Why read Deely? Introduction to the *Four ages* special issue

SUSAN PETRILLI and JOHN HITTINGER

1. Susan Petrilli: A view from Europe

As oil lay in the ground for millions of years hardly noticed and little useful, suddenly to become essential and invaluable with the discovery of the internal combustion engine, so the general notion of sign lay embedded in philosophy's historical development and noticed if at all only on the margins, suddenly to become a topic of central and essential interest with the realization that *all of thought, and before that sensation itself*, is in signs. Yet while that (now) precious oil may one day again become an object of little to no interest with the introduction of new technologies not yet dreamed of by men, it is not so at all with the questions of semiotics!

For where the oil analogy falters is over this difference: no technology can ever render the doctrine of signs insignificant, for the very thought of humankind depends upon signs from its origins in sense to its farthest reachings toward the infinite in being and action. Oil became important *because of* a new development. The action of signs *was important* from the beginning, only time was required for semiotic animals (no other animals enjoyed even the possibility) *to realize* that importance, an importance coextensive with human understanding and beyond — if we want to consider even (again with Deely, this time 2004) the case of creatures intellectual, as are human animals, but *bodiless*, such as Aristotle postulated in his theory of Separated Intelligences moving the (as we know now mythical) celestial spheres, or as Aquinas and Augustine presented in their theory of "angels" as intellectual beings devoid of bodies or even the capability of informing bodies properly their own. Even there semiosis proves indispensable to awareness.

Hence the importance of Deely's *Four ages*, reminiscent of what Thomas Donlan once said of his edition of Poinsot: "This is not a book; it's a *tome*!"

As astounding as this tome may be for size and comprehensiveness (but never with a claim to exhaustiveness), what is even more impressive, and

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well beyond the quantity of information made available in one work and by a single author, is the *new perspective* offered on the history of philosophy itself and as a whole. The original division of the work into "four ages" is based on the predominantly conventional character of linguistic communication as the "exaptation" (in Deely's phrase borrowed from Gould and Vrba 1982 and Sebeok 1985, 1986) of the biologically underdetermined modeling distinctive of the human animal in its unique capacity for achieving *metasemiosis* (i.e., the reflection of wonder consequent upon the realization that *there are signs* upon which all thought and experience depends).[1] Within this framework, we find the development of new insights into basic issues on a theoretical level thanks to a remarkable capacity for dialogic and dialectic problematization.

The *Four ages of understanding* is not only a *history* of philosophy, but a new *philosophy* at the same time, one that interrogates the very foundations of human thought and the very character of its historical dimension. The book establishes a perspective that favors dialogue between the history of philosophy and the problems upon which such history is constructed, or around which the history develops, in varying ways in each of the periods. By casting the whole of philosophy in a new light and new perspective, *Four ages of understanding* furthers our understanding of old problems through new interpretations of traditional issues while at the same time raising also new problems at the very heart of semiophilosophical reflection, and therefore of life itself. Thus empowered, human understanding looks forward in search of new horizons, new interpretations, and new solutions to the whole range of problems proposed for the reader's perusal.

Beginning with Descartes' recommendation to cease reading the Latin and Greek philosophers lest "traces of their errors infect and cling to us against our will, and despite our precautions" (1985 [1628]: 13), modern philosophers came to see the history of thought as irrelevant to their work as philosophers, an attitude which particularly marked so-called "linguistic philosophy" in the twentieth century, modernity's twilight era. Deely's account shows that such an attitude embodies a serious error, inasmuch as philosophy requires an historical consciousness for the very reason that science requires a laboratory: to test the consequences of given hypotheses or views. Thus, exactly on the most decisive points that emerge in the history of the development of semiotic consciousness — such as the unity of semiosis, the triadic character of the relations constitutive of signs, and the transcendence by the action of signs of all subjective divisions of being — Deely shows that the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (*CP* 5.488) owes much of his greatness as "a pioneer, or rather a backwoodsman, in the work of clearing and opening up what I

call semiotic, that is, the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis,'' to the fact that he explicitly recognized that ''the field [is] too vast, the labor too great, for a first-comer.'' Unlike any other among the moderns, as Deely's remarkable history stands alone in being able to detail, Peirce achieves his own semiotic consciousness by turning to the very history that the modern mainstream eschewed and picking up the threads of the original development of semiotics among the Latins, effectively establishing a genuinely postmodern frontier, finally setting the boundaries of philosophical modernity and commencing the ''Way of Signs'' as the path of a veritably postmodern intellectual advancement of human culture.

