

The integration of Thomistic intentionality theory and contemporary semiotics

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Abstract

Semiotics is a theory of signs, beings whose whole identity is to be not a thing or idea in itself but to signify something else. Thomistic intentionality theory serves a similar purpose when applied to ideas and sense perceptions in the realistic theory of knowledge. Ideas and perceptions are not objects or things in themselves, but their whole identity consists in being “about” something else, in “intending” or “stretching out” to signify or be a sign of something else.

Keywords: mind-independent being; realism; bridge problem; Poinset; Peirce; Brentano.

The rapprochement of the high medieval intentionality theory of St. Thomas and the nineteenth- to twentieth-century movement of “semiotics” (theory of signs), launched by Charles Sanders Peirce, is somewhat of a recent discovery, at least to me — and to many others, it seems. But it is a fascinating chapter in the history of Western thought, filled with significant implications, and deserves to be better known. It came to my knowledge through my reading (for a paper at the ACPA meeting in November of 2003)¹ of the remarkable work of John Deely, *Four ages of understanding* (2001), a thousand-page history of Western thought from the point of view of the theory of signs. There he points out that the first two Ages, the ancient and the medieval (or Latin Age), either implicitly (the ancient) or explicitly (the medieval) built their whole realistic theory of knowledge on the basis of a theory of intentional signs that mediated the outer world of mind-independent real beings to the inner world of mind-dependent human and animal consciousness.² He calls these two periods “presemiotic” and “protosemiotic,” respectively (Deely 2006).

At the end of the latter period, in the late Iberian revival of Scholasticism, appeared the first formal treatise on signs in Western thought, the *Tractatus de signis* (1632) of John Poinot (often called by his later Dominican name of John of St. Thomas, the last of the great Thomistic commentators). This was a brilliant work of synthesis, constructing a general theory of signs, for the first time, with the realistic epistemological side of it built upon the intentionality theory of St. Thomas, interpreted in the language of signs. St. Thomas occasionally uses the language of signs, but worked out no formal theory of it, preferring the language of “intentionality” (*esse intentionale*, *species sensibilis*, and *intelligibilis*, etc., as distinct from *esse reale*).

But the same fundamental philosophical insight is at work no matter which form of language is used; namely, any realistic theory of knowledge must be built, implicitly or explicitly, on a theory of “formal” or “intentional signs,” whose special mode of being is a purely relational or “pointing” one, i.e., “that which makes known something other than itself.” These signs, the result of the ontological intentionality of real being itself as dynamically manifesting itself to some cognitive receiver by leaving the impress of its action upon it, do not make themselves known to the knower directly in themselves as objects known, but as pure “signs of . . .” pointing back beyond themselves to the real agent from which they come and which they manifest. In my own modern translation of this function I like to call them “self-effacing signs.” St. Thomas calls them “intentional similitudes” because their whole being is a relational one, tending or pointing toward something beyond themselves, their active source in the real beings acting on the knower, as formal similitudes of the latter. One of his favorite ways of describing how these sign-beings work is to say that they are not *that which* is known by our sense images and intellectual concepts, but that *by which* the real world they refer to is known.

How important St Thomas considers this distinction as central to a realistic epistemology is shown by the long article he devotes to it in his *Summa Theologiae* I: “Whether the intelligible species abstracted from the phantasm is related to our intellect as that which is understood” (q. 85, art. 2). His answer is “No,” for if so, we could have no knowledge of the real world outside our minds or be able to distinguish between truth and error about reality. Hence they must be not *that which* is known but *that by which* the real objects beyond them are known; in a word, in more contemporary language, they are *self-effacing (intentional) signs*.

At the same time that John Poinot was publishing his *Treatise on signs* of 1632, Descartes, the father of the “modern” period in Western

thought, was publishing his own works, marking the new “turn to the subject” that was to be characteristic of the whole period of classical modern thought. Deely in his book characterizes this whole modern period from Descartes, through the other rationalists, through Locke, Hume, and the other empiricists, up to Kant and beyond, as the “Age of Ideas,” the reason being that the key epistemological principle guiding all of them was the exact opposite of what St. Thomas and Poinsoot had earlier established. As John Locke puts the modern turn succinctly: [That which is immediately evident to the consciousness of every man is] “that which his Mind is employ’d about whilst thinking [are] the Ideas which are there” (1975: I, 1.1) ... “Our knowledge is only conversant about them” (1975: IV, 1.1).

