans, and only a few of the remote monasteries survived. They turned into something very much like hidden wine barrels, where Bulgarian national awareness could ferment. The monks took care of the surviving religious books, copied, and hid them. Inside the monasteries' walls spiritual life may have been disturbed, but it did not die out. Services were held, prayers were offered up, and ancient songs were sung. Other clergymen worked as teachers at early monastic schools, and this is how education in the East started. The same happened to the greater part of Eastern Europe, including what was then Serbia, Romania, and fractions of ancient Greece — for example, in the precious monastic complex of Mouth Athos. Accordingly, all of Eastern Europe's rich literature, philosophy, and theology became imbued with the atmosphere of monastic life. Another characteristic that can be given to what was spiritually created in the bosom of the Orthodox is a culture of resistance. During the long shadow of Ottoman invasion the monks did not write new manuscripts, but they kept what was already created. The old books played their allotted role in transmitting the national spirit through the centuries. An essentially different civilization, that of the Eastern Europe's Middle ages, was being preserved within the framework of the alien Islamic doctrine.

If we ask ourselves why Deely is discussing this issue at length (and we did the same with the "missing part" in short), the immediate answer should be that he sees giant gestures, such as the takeover of Christianity as a meaningful act — in other words, the author is persistent in his semiotic approach, for which the road taken (or, not taken) plays a great role. The slow integration of pagan tribes and peoples into Christianity is for Deely *philosophy in action*, and the same with the theology of these times of which he also writes insightfully. The method Deely applies here is, undoubtedly, the pragmaticistic one. Exactly here, in this part of his book, mentioning the last Emperor to rule over a united Roman Empire, Theodosius the Great, Deely makes a significant point. In Deely (2001: 179, note 37; how the author decided which text to put in a footnote, and

which in the main body, is not clear; it doesn't seem that there is any solid criterion), the author explains one of the earliest recorded use of the term "triad," which plays a central role further on in the book. It is for theosophical usage only, but still, we shall mention that, after telling another story of Theodoric, who became a king of the Ostrogoths, Deely concludes in yet another footnote that "... the death of the learned figure of Boethius is made to stand as a symbol and synecdoche for the loss of access to the past in its Greek form" (2001: 182, note 42). It is not just a fancy linguistic figure that the diving into the so-called Dark Ages brought to life the tradition of liberal arts education in the West. We tried to see what kind of education was born during the same age in the East. Deely makes only passing mention of this, saying that "Indeed, much of the art, theology, and religious orientation of the Byzantine civilization in fact survives, in Russia and in the Slavic cultures" (Deely 2001: 205). Well, in Russia, yes, some centuries after it existed in some "Slavic (not only) cultures."

4. Fixed or progressing meaning

The heavy structure of Deely's theory of the *Four ages of understanding* stands on three (surprise) powerful conceptions. They are outlined at the corresponding places, but are also repeated frequently in the course of the book. These are, first, his understanding of the history of philosophy as *today's history of philosophy*, meaning, that we actually make the history of philosophy while writing about it (similarly to Hegel's understanding of teaching philosophy); second, his favor of *the triadic, rather than a dyadic, way of thinking*, which we will clarify further on; and third, his *conceptualization* of all that has been revealed as a fact from the history of thought. On these three giant pedestals or pillars Deely constructs his view of what was, what could be, and what turned out to become the mainstream of human thinking in the major eras of philosophy's development. This is how he structures his "grand narrative" of the Occidental and some other civilizations. The first of those three "pillars" we have already discussed at some length. Let us see what the other two look like.

In a microscopic chapter entitled "Language and the ages of understanding," Deely unveils one of his most general points of view, claiming:

I have in mind the fact that the major changes in philosophical epochs happen to correspond in general with the major changes in Western civilization: the natural

macro-units for the study of philosophy would appear to be the major changes in the situation of the natural languages. (Deely 2001: 210)

Deely clearly sees the mechanisms of linguistic difference and change as they occur within the framework of philosophy. This double-view of the semiotician allows Deely to see history as a result of thought, *a thought in action*, and philosophy as *ideas in progress* or as progressing meaning. That is his way to reprise the reality of ideas, on which he talks at length. In the same brief chapter, when talking on the postmodern times, Deely says: "This movement, the postmodern development, is coming to be based especially in the work of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce" with its leading premises that "the highest grade of reality is only reached by signs" (Deely 2001: 211). This last notion of Peirce is going to play a much larger role in Deely's view on the history of philosophy.