In this new development, as precisely ''postmodern'' as the line Peirce draws between ''pragmatism'' as compatible with the nominalism of modern philosophy and ''pragmaticism'' as incompatible therewith (Deely 2001: 616–622), the sign not only performs its vital role but also takes the spotlight as vital in that semiotic web as relation, which is the only real guarantee of any genuine communication of any sort. It is with this achievement that Peirce occupies the position (Ch. 15) of ''last of the moderns and first of the postmoderns,'' in exactly the sense Joseph Ratzinger characterized with his proclamation or formula that ''sole dominion of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality. It becomes possible to surmount what we call today 'objectifying thought'; a new plane of being comes into view'' (2004: 184).

But with Deely, the semiotic interpretation of Peirce takes us even beyond Ratzinger, grounded by his faith in being, to glimpse something ''otherwise than being'' (to use an expression evoking Emmanuel Levinas), that may be vaguely seen to emerge on the horizon beyond ontology and epistemology alike in their modern senses, in a dimension that has to do with ethics no less than ontics. In fact, analysis of the history of philosophy and its problems within the framework of ''four ages'' may also be interpreted as contributing to human understanding and its development in terms of the transcendent other beyond self, beyond being. In other words, Deely's approach contributes to our understanding of the ''otherwise than being'' at once transcendent and yet still of this world. Concretely, this remarkable new horizon is first adumbrated in the neglected notion of Aquinas, as treated by Deely in his Chapter 7 (pp. 341–355) and again in Chapter 15 in connection with Peirce's ''new list of categories'' (pp. 645–660), that ''being as first known'' involves equally *nonbeing* or *ens rationis*, equally objective and knowable with being or *ens reale* but (even in its dependence thereon) irreducible thereto; and not only inseparable from the Umwelt of any animal but also

constitutive of the species-specifically human Umwelt, the Lebenswelt, insofar as the human lifeworld depends upon the distinctive possibilities of social construction opened up by linguistic communication. Thus, as Deely presents the matter, there remains little or no doubt that recognition of other as other, a theme present in filigrain throughout Deely's volume (as shown by my contribution with Ponzio in this issue; and see Petrilli and Ponzio 2003), implies — as the "practical extension" (as Aquinas puts it) of what distinguishes human understanding — an equiprimordiality of ethics with being in philosophy.

Such is the story that Deely's book tells, an absorbing and astounding tale that is as revolutionary for our understanding of traditional philosophy as it is for our understanding of semiotics as the quintessential postmodern florescence of that long tradition.

2. John Hittinger: A view from the Americas

John Deely's *Four ages of understanding* amounts to a new map of the history of philosophy as a whole. In tracing this new map, Deely provides us with a wealth of resources for seeing in semiotics ways of curing the current malaise in philosophy and surmounting the age-old standoffs looping back to the empiricist/rationalist and realist/idealist dichotomies of the modern age. This remarkable tome takes a fresh approach by providing *landmark* details[2] that change the very way we see philosophy's overall development as we look back over a now confusing and often trivialized historical awareness.

I think an apt comparison could be made to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre in the field of ethics, *After Virtue*. As MacIntyre (2007 [1985]) with that book broke up the sterile rehearsals of consequentialist versus deontological debate with his breakthrough concept of virtue in communities of practice, so Deely breaks up the sterile rehearsed histories of philosophy with the breakthrough concept of sign. As MacIntyre found untapped and unappreciated resources in Aristotle, Augustine, and Marx, so Deely finds a newness in Peirce, Locke, Poinsot, and Augustine. *Four ages of understanding* has the potential to refocus the debates about knowledge and redraw the lines of alliance.