The notion that these ideas and perceptions are rather *intentional signs* of a real world beyond our ideas — *that by which* we know this real world — has vanished! The whole order — and theory — of intentionality, of intentional, self-effacing signs, has slipped off the radar screen of this classical modern period. The amazing fact is that no classical modern philosopher (outside of Thomists — most notably Jacques Maritain [Deely 1986] — and other scholastic philosophers) ever mentions or discusses John Poinsoot’s *Treatise on signs*, published in the opening era of modern philosophy. Poinsoot’s creative synthesis seems to have suddenly blossomed, at the end of the scholastic age, then almost immediately died, totally forgotten or ignored (deliberately or not) throughout the whole modern period. It should be remembered that most of the leading classical modern philosophers came from the north of Europe, were not Catholics, and tended to look down on the “pre-modern, outdated, theology-dominated philosophy of the Middle Ages, typically expressed in Latin.” It is thus perhaps no wonder that they seem to have ignored entirely the powerful Iberian Revival of Scholasticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that took place in Catholic Portugal and Spain and engaged in a lively discussion of the theory of signs — but all using the Latin language.

But once the fateful step had been taken of positing that ideas and sense impressions in the mind are that which is first and directly known, the sole immediate object of our awareness, the problem arises: How then do we get from our ideas to the real world beyond them? What is the bridge, the connection, if there is any? The whole of classical modern philosophy struggles with this *problema pontis*, the “bridge problem,” without ever really finding a satisfactory solution.

All kinds of strategies have been tried, from idealistic metaphysical ones to pragmatic ones through feedback from the real world (but how would one ever know the feedback is from the real world?), or recourse

to common sense or “animal instinct,” or simply forgetting about the problem and following the natural dynamism of the mind toward the real. Finally Immanuel Kant gives up on the project itself and concludes we must be content with knowing only the phenomenal appearances within our own consciousness and imposing intelligible forms upon them from within by our own innate a priori forms of sense and understanding, which are fortunately the same for all human knowers.

This is Kant’s famous “Copernican revolution”: the world no longer *informs us* from without; it is we who *inform it*, i.e., impose the intelligible forms from within ourselves upon the raw material, the “sense manifold” that alone comes to us from without as an intervening “phenomenal veil.” The only world accessible to us humans is the world as we have to think it from within the a priori forms of our own minds. “We are world-makers through our language,” as later Neo-Kantians will say (Nelson Goodman), exchanging what Kant believed were the universal, unchanging a priori form of all human knowers for the newer historical, changing a priori’s of language and culture (now “a prioris” only for those within that culture and language). Having discarded the key of dynamic intentionality, of intentional signs, they have locked themselves in and have no way of opening the door again to the real, mind-independent world without — no *philosophical way*, that is, although in their ordinary lives they spontaneously live consciously as though connected with the real world, without worrying how.

The great German idealist philosophers after Kant — Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, etc. — rightly judge that this situation in which Kant left them is intolerable. We must somehow know the real world basically as it is, they felt, yet lacked the means to pick up again the epistemological and metaphysical key of a realistic theory of intentional signs connecting to the real world from within the world of consciousness (the *Umwelt*, as Deely calls the public side of the *Innenwelt*) through the medium of the action of the real world upon us, leaving in us (as indeed in every animal) intentional signs of the physical surrounding in *its* own being. Instead, accepting that the outer real world cannot really inform us about itself so that our minds are truly receptive of the real, the moderns after Kant concluded that the real world must conform to our ideas on the ground that we are really secretly united with the one great Absolute Mind that creates all reality, co-creating this dependent real world together with the Absolute. In fact, we ourselves are actually only expressions of the Absolute unfolding itself in history. We humans are really “little gods,” so to speak, who are not yet aware of what or who we really are.

But the twentieth century, the age of unprecedented violence anticipated in Darwin’s theory of evolution by random mutations and the sur-

vival of the fittest, collapsed what was now recognized as the Myth of endless Progress, the infinite perfectibility of man, moving toward an inevitable Utopia generated by a beneficent Science. The human being is no longer now the quasi-divine being it was thought to be. We must turn back to a more humble listening to and learning from reality itself that is not our creation.

Deely concludes that this whole modern philosophical journey along the Way of Ideas — at least in its epistemological and resulting meta-physical dimensions, despite many other significant contributions — has proved to be a dead end, although many are not yet able to concede that it is such and keep trying to build a bridge across the unbridgeable abyss separating, on modern epistemological premisses, their minds from the real world.