The sign-notion as a key for understanding the entirety of thought processes reappears in the chapter on Augustine of Hippo, where Deely was struck by the discovery that "the idea of *sign* as a general notion, which we today take more or less for granted, did not exist before the fourth century AD, when it appeared in the Latin language as a proposal of Augustine" (Deely 2001: 215). Here and a few pages further, Deely talks on the sign at some length for the first time in his work. At this miniature place he manages to put so much on the notion of sign that it amazes the reader — in fact all major figures of semiotics are mentioned here, from Aquinas to Locke and Peirce, then back to the beginning — from the Greeks to Umberto Eco — we have a full range of a microscopic semiotics. Then why was a thousand-page book needed on the same matter? Our small suggestion is based on a half sentence by Deely: The whole idea of philosophy, "was born in the attempt to discern reality" (Deely 2001: 217). In order to understand Deely's second pillar, on which he places his giant thesis on philosophy, we have to keep in mind this ratiocination and trace it as it unfolds in the book. We have to be very patient, though, for soon after making some steps towards relating the philosophical concept to semiotics, Deely turns back (and does this many times afterwards) to a theosophical interpretation. For him the origin of the idea of sign clearly lays in Christian doctrines. He is not far from saying so, but the fact that the notion of the natural sign had been long forgotten among the early Christian authors prevents him from such a claim. Instead, Deely finds out "a very curious thing": "Augustine has begun by enunciating in its full scope a semiotic point of view" (Deely 2001: 221). We'll see further that same assertion will be made about John Poinsot, and then about many modern theologists.

5. Thinking of our own thinking

We now need to take a slightly different route in order to catch Deely's way of reasoning later on the road "not taken." Thinking of one's own thinking is not a favorable job, even for philosophers. It seems natural for humans, unnatural for animals, and that is all. Hypotheses are used to explain the patterns of thinking, instead of the flow of thinking in different patterns. The usual approach is to attribute sense to phenomena, rather than to study them "as they are." As for sense, it is indisputably at hand. This has been the way undertaken by philosophers over centuries. For example, let's recall how John Locke opens his study in *An essay concerning human understanding*: "The understanding like the eye, whilst it makes us see and perceive all other things, takes no notice of itself; and it requires art and pains to set it at a distance and make it its own object" (Locke 1964: 63). Amazing that "it requires art and pains" to start the process of understanding our own understanding. It takes no pains or art to replace synonymously "thinking" and "understanding" in order to achieve some progress on both fronts.

The above reasoning sounds merely provocative; it only aims to show that asking a question on thinking/understanding is questionable. We need to start from a beginning, but what beginning? How can one find a basis for building a new hypothesis — invariable, durable, fundamental? For reconsidering thinking, we need: first, a starting point; second, something stable and repeatable in time; and third, a philosophy to serve as a window. (One of the many feelings accompanying reading Deely's book is the secret hope that this window will turn out to be an open door to the matter.) What is certain, solid, and unquestionable on this topic is that nothing is certain, solid, and unquestionable on this topic. Well, this might be for good. Let's rush to the movable sands, who know what treasures are buried there. Would it not be intriguing to consider Deely's book under the synecdoche of "movable sands," and see what this linguistic figure brings to its understanding?

Following the fact that we are living creatures, we may say that we posses some mental abilities, among them the ability to produce thoughts. Afterwards, we invent philosophical categories; we argue or agree with them, reduce or multiply them. We think, or we think that we think. Safer is to say that we believe we think — no one doubts this. We "feel" we produce meaning. This is still more doubtful. But who is going to argue with this seriously? Meaning and understanding are changeable, variable, and different for everyone. This is similar to thinking itself. However, there is a permanent need to reconsider the fundaments of the thinking process. Here is Locke again: "Every step the mind takes in its progress