Deely provides a much needed focus to the term "postmodern," so bandied about to little accord in the contemporary discussions thus far. Heretofore this term, "transposed into the philosophical field," as Karol Wojtyła remarked, "has remained somewhat ambiguous, both because judgement on what is called 'postmodern' is sometimes positive and

sometimes negative, and because there is as yet no consensus on the delicate question of the demarcation of the different historical periods'' (1998: par. 91). In Deely's book this term finds a latent history, an intelligibility, and a fruitfulness for future exploration, wherein Wojtyła's ''delicate question of demarcation'' has been resolved.

How did Deely come to produce this work designed to upend the academic histories of philosophy? Aside from the personal characteristics of the author, such as pertinacity, rigor, encyclopedic knowledge, and readiness for dialogue on important issues of philosophy, we must look to resources he deploys in this body of work. To begin with, Deely strategically introduces from Sebeok the distinction between ''language'' and ''communication.'' ''Language'' in the root sense is the biologically underdetermined part of the human modeling system; while ''communication'' is a universal phenomenon that becomes ''linguistic'' only as a species-specific modality through a process of exaptation, i.e., an adaptation applied to a new or further use than the original one. Aristotle notes in the beginning of his *Metaphysics* (980a25) that there is a surplus of function in human sight that goes beyond its utility, lending itself to seeing for the sake of seeing; thus, speculative cognition is born in such surplus. In Deely's account, it is language, or rather ''linguistic communication,'' which spills into philosophy through reflection; and thus we find ready-made, if you will, an overall framework for the development of philosophy in its ''four ages.''

In its origins and initial development, philosophy is an achievement of the ancient Greeks that was made possible in great part because of the inner brilliance of their language. The quest for true being, in opposition to what merely seems, is urged upon us by the very grammar of Greek language. But around the fifth century AD, changes in civilization and politics resulted in a major linguistic shift, and a new age, the ''Latin Age,'' took root through the work of Augustine and Boethius. The uniqueness of the Latin civilization in its Roman and subsequent medieval variants is sketched by various authors, such as Brague (2002) and Dawson (1932). But Deely attends to the way in which Latin became the main carrier or vehicle of philosophical thought and made possible the first comprehensive approach to the problem of sign as such. Augustine, explicating issues in language and sacramental theology, introduces into the Latin development a general notion of sign that has no precedent in the earlier Greek period, which treated of signs only as a specific form of natural phenomena or as divine interventions in nature's ways. Picking up the thread introduced by Augustine, however, is what enables Deely to develop, in sharp contrast to what has been the standard treatment, a pattern of Latin philosophical development which does anything but

fall into barrenness after Ockham. In fact, Deely is able to show that the main realization and development of the consequences of Augustine's original notion of sign takes place in the very period that the standard histories neglect all but entirely — that is to say, the period between Ockham and Descartes! These neglected last three centuries of the Latin Age thus need to be seen *de facto* as among the most important of the centuries wherein human beings make progress in following the advice of Socrates, "*Nosce teipsum*," "Know thyself," for they constitute the original gestation of semiotic consciousness. The 1632 work of Poinsot, summarizing these later Latin centuries, had achieved in fact the first demonstration of the systematic unity of sign as subject of possible inquiry, of the being of signs as consisting in triadic relations, and of the rationale for the sign as transcending in its action and being all the traditional divisions between nature and culture, inner and outer, *ens reale* and *ens rationis*.

Although spawned at the end of the Latin Age (which still includes Galileo, Poinsot, and Descartes), the modern age witnesses another seismic change of linguistic communication taking shape, the shift from Latin to the "national languages" of modern thought and culture, and such discourses and essays in vernacular first mastered by Machiavelli, Montaigne, Descartes, and Locke. With an emphasis upon self-concern, personal verification, and the utility of knowledge, to the neglect of tradition and inter-personal dialogue, the modern age generates in philosophy the antinomies and dichotomies that continue to haunt the philosophical establishment. Of course, the modern age enriched philosophy in many aspects, well articulated by Charles Taylor (1989) in *Sources of the self*. But as for "first philosophy," even John Locke (who, as Deely notes, first proposed the science of semiotics) could not ultimately escape the dilemmas of epistemology into which the Cartesian way of ideas had plunged philosophical modernity.