The Fourth and last Age of Western thought in Deely's history he calls the "Postmodern Age," in his own special way of understanding "Post-modern" not in its customary negative sense of Deconstruction and incurable relativism, but in the positive sense of the rejection of the Way of Ideas characteristic of "Modernity" to rediscover again creatively the realistic Way of Signs of the later medieval mind, as powerfully expressed in John Poinsett's *Treatise on signs*.

This new Age of Signs was initiated by Charles Sanders Peirce in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and blossomed into the now global movement (as Thomas Sebeok called it in his last book of 2001) of semiotics absorbing semiology. Peirce himself started off as a convinced Kantian, then renounced Kant when he rediscovered the whole theory of intentional signs by actually going back to read in Latin the late Iberian scholastic elaborations of the theory of "formal" or self-effacing signs which built upon St. Thomas's doctrine of intentionality (Beuchot and Deely 1995), but going far beyond it to construct the first general theory of signs in the West.

Peirce added on many creative developments of his own to the theory of signs, although his famous triadic definition of the sign as involving (1) the sign-vehicle, (2) the object signified, and (3) the interpretant (or interpreter in the widest sense) that interprets the sign-vehicle as sign of the object, apart from the term itself, "interpretant," owes more to the Latins than to Peirce's own genius.

Notice that in the modern Age of Ideas the notion of sign was telescoped by Saussure and the early "semiologists" into only two components: the sign vehicle and the interpreter, the knower. The object known beyond the sign-vehicle has disappeared, absorbed into the sign-vehicle itself, so that the latter has now turned into the very object known; its whole pointing function has dropped out of sight! Thus the semiotic

movement *relaunched* by Peirce is basically realistic, anti-Kantian (although it is not clear to me that he and all his followers always held on fully to this realism. I am open to correction on this).

As twentieth-century Western thought developed, the phenomenologists, especially the existential ones and the interpersonal ones (Heidegger, Mounier, Buber, Marcel, etc.), simply refused to consider or take seriously the bridge problem at all. A careful description of our actual human condition, they argued, shows clearly that from the very beginning the human being as knower starts off in the midst of a real world interacting with animal knowers, and especially with real persons communicating successfully with each other through languages that have already been taught them by others. Although all do not bother with explaining how this is possible, the official phenomenology movement, initiated by Brentano and developed by Husserl, etc., has explicitly reinstated intentionality as the key to human knowledge. Brentano is proud to say that he has rediscovered for our day the medieval scholastic theory of intentionality, neglected by the classical modern period.

If this were the case, then it seems that Western thought is back on the track of a realistic epistemology again, and we do not need to go back again to St. Thomas's own theory of intentionality. Unfortunately this is not the case — and this I consider my own special contribution in this paper. Brentano has indeed recovered an important half of Aquinas's own full theory, but only half of it. He has recovered the movement of the mind reaching back through intentional signs in our consciousness to the objects it knows. The sign is again "that which makes known something other than itself." But the initial metaphysical underpinning, coming from the initiative of the real world itself acting upon us, is still missing.

First, let us take a closer look at Brentano. Although he has caught well the intentional movement of the mind back toward its objects, he then somehow loses his nerve. It turns out that the only objects that the mind can intend are mental objects, within the mind itself (see Deely 1978, which analyzes Brentano's own texts on this crucial point). The reach across to the real itself has been short-circuited. He remains stuck in a kind of semi-idealism.

Next, how about Husserl? He carries Brentano's intentionality all the way, it seems, to become a sign of the real world itself, the *Umwelt*, presenting itself to the mind of the human knower, whose content he then focuses on to describe with all his well-known richness and subtlety. But Husserl himself never pays any further explicit attention to just how the objects in the real world present themselves to the interior consciousness of the knower, its *Innenwelt*, and pretty much all professed Husserlians

seem to follow him here. Because of this, many philosophers call Husserl, with good reason, a “naive realist” in this aspect of his phenomenology. That would be fine with me and other Thomists. We take what Husserl gives us and are grateful. Phenomenology fills out with great richness what Thomas’s more exclusively metaphysical approach leaves implicit. But in order fully to understand our human process of knowing, phenomenology itself needs the complementary metaphysical grounding of the dynamic relation of the real world to the human knower. But many strict Husserlians, I have found, strongly resist any attempt to ground phenomenological intentionality in any kind of prior metaphysical foundation. Phenomenology, they vainly postulate, is “self-grounding”; it grounds all other modes of explanation, including the doing of metaphysics itself.

This is a crucial point in the interface between phenomenology and metaphysics, and it is not easy for many of us to be sure just where Husserl himself stands on this point. So I am putting this question to you, my audience and readers, to find out both where Husserl himself really stood, if possible, and where you yourselves stand as philosophers.