towards Knowledge makes some discovery, which is not only new, but the best too, for the time at least'' (''The Epistle to the reader,'' 1994: 55). But what is knowledge, considered historically, or considered theoretically? Knowing who had founded the discipline ''structural anthropology'' some time ago was accepted as knowledge. Is it now, when every eight-year old could check it on the Internet? Or, the same question asked from the reversed side: In his *An introduction to logic and scientific method*, published for the first time in 1934, Morris R. Cohen (the same one who first published in 1923 a posthumous collection of essays by Peirce) states the fact that ''... the word 'sociology' was invented by August Comte as a name for the study of human relations in organized group life, and other writers have chosen to follow him'' (Cohen and Nagel 1947: 118). Was this discovery not a deed in the times before ''Wikipedia''? What strategy did Deely chose in approaching such a general view on knowledge? Let us count what we have up to now: he has acontemporary understanding of past and present; according to him, the turning point of thought-development was the shift from the way of ideas to the way of signs; he has a deep and profound view on theosophical treasures of thought, preserved in monastic libraries; Deely is also well-versed in Thomism, John Poinsot, and Iberian philosophy, to mention only the rarer among the schools. Besides, Deely is in many respects a pragmaticist: this can be seen, for example, in his numerous insistences that ideas have to be clarified. But his strongest side as pragmaticist is his obvious regret that human thought shifted from the ''way of sign'' to ''the way of ideas'' as the Latin Age gave way to modernity.

Deely likes the expression *purely objective* as it applies reality, especially to relations, as in the *Four ages*. In a chapter section titled ''Purely objective relations,'' he undertakes the task of outlining the development of medieval logic considered to be ''a science of relations obtaining among things *as they are thought of*, as distinct from things (and relations among things) as they are in themselves indifferent to human thought'' (Deely 2001: 229). It is noteworthy to point out this place, because it is one of the very few where Deely deals with the ''constant'' part of his dynamic clarification. It seems that what is constantly missing in Deely's ''relatum'' explanations in general is a profound elaboration on the ''stable element'' of the triadic thinking, the one which, in Aristotle's definition of ''definition,'' refers to the thing's essence, the set of fundamental attributes that are the necessary and sufficient conditions for any concrete thing to be a thing of that type. In Peirce's semeiotic doctrine (rather, in his early writings), this essence would be ''the ground'' (see Deely's Index entry on this point, 2001: 900–903, esp. ''sense'').

According to Charles Peirce's evolutionary cosmology, the creation of universe (but also, of meaning, in general) passes through three phases: "*tychistic*" (spontaneous), "*synechistic*" (durable) and "*agapistic*" (sympathetic). The question is, is there something stable, something that never changes? Are there some principles that precede thought-action and serve as frames in which the new thoughts appear? Humankind has failed to produce something of extreme novelty on this issue. In order to illustrate the importance of the notion of the "missing stable," we must see what was it in Deely's treatment? Again in a footnote (why are we constantly finding the most important notions in the footnotes?), we can read Deely's remark against Gèrard Deledalle's opinion of an exclusively relational character of treating reality, where a ground could be found, according to Deledalle, within sign-action only. Deely objects correctly: "But in speaking thus he shows once again the incapacity of late-modern idealism to realize the distinctive perspective of the doctrine of signs as no longer tied to either side of the old *ens reale/ens rationis* distinction" (2001: 253–254, note 10). Here and elsewhere, Deely is smoothly developing his concept of the "way of signs" even in the deepest theological dogma. He is at his best while interpreting *On interpretation* of Thomas Aquinas:

> Sensible objects at first seem to be but things; but, as we learn more and more of their connections with other objects, both in the world of nature and in the world of culture, these objects become more and more significant. But the ideas in the mind by which we think these objects, the thoughts by which we say how things appear to us and to be apart from us, these are signs from the beginning. (Deely 2001: 337)

The key issue again is the sign domination over ideas treatment. What does this really mean? In what way is the sign so different from the idea? Why does the *sign-notion* dominate the *idea* one? This is the utmost point in Deely's exploration of thought-development. It is obviously his main discovery with regard to the entire thought-development. And I am not quite sure that I am fully confident in what he meant by *shifting from the way of signs to the way of ideas*. He made such a claim at the opening of his work: "If there is one notion that is central to the emerging postmodern consciousness, that notion is the notion of sign" (2001: xxx). It almost acts as a general motive for writing the whole book, as we can see from the next sentence: "And for understanding this notion, nothing is more essential than a new history of philosophy." Still, I need more perspectives on this matter, but I have no doubts that I will find some. After all, we are not dealing with a book but with a cosmos. In order to furnish the

insufficient angles, we'll do the same as before — we'll begin with our own way of reflecting on the same matter, confront it with Deely's, and see if the outcome will fit with his view. Then, to stay in the pragmaticistic spirit, we'll sum up our mistakes, and readjust the approaches. We hope to be more successful each time we repeat the procedure.