We find two key figures looming large in Deely's work, Poinsot and Peirce. John Poinsot, a "medieval" or Latin Age philosopher, writing at the time of the first moderns, crafts a work on signs that lay unread for centuries, his approach to the doctrine of signs (semiotics) unknown, until French philosopher Jacques Maritain drew a first attention to the work beginning in 1937 (and here I should mention that Deely was one of the last people to meet with the elderly and reclusive Maritain, at the Chateau Kolbsheim in Alsace-Lorraine on July 20, 1972). Just four decades prior to Maritain's discovery of Poinsot's work on sign, Charles Sanders Peirce had begun his account of semiosis through his own (Latin Age informed) efforts to surmount the dilemmas of modern epistemology. Peirce picked up from Aquinas, Scotus, the Conimbricenses (Poinsot's

undergraduate university professors), and others, the loose ends of the Latin semiotic development to establish what amounts to a postmodern frontier demarcating the end of epistemological modernity and initiating the "time of the sign" as the essence of a truly *post*-modern development of intellectual culture. In this new development, the sign not only *plays* its indispensable role but *comes to be seen in its indispensability* and proper being as that network of sense-invisible being, namely, relation, that everywhere sustains communication wherever it occurs. Deely, accordingly, identifies Peirce as at once "the last of the moderns and first of the postmoderns."

The fourth age, the truly postmodern age, now emerges from the spent cultures of modern nationalisms as linguistic communication itself comes to be seen as but one system of signs dependent upon many others (see also on this point Todorov 1978 and Deely 2006). Deely sees this perspectival shift — to a view of language itself seen no longer as if it were a self-contained and autonomous medium, but seen rather according to its workings as a system of signs and dimension of semiosis among other dimensions — to be the advent of a postmodern and truly global stage of intellectual culture.

Thus Deely brings together Poinsot and Peirce, Maritain and Sebeok, together with the whole cast of philosophy's historical development, within a monumental survey of philosophy wherein the theme of the sign and its centrality to human culture is made explicit in the unfolding of philosophy from its very beginnings in the ancient world. Since semiotics is the knowledge acquired by the study of semiosis, and human animals are distinctive in being able to recognize relations as being the essence of that activity proper to signs, semiotic knowledge is a possibility distinctive of human animals. From this unique possibility Deely (joined in this by Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, 2005) proposes accordingly, as the postmodern definition of human being, *semiotic animal*.

Should anyone wonder why *Semiotica* is devoting an entire issue to a collection of review and discussion articles by readers' of Deely's book, I should hope that my brief remarks here sufficiently indicate the answer. Not only is the place of semiotics for the first time set in the full perspective of philosophy's history, but that history itself is for the first time made sense of in terms of exactly what — for philosophy as a distinctive discipline of the mind — constitutes postmodernity. As the reader will see, the resources and fruitfulness of Deely's demarcations, delineations, and discoveries are richly proffered to us in implications drawn by readers that go well beyond Deely's own work — precisely by taking account of that work.

Notes

1. Without exception or, as Deely (2001: 126–128) notes, with the *possible* exception of mystical experience *in its origin*, even if not at all in its construal. Coming to terms with a universe perfused with signs both in action and thought is precisely the postmodern human task.
2. It should be mentioned that there are also *scholarly details* of Deely's work that are in their own way landmarks of style, one of which in particular that merits universal adoption, to wit, his so-called "historical layering" of references according to dates invariably within the lifetime of the author cited, giving the reader a view of the veritable history as embedded in discourse, comparable to what a geologist is able to see in layers of rock. Then there is his detailed Index, covering one-hundred-seventy-seven pages, which organizes the reader's access to details in ways that veritably supplement and augment the information of the main text itself. And his concluding Table of Figures, arranging the philosophers from ancient to present time by year of birth and death, enables the reader to see exactly which among the great figures had the possibility to meet in the flesh as well as in the great discourse extending over the whole of historical human time.

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