This is where the unique contribution of St. Thomas comes in. For him, there is an initial *ontological* intentionality (in a deeply analogous sense, of course) of real being itself as by nature dynamically self-manifesting, self-communicating to other beings by the medium of the distinctive action of each real being. By this action the agent through its form projects into the expectant, receptive cognitive field of the knower a formal similitude of itself — which Thomas calls a *species impressa* or impressed intentional similitude of itself. To be a knower is to be the kind of being that is equipped by nature to be expectantly open to receive the projected formal similitudes or self-expressions of agents from the outside world acting on the self, and to consciously recognize these intentional similitudes as *other* than the self’s own innate natural form and as enabling dynamic signs pointing back beyond themselves to the real agents from which they come. Thus human knowledge is intrinsically “intentional” by nature, a “consciousness of . . . another as other.” This is precisely what allows human understanding to include knowledge of a real world of active agents beyond itself.

The key to such realistic knowledge is clearly the notion of a *self-effacing sign*, i.e., the effect produced by a real agent, actively projecting onto the receptive, or expectantly potential, field of a knower a formal or intentional similitude of itself whose whole being is relational, pointing beyond itself to its source in the real agent outside the knower. St. Thomas called such a sign an “intentional similitude” (incorporating the strong image of stretching beyond itself); John of St. Thomas (Poinsot),

incorporating it into a more general theory of signs, called it a “formal sign” (This is to distinguish it from a “natural sign” such as alone was generally recognized among the ancient Greeks, e.g., smoke as a sign of fire, where the smoke has to be first known in its own real being, then connected with fire, also known first in its own real being, and then one serving as a natural sign of the other, incorporated into the very structure of nature itself, prior to our knowing it. Such a sign, of course, already presupposes that we know the real world as it is, hence cannot serve as the explanation of how we know this real world in the first place.)

It should be clear from this that the intentionality of Brentano and the phenomenologists — which traces out insightfully how the mind follows out the pointing of the sign already within it back to its source beyond the knower — does not explain or ground ontologically in any way how the sign got within the knower in the first place. To be complete and intellectually satisfying the *one-way* intentionality of Brentano and contemporary phenomenology must be completed by the *two-way* intentionality of Aquinas: first *ontological*, rooted in the intrinsic self-communicating dynamism of real being itself; only then cognitive or *epistemological*, i.e., the dynamism of the knowing being itself, responding to this gift from the real world. The basic structure, thus, of all realistic knowledge is the dynamic relation of receiving-and-responding between knower and world; and the indispensable mediating bridge is that of the intentional or self-effacing sign, that which allows the outer world to become present as known in the inner world of human consciousness.

John Poinsot, and John Deely after him, make the interesting point that the intentional sign can function as this bridge or mediation between the inner world of mental being and the outer world of real being precisely because its unique character (what Deely traces to what he calls the “singularity” of relation as ontological) is that the sign transcends both, is neutral to both, so to speak, anchored at one end in mental (mind-dependent) being within consciousness and at the other pointing to or terminating in real (mind-independent) being without. This is because, as St. Thomas himself pointed out earlier, the being of an intentional sign is the being of a *relation*, and relation is the only one of the Aristotelian categories that can function equally in the order of real beings, or of mental beings, or between the two.

Admittedly, the being of a formal sign as such is indeed a mysterious one, and not at all easy to analyze, certainly not by any scientific method of quantitative measurement and mathematical expression. But it can be shown that it is an indispensable ingredient of our marvelously self-communicating universe. St. Thomas himself has done a subtle and insightful analysis of it in various places in his work, which we cannot go

into now, though it is well worth studying (see Deely 2004). One of his main points is that the mode of being of an intentional sign cannot be reduced to a purely material one, since it is clear that in human knowledge the actual physical material of the thing known is not physically transported into the knower — which would be absurd. The sign must be present, then, in the knower in the mode of a form without its own natural matter — a formal similitude, as Thomas puts it — which demands a certain degree of immateriality, both in the indwelling sign itself and in the receptive knower so as to be able to receive it. Thus, intentionality and immateriality go together in the hierarchy of being, and that is why any knower must exist on a higher level of being than a non-knower.

In conclusion, let me say that it seems to me that the new semiotics theory and the old Thomistic intentionality theory (in its double dimension: metaphysical and epistemological) unwisely banished by “modernity’s” Age of Ideas are profoundly complementary. In fact, they need each other to be complete. Thomistic intentionality theory is enriched by being incorporated into a wider general theory of signs; semiotic theory needs to have its epistemological intentionality metaphysically grounded in the ontological intentionality of being itself as by nature actively self-manifesting, self-communicating. Their integration can only be for the benefit of both. I am happy to report that John Deely, himself a leader in the field of semiotics, has expressed his strong agreement with the relevance and need of this integration.