6. Warm and cool

Thinking is associative, imaginative, intentional; or free drifting, purposeless; or disciplinary, forced: it cannot be exhausted by any generalizations. Thought categories limit thinking's creativeness or cut its characters. Thinking is immaterial, unlimited, and beyond any classifications.

Philosophers are aware of the sharp demarcation line between the "warm" senses of our organism and the "cool" objects of the outside reality, which usually lead them to an infinite regressive dualism. How can one grasp the phenomena outside of us "objectively," i.e., independently and outside of our perceptions, while we have at our disposal no sense that is independent and outside of us? There is a famous statement of Peirce in this regard.

> A figment is a product of somebody's imagination; it has such characters as his thought impresses upon it. That those characters are independent of how you or I think is an external reality. There are, however, phenomena within our own minds, dependent upon our thought, which are at the same time real in the sense that we really think them. But though their characters depend on how we think, they do not depend on what we think those characters to be.... Thus we may define the real as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be. (*CP* 5.405)

For Peirce, the external reality is something that does not call for a proving of its existence. This statement is from a late period of his work, when he accepts that thinking is "real," i.e., that it falls under his category of Thirdness, the area of endless interpretation. Even phenomena "within our minds" are "real" to the extent that they are thinkable. Moreover, someone's dream is "real" because it is fact, which is "seen," that is; it means something for this individual. The statement about the "real" is that whose characters do not need to be thought by anyone. The logical conclusion sounds quite odd; if the "reality" is independent of what anyone may think of it, it cannot be known. Actually, this is one of those ill-stated syllogisms that seem perfectly well built but in fact are ill-built even though perfectly well stated.

The reality is inexhaustible by any thought-process, so it is at once knowable but not known. It is a matter of unlimited interpretation. Peirce himself hints to such a conclusion by saying that the character of some phenomena ''depend on how we think'' although ''they do not depend on what we think those characters to be.'' Thinking can change reality's character for us, not for the reality, although thinking of its character alters the subject matter of ''reality'' within our minds. The external reality is ''cool,'' that is, it is insensitive towards our thoughts of it. We could assign all kind of characters to it, but we cannot be certain that any of those are really characteristic of it.

These considerations do not explain the fact that thinking produces meaning, and meaning evokes understanding/misunderstanding. The question of meaning is illuminated from many different perspectives: How it originated? How is meaning possible? What is meaning? Where does it reside? What is a meaning-carrier? Is it organic only? Other sets of questions excel with the new findings: What is the nature of ''memes'' (the fields of memory)? How are connections between them established? Is it immaterial? Are genes alone the substance of meaning? How much meaning is assigned to mental phenomena? Of what kind is the relationship between thinking and understanding? Do we understand in what was expressed, what was thought or is there always something (left) beyond understanding? And if so, what?

Less frequently asked is the following question: How do we know that something called by us ''meaning'' is meaning? Does it arise within the thinking process, or is it always ''there'' (somewhere in the organism), and we only reveal it step by step, removing the upper layer, as it were? Are we ''inside'' or ''outside'' meaning? (Peirce would choose ''inside''). Why do we think that we ''produce'' meaning? What kind of a product is this? How do we know that it is not an illusion?

Meaning varies in time and age, in different geographic areas, in individuals. Then how do we know what is meaningful and what is not? The same questions can be asked from the reverse: Is there something general in any sense-producing process? If there is not, how is it possible to understand each other? Peirce's answer to this is that there is something general in any sign. There must be a sense, common to all individuals who communicate. There must be an unchangeable level of meaning, one that lasts in time and guarantees understanding. On the other hand, the sense, which is produced even within the same *relata* changes with an accelerating dynamics, and a completely new one periodically appears. This is due to the process of accumulating knowledge. Knowledge alters, and continues as well. What refreshingly new has Deely to say on all these questions? In order to comprehend this, I would suggest taking a look at

a pragmatist definition by Peirce, but the one that is rarely quoted: "If pragmatism is the doctrine that every conception is a conception of conceivable practical effects, it makes conception reach far beyond the practical. It allows any flight of imagination, provided this imagination ultimately alights upon a possible practical effect" (*CP* 5.196).

