



## Foreword

### *John Deely and His Vocation as a Philosopher: From New Mexico to Mexico to the Universe\**

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**H**aving first been a Fulbright scholar to Brazil, John was a Fulbright scholar to Mexico in the mid-1990s. During this time he presented a paper in Puebla, while I sculptured clay at the largest ceramic studio in Mexico City. We later visited Puebla together. Our gracious host helped us select our beautiful Talavera dinnerware, which

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\* With the exception of minor editorial changes deemed more suitable for transfer to the special issue, this essay is virtually verbatim as presented at the Plenary Roundtable on John Deely organized by Farouk Seif at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America (October 25–29, 2017), Puebla, Mexico. Given the conference theme, “The Signs of Play and The Play of Signs”, I spoke personally and playfully. I had not intended to publish the manuscript, but afterward Jamin Pelkey cajoled me into doing so. My references in the essay are those I have ready-at-hand. The original manuscript opened with the following introduction: *Farouk, Semiotic Society of America members, and conference team, my heart is filled with gratitude for your loving hospitality. The beautiful Dia de Muertos altar in honor John is beyond words. A few friends had encouraged me, in my bereavement, to come here to be with you.*

thereafter graced our dining room table with our fond memories of the Mexican people.

Our host next invited me to play tennis here. John, the imp, had said to our host that I had “beaten Billy Jean King”. When our host turned to me with raised eyebrows, I hastened to point out that the year was back in 1955. I was fourteen and Billy Jean Moffitt—way before she became King—was a couple of years younger than I. While casing her game, a Czar of world tennis said to me, standing by his side: “She’ll never get anywhere. She’s too erratic.” I, who had faced her across the net waiting for her unforced errors, exclaimed: “What if those balls that go six inches out one day land six inches in!”

Such signs of play illustrate John’s own claim in further developing C. S. Peirce’s insight that the future bestows new meaning on the past. This claim will be my unifying theme in my *random reflections* about John’s own inner fight in getting where he wasn’t supposed to get. What can we learn from him about how we play our own inner game of life?

First of all I reflect on John’s friendship with Richard Lanigan. It is fitting that I originally delivered this essay as part of the same plenary panel in John’s memory wherein Richard also delivered his address. When Richard and John first met in the land of *semiotica*, they looked familiar to one another, each wondering at which semiotic conference they had met. Finally, Richard exclaimed: “I remember! At St. Therese school we got into that fist fight!” They were then in elementary school. They both grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, that land of enchantment by the Rio Grande that flows onward, paying no heed to state or national boundaries.

John left his home in New Mexico the day after he graduated from high school, in 1959, with no means to go to college. He dug ditches for highway construction. The marvel is that he met a Dominican priest, Fr. Tom Donlan, who saw intellectual potential in this teenager. So the Dominicans invited him to study under their own domain at Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa.

John was by now an experienced fist fighter. So in his freshman year he got into what has become on that campus a legendary fist fight. *Why* did John land the first blow to the face of his foe, a fight that ended in a pool of blood? A student who was much larger than John had called the Dominicans “all wimps”. After class John had said to this student, “Will you take back your comment?” The opponent looked down his nose at Deely with a defiant “No!” Deely, as we would say in tennis, “went for the kill”, that is, “put the ball away.”

Because the fight took place on Loras College campus—rather than *off* campus—Loras authorities handed over John to the jurisdiction of the head Dominican, Fr. Clancey, for disciplinary action. Were *you* this Dominican, what would *you* say to John? After a rigorous reprimand, the Dominican said: “Next time take him *off* campus.”

Next it was the turn of Fr. Donlan, as John’s Dominican director, to try to direct John. In John’s archival letters to him, I marvel at how John wrote so masterfully, so poetically, and, truly, so authentically. Docile as he was with this director, upon occasion John, with intellectual skill, directed this Dominican how to coach him. Does that surprise you?! John would always remain devoted to this distinguished Dominican as a dear friend who challenged him to be open to his potential, to submit to the study of Latin “even if it kills you”, and hence to “become a man”. John, however, considered his potential to be highly improbable because he fell asleep in boredom whenever he tried to study classical Latin, and so far his grades were, as Donlan said, “disgraceful.” John became certain that he couldn’t pass the Latin final exam.

At one point in the correspondence, John went so far as to say. “I will lose respect for you if you continue to see potential in me.” This Dominican showed no sympathy for the boy from New Mexico who pitied himself as a lost cause, who wrote “I doubt I will ever amount to anything in life”. Donlan replied that he knew potential when he saw it, and that John need not write back if he so wished. If John failed the final exam in Latin he would have to be dropped from Loras, with no place to go. John wrote back: “I don’t know if I’m equal to the task . . . despite your total lack of sympathy for such childish academic foibles . . . this year may prove the end of me yet.”