A few key questions still remain, brought up by critics.

1. Why should not Thomists just be content with Aquinas’s own language of “intentionality”? Why bother with expressing it in terms of semiotics or “sign-theory”? What does that add, if anything?

Response. Although St. Thomas occasionally uses the term “sign,” he prefers the term “intentionality” as already introduced for the first time by the great Arabic philosophers read by Aquinas in Latin translations. This can indeed carry the essential thought content, but it still leaves matters somewhat obscure.

The ontological nature of “formal or intentional similitude” — “that which points to another” — is still a metaphor, though understood by the experience of knowing. But just what kind of being is that of a formal similitude or intentional similitude? It is more illuminating to add that what these are doing is acting as “signs” of something beyond themselves. They are of the ontological nature of “sign,” which is not a metaphor. That is precisely why John Poinset in the seventeenth century first translated the traditional Thomistic theory of intentionality into the broader theory of signs in his own book, itself the fruit of lively discussion of the

topic of signs in the Iberian Thomistic Revival of that era. One sufficiently steeped in the older ways perhaps does not have to make this translation, but it seems more illuminating for the contemporary philosopher if one does. The ontological function is more clearly and explicitly expressed when it is set in the context of a theory of “sign,” particularly when that expression is accomplished in an already established and widely used contemporary theory known as “semiotics.”

2. How open is the semiotics community to understanding and accepting the need for the ontological grounding of an epistemologically realistic semiotics?

Response. Many have not ordinarily been interested in that kind of question. That is what is not yet clear, John Deely informs me. But that is precisely what he, as a highly respected technical semiotician and I through him are now trying to do, using this article in this collection as a springboard. Wish us well — and join us!

Can the necessary ontological grounding for a realistic semiotics be done through the metaphysics of Peirce, with which many contemporaries are more familiar? Perhaps so, which would be welcome. But personally, I am not intellectually comfortable with Peirce’s metaphysical method, using such highly abstract formalities as “firstness, secondness, thirdness,” rather than Thomas’s more holistically centered and existential starting points like being, nature, substance (according to the wonderfully expressive definition by Aristotle of nature as “as an abiding center of acting and being acted upon”). I find the Thomistic understanding of being as by nature intrinsically ordered toward dynamic self-communicating action more simple, direct, and easily accessible than any other realist metaphysical theory I know. And I am not sure that Peirce and the Peircians always hold on consistently to an unambiguous realism. But the essential is to have some adequate metaphysical grounding for a realistic theory of intentionality as our response to the signs left within us by the self-expressive action of the real world around us.

3. What is the status of epistemological realism now in contemporary thought?

Response. It now has a central place again, partly due to the influence of realistic semiotics. But in the British-American Analytic tradition, where most do not like to get involved in metaphysical rather than linguistic analysis, a well-grounded understanding of intentionality never seems to have been integrated, so that many analytic thinkers still tend to shift back and forth indecisively between arguments over “realism/anti-realism” (Hilary Putnam, John Haldane, etc.)

Let us end with Thomas's own words:

It is the nature of every actuality [actually existing being] to communicate itself as far as possible (*De Potentia*, q. 2, a. 4).

Communication follows upon the very meaning [*ratio*: intelligibility] of actuality (*In I. Sent.*, d. 4, q. 4, a. 4).

Each and every being abounds in the power of acting, just insofar as it exists in act (*De Potentia*, q. 1, a. 2).

Notes

1. *Editor's note.* Fr. Clarke is referring to his participation in the Symposium "Getting the postmodern perspective" organized by Professor Douglas Rasmussen on 2 November 2002 in the framework of the seventy-sixth Annual Meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association at Xavier University, Cincinnati. That symposium has since been published in 2005 in *The American Journal of Semiotics* 21(1–4), 1–74.
2. To understand the full Thomistic intentionality doctrine I have found most helpful the following: Hayen (1939; a powerful synoptic vision of a self-communicating universe), followed by his larger book of 1954; de Finance (1969: 72–78) is rich; Regis (1959: Ch. 6) is a careful analysis of both dimensions of intentionality, filled with texts; Casey (1992: 97–112); Pegis (1984: 109–134). By contrast, I found Searle (1983) to be a typically analytic approach, i.e., one with no metaphysical basis.

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