I like this version of the definition more than the most famous one of the pragmatic maxim. It allows "the flight of imagination" to obtain an almost categorial status. And exactly here is the moment to see the turning point of Deely's hypothesis on the general path of knowledge. It is placed in a chapter section called "The end of the story in Latin times and its opening to the future." As we can see, it is again a passage on a transitional period. It starts with the following statement:

> The story of medieval semiotics, in sum, opens with the positing of the first notion of "sign" in the contemporary sense, made by Augustine in the fifth century. The story develops through a complex and rich discussion of the foundational notions involved therein. This development reaches its highest point in Poinsot's resolution of the main problem raised by Augustine's notion of sign: the problem of how there can be a being common to signs as involved in natural phenomena and signs as involved in the phenomena proper to culture. (Deely 2001: 443)

That is that. The clouds begin to part. Deely wrote a book on how sign becomes general to embrace characters of both reality and human thought. A new set of questions arise. The first one: If the understanding of this process is so simple, why hasn't it been followed? The first complicated answer — where is the watershed between human culture and nature? An entire new book can start from here and, in my opinion, it starts with the already mentioned key chapter, "The road not taken." The slightly melodramatic tones signal the beginning of a story of a new development that is not favored by the author. We are not going to discuss the Cartesian era, Poinsot's vindication of the Augustinian proposal of sign in general "from the charge of nominalism" (2001: 448). The essence of this and several smaller sections with Deely's chapters that follow is the loss of the integral understanding of "signum" as a unifying theme, providing a more complete view to the world of thought. But we are already in the modern times and, as Deely says, "Peirce would resume this point under a clearer terminology: every sign, in order to function as a sign, requires an object and an interpretant, and hence consists in a triadic relation" (2001: 464).

What remains to be clarified is the question of the relationship between reasoning and reality. Straight, would be the immediate answer. Reality is an area of endless meaning. If we cannot grasp it as an observable

phenomenon but as a process of interpretation, we have to say that we live in a permanent endeavor toward approaching it. This conclusion confirms the ''pragmatic maxim'': that our lives are based on committing mistakes, considering their effects upon our knowledge of the world, appropriating our actions accordingly, and performing new mistakes. Do we really live in the world of pragmatism, where we call the nominalist effects ''knowledge''? Let's give a detailed quotation by Peirce on the same subject matter:

> It seems to me that one of the first useful steps toward a science of semeiotic ({sémeiötiké}), or the cenoscopic science of signs, must be the accurate definition, or logical analysis, of the concepts of the science.
>
> I define a Sign as anything which on the one hand is so determined by an Object and on the other hand so determines an idea in a person's mind, that this latter determination, which I term the Interpretant of the sign, is thereby mediately determined by that Object. A sign, therefore, has a triadic relation to its Object and to its Interpretant. (*CP* 8.343)

Now we can reformulate the same questions in pragmatic perspective: How much conceivable reason is needed to be furnished in the process of conceivably reasoning for outlining thinking as a process that can be revealed?

7. Conceptualizing the four ages of thought

We are now approaching the last encountered ''pillar'' for the structure of Deely's book — his conceptualism. It is not the classical one, as stated by John of Salisbury: ''the mind recognizes the same or similar characteristics in different individual objects and conveniently gathers these differences into one mental concept or idea, which provides the meaning for the universal or general term, the spoken sound or written character string with which the concept is then associated'' (Salisbury in Deely 2001: 246).