In a later letter, John had at least regained his sense of humor: “O damn. The more I write about [the forthcoming Latin exam] the more depressed I get; so I’ll quit while I’m still able to laugh. It’s *so* much more pleasant to die *laughing*”. He signed, “Your dead friend, Jack” (His nickname as a child).

Later yet in the game, the teenager docilely accepted his possible potential to pass the exam. He responded to his Dominican coach: “Well, I must admit you sound serious about Latin”. So John requested Donlan’s prayers for success in the final exam.

His faithful friend and frustrated coach, Fr. Donan, wrote back, during the week of final exams, that, to his relief, by the time his letter would arrive the “damnable Latin exam” would be over! We can abduce the outcome of that exam. Well done, coach Donlan!

Less than five years later, at age twenty-four John submitted his doctoral dissertation to Fr. Ralph Austin Powell. This Dominican was a master of the philosophical traditions of the Greek, the Latin, the German, and the French. The moment had arrived for their first meeting to discuss Fr. Powell's response to the submitted dissertation. In the future, bestowing new meaning on the past, John regaled our dinner guests, including Fr. Powell, with the story of that moment. John said: "Fr. Powell looked disconcerted. I dreaded what he would say. He said, alas, 'Well, John, what you have written is not a *dissertation*.' Fr. Powell then put his hand over his eyes, contemplating for a long moment what to say. His next words were: 'I must say that what you have written, from beginning to end, is *philosophy*.'"

That work became John's first book, *The Tradition Via Heidegger* (Deely 1971). John dedicated the book to Ralph Austin Powell and to Jacques and Raïssa Maritain. In July, 1972, John gave this book in person to Maritain, then ninety years old, in France.

As with this first book, John always wrote because he had something to say. Again to use my sports analogy, he was playing his own game. At the same time he was never attached to his own name. I am reminded of a verse from Thomas à Kempis's medieval spiritual classic (1441, Book 3, Chp. 24: 244): "Be not solicitous for the shadow of a great name." St. Therese of Lisieux (1896: 121), John's favorite saint growing up in New Mexico, herself reflected on that quotation at age fourteen, on her pilgrimage to Rome. Her fellow travelers, unlike her own family, were mostly from the nobility, so she observed for the first time how attached they were to great names. By the way, how this saint became a doctor of the church, without learning classical Latin, remained a mystery to John. As Jacques Maritain once said (1957: 31–32), "History is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be looked at."

Concerning John's detachment from his own name as a philosopher, I reflect back on a well-known example. Early in his career, John collaborated with a famous Thomist, Mortimer Adler, at the Institute for Philosophical Research. Their colorful correspondence is in John's archives. They had co-authored the book, *Some Questions about Language: A Theory of Human Discourse and Its Objects* (Adler 1976). In Adler's opinion as a mainstream Thomist, however, John's own stance on certain issues in semiotics concerning the nature of sign *relation* in anthroposemiosis was only a "small point" of difference between them, so why dispute further over it? John responded by withdrawing his own name as co-author. I quote Christopher Morrissey's account (Morrissey

2017: par. 6): “A fruitful disagreement between John and Mortimer over key issues in semiotics resulted in John’s going his own way to continue unhampered his investigations into the history of semiotics in the Middle Ages.” Speaking of John as co-author, Adler himself wrote in the preface of the book (1976: xii): “I am indebted to him and regret that unresolved differences of opinion between us about certain aspects of a theory that we otherwise share should prevent him from associating his name with mine in the authorship of this book.”

In the future, in the last few weeks of his life, on December 20, 2016, John said to me (I wrote down the comment at the time), regarding his 2016 archival work with the Thomist and Maritain scholar Matthew Miner: “It’s really astounding! From the very beginning of my work I’ve been dealing with the subject of *relation*. I just didn’t realize it until going over all this old material, the Adler correspondence and all that.”

Returning to my reflection on John’s going his own way after parting with Adler, the former fist fighter returned to Loras College, this time as Chair of the Philosophy Department. Over more than two decades there he produced the two opuses, his bi-lingual edition of Poinso’s *Tractatus de Signis* (Poinso 1632) and *Four Ages of Understanding* (Deely 2001). His landmark edition of the *Tractatus de Signis*, in consultation with Ralph Austin Powell, was sixteen years in the making. With three years to go, Umberto Eco drew a cartoon of John’s grave site, with a human being in a space suit reading to others in such space suits: “And today, gentleman, we are celebrating the beginning of the fifth millennia A. D. with the publication of the expected and coveted *TRACTATUS DE SIGNIS*.”