Deely's conceptualism is an analytical tool for deriving meaning from coded and unfinished philosophical concepts frozen into remote comparisons. It is applicable to any doctrine, notion or proposition. In this regard, conceptualizing is to be understood in two senses: first, it is an attempt to reveal the unexplored meaning in some of the abandoned notions; second, it might be used as a general device for different goals. One of the worthiest contributions of Deely is made in his conceptualized thought as expressed in Peirce, but also in Aquinas, Scotus, the Conim-

bricenses, Poinsot, and others who have argued that ''All thought is in signs.'' For better understanding this operation, we have actually to point to the main difference between the sign notion and the ideas notion. Favoring the first allows to Deely not to see the thought-findings as precious but static statues in a giant park. He prefers to animate them by letting them produce new meanings in new contexts. In other words, ''the way of signs'' fits better to conceptualism as well; concepts are similar to microscopic schemes or plans for acting. A thought represents a sequence of such scheme-concepts for acting made permanently by our minds. The scheme-concepts are built in an expanded present moment, with the help of the immediate past (our experience), and are pointing towards next moment. This short elaboration supports the need of a new definition of present, as Deely demands. Of course, thinking is always based on the past and it seeks meaning collected in ideas, which is not a contradiction to Deely's favoring of sign-notion. The present is the absolute ''First,'' something that is unrelated and incomparable to anything else. We cannot be conscious of the immediate present; it is unimaginable. The instant is a flash to a present moment and a freezing of all signs in it. Any awareness or understanding of these signs requires interpreting and relating them to others. In its turn, ''relating'' is possible to the past. The present is unknowable and the future is inexhaustible. The very fine difference that Peirce draws between the impossible awareness of the present and its quality as a present allows him to use by this definition one of his categories, Firstness:

> The immediate present, could we seize it, would have no character but its Firstness. Not that I mean to say that immediate consciousness (a pure fiction, by the way), would be Firstness, but that the quality of what we are immediately conscious of, which is no fiction, is Firstness. But we constantly predict what is to be. Now what is to be, according to our conception of it, can never become wholly past. In general, we may say that meanings are inexhaustible. (*CP* 1.343)

The inexhaustibility of the future makes it so that the future cannot be fully turned into a past experience. This is what feeds our illusion that it is achievable.

To reach our conclusion of the present discussion, we'll return to the main point of sign-notion as abandoned on behalf of the way of ideas, and see if we have reached, along with the author, a new stage of clarity. Deely furnishes much meaning for revealing his major claim while he is still reflecting on the Latin age of understanding. It turns out that in the bosom of the Hispanic Latin tradition this shift would not occur. According to Deely, in this tradition the distinction between *representation*,

where an object can present itself; and *signification*, where an object or a concept can only present something other than itself, was thematically maintained. Deely states: ''In equating ideas with objects represented, here, at the very beginning of modern thought, the late Latin notion of concepts as formal signs in the tradition of Aquinas and Poinsot is rendered impossible'' (Deely 2001: 520). There was another attempt to outline the signification process as triadic, not dyadic, made by John Locke. He strangely failed, although reading his *Essay* the reader gets the impression that it is the triadic thinking that Locke favors. In book three, chapter one of his famous *Essay*, Locke clearly sees words as signs of ideas, but further it gets even clearer that for him signs ''self-evidently signify ideas,'' meaning that ''words by use readily excite ideas'' (Locke 1964: 261). This is to say that words *directly* evoke ideas, *unmediated* necessarily by signs, or (which is the same) words are equal to signs. Instead of calling this a triadic model, one might call it a concatenation of two dyadic models. In other words, Locke speaks of two dyadic signs, the one ''word-idea,'' and the next one ''idea-thing,'' making altogether a relationship of two dyadic signs. (''Things'' cannot be directly referred by words, but mediated by ideas only).

Whatever the case is, the final shift, according to Deely, occurs in the following point: ''If the doctrine of signs was correct in assimilating to the notion of *signum* to ideas as well as words and natural phenomena — *if*, I say — then Descartes with his theory of ideas is on a wrong track, and so is the whole of rationalism after him in maintaining the representative theory of ideas'' (Deely 2001: 520).

This must be clear enough, and we must be given the clue to the shift that occurred between the way of sign and the way of ideas. Further, ideas ''are what they are and remain such regardless of philosophical theory,'' says Deely. Signs, in turn, must be more flexible and possess more potency for referring to and embracing meaning that is inexhaustible by any interpretation. Signs change and vary as does meaning; ideas *stay* and pretend to teach us. And one more thing — quite important:

> Yet ideas or images are required only to supply presence for an object otherwise absent, or to supply the proportion between what is perceived and what is sensed. Neither of these reasons for supposing an image at work within cognition apply to the case of external sensation. Hence, the supposition of images in the case of external sense is gratuitous, simply without warrant. (Deely 2001: 531)

The missing ''Third'' is at stake here, the inability of ''idea-notion'' to ''catch up'' with outside reality (objects as they are), to signify, or to refer to it. That is how the entire machinery turns into an ''idea-idea'' or,

which is the same, a "sign-sign" tool that cannot supply knowledge which grows and changes. To the end of his *opus magnum* Deely makes one more clarification to drive away any obscurity from what he thinks was the major mistake in thought progress: "I conclude that the notion of sign-function is not an adequate — let alone necessary — substitute for the classical notion of *signum*, precisely inasmuch as the classical notion was proposed as a genus to which significant natural and cultural phenomena *alike* are species" (Deely 2001: 719).

It is now clearer, which would be the closest answer to the question — why read Deely's book? — to enable the reader to see through the enormous human flesh of thought its schematic skeleton. To grasp the major tendencies as they start and develop, "crash to earth," and rise again in a new brilliancy. To choose accurately and then more accurately.

8. Laudation

The first recommendation to the reader of this book should be not to take any advice by the author himself how to read it. This is all only misguiding advice, like, for example, that the reader can jump over some sections that are not of interest. I tried — nothing happened, I felt like I was surfing for online information, after whose use nothing remained in my mind. It is a fully conceptualized work, from the beginning to the end, a whole thing. But then, how to assess, appreciate or criticize such a book? One thing would be surely useless — to quote authors in order to beat Deely. That is an impossible undertaking. In the monstrous Index at the end so many authors are listed that the book resembles a universe for itself. I have to admit, though, that I could not cope with the index; it simply has the value of a separate book, like the accompanying booklets of the major scripts of Eco. The Index even has its own sections, not all of them found in the main body of text. It is rather confusing and not helpful if the reader decides to find a notion or an author in it mentioned in the book. In addition, there are the numerous footnotes, as already pointed out. On the other hand, books like this have to compete with giant encyclopedias and dictionaries, which are mostly online. And I am not sure that it is not a competition lost long ago. In order to check a reference, or to check for date of some event, one will not browse through countless pages but simply go to Internet.

So, I will spare my overall laudation for Deely's work. One cannot praise (even less, criticize) a river for its streams, feeders, creeks, floods, and large mouth. One is simply struck by its glorious Being. But let's recall the synecdoche of some book's fundaments as grounded in movable

sands. In "movable sands" some philosophers build precious castles with tall towers in the clouds, illustrious facades, pillars, rotundas, fountains, sculptures, beautiful parks, etc. Others prefer "to erect a philosophical edifice that shall outlast the vicissitudes of time ... not so much to set each brick with nicest accuracy, as to lay the foundations deep and massive" (*CP* 1.1). Still others, especially in modern times, are making computer models that prove their soundness and reliability before being built in reality. John Deely tries to avoid movable sands by designing parts of the basics of his book movable, flexible, adjustable, and self-correcting. A worthy task, although a very difficult one.

I would like to conclude this article by emulating Deely's style. Here is my attempt. After Albert Einstein (1879–1955), Max Plank (1858–1947), Ernest Rutherford (1871–1937), Wolfgang Ernst Pauli (1900–1958), Niels Bohr (1885–1962), Max Born (1882–1970), Werner Karl Heisenberg (1901–1976), and Kurt Gödel (1906–1978), the world learned terms like "general theory of relativity," "dimensionless constant," "matrix mechanics," explaining "quantum mechanics," "the properties of radium emanation," "structure of atoms," "completeness problem." They were spoken of and given sense by the Nobel laureates listed above, after which we know that time is measurable, reality is probable, vagueness is an active element of any theory, and chance is countable. After Charles S. Peirce we may hope that our idea of measurement will "never crash on the earth." After John Deely's *Four ages of understanding*, we know that there is someone who tried to distinguish order and trace paths in all brilliant findings of four ages of thought, and to prove his angle of seeing the giant figures of thinkers in the pantheon of humanity.

Note

1. The Cyrillic alphabet, which, with the entry of Bulgaria into the European Union in 2006, became the third officially recognized alphabet after the Greek and the Latin ones.

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