I recall the day that the original publisher, John Gallman, cancelled contract while the book was in production. Its successful production, as Deely would have it, was beyond the capacity of Indiana University Press, so well known in the field of semiotics. John had come to a dead end. Dejected, he said to me, “*Now* what do I do?” The road to Wimbledon can wind around to nowhere.

John started over and submitted the volume to the University of California Press, Berkeley. A great medieval historian, C. Warren Hollister, said flat out, in his reader’s report, that Deely’s own stance, spelled out in his editorial monograph introducing the work, went contrary to mainstream medieval scholarship. Hollister claimed that Deely’s stance was “brilliant but perverse”. Upon further reflection, at match point in his review, Hollister put the ball away. He concluded frankly that Deely’s stance was “perverse indeed, but brilliant”. That match won, the book went to Production.

I further reflect that John had placed this interpretative commentary for Poinso's *Tractatus de Signis* last in the book, as "Editorial AfterWord" (Deely 1985: 399–404). He often said, with deep reverence for Poinso, "I don't consider this book my book. It is *Poinso's* book." At the same time, with true humility, John had persevered in saying what lay within him to say, thereby transcending outcome. Surely such is the underlying attitude that sports also hopefully cultivates, win or lose in the eyes of this world.

Decades in the future, Gary Shank cased John Deely's inner game just as frankly. In his Preface to the 2016 Special Issue edited by Paul Cobley, *Deely in Review*, in *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, Shank says of Deely:

He very much sees himself as part of the long and venerable Catholic tradition of philosophers. This is not much of a revelation frankly . . . In addition to grounding semiotics in the ancient and medieval work of Catholic thinking, John takes it one step further to transform, rather than merely expand, that body of work into a whole new perspective on the world. And he is not afraid to upend millennia of thought and tradition to do so. (2016: 269–272)

Back to the actual Production of Poinso's book, why did it take three years in Production? You see, John's own grand book design required that each page of the bi-lingual Latin and English line up page by page, for the first time in history. Each page had to be separately typeset by the one genius typesetter who could do it, Bud McFarland, whom John had discovered in Dubuque, Iowa. This even-tempered and patient typesetter had said it was his only chance to produce a masterpiece. One day, to the amazement of his staff, he hurled his pencil across the room and headed for the golf course. He, too, persevered in completing the masterpiece!

The landmark tome landed a two-page feature review in the Easter Sunday edition of the *New York Times*. The reviewer, Thomas A. Sebeok (1986), points out that in his youth he taught with Jacques Maritain, who introduced him to John Poinso's *Treatise on Signs* (known by his name in religion as John of St. Thomas). I further reflect that when Sebeok first met Maritain, in 1943, John Deely was one year old. Maritain said, in 1956, that he "worshipped and adored" Poinso as his teacher and friend across the centuries. Before John had ever heard of Sebeok, John was already translating Poinso's *Tractatus de Signis*.

As you know, a central theme of John's work is the evolving Universe. Yet sufficient for my own reflections today is simply to muse on what Dante as a semiotic animal said (1321: Par. 33.142–145): "my desire and will were moved . . . by the Love that moves the sun and the other

stars.” Surely John’s own redefining of the human being as a semiotic animal allows room in the universe for Galileo and Dante to join hands in integrating both the rational mode of knowing through reason and the *suprarational* mode of knowing through love, which is, according to Maritain, a mode of knowing that is not *outside* of reason but *above* reason, in the realm of unknowing. I reflect that such a transcendent turn moves beyond the Western dualisms of “rational animal” or “thinking thing” toward a new era of human understanding.

Having reflected on the Universe in so few words, I turn now to John’s opus written in Mexico, *Four Ages of Understanding*. Thanks to his Fulbright in Mexico, John at long last had the opportunity to write this opus. Neither before nor since have I seen him so in flow with his own game. He played from what he himself called his “angle” in venturing beyond conventional boundaries in disputations across the millennia. He was rewriting the history of philosophy from the vantage point of the *sign*. He played in concert with a neighbor’s fearsome outdoor dog, who sat by his side on a rustic Mexican bench within a stone-walled enclosure of a well-known Mexican potter.

After twenty-four days, John sent his manuscript to his printer. The print-out was just over 500 pages, and the eventual finished opus was over a thousand pages.

In his *Reconocimientos* (a richer word than the English “Acknowledgments”) John speaks from his soul. Let’s listen to what he says in this passage:

Since early years I have been cursed or blessed with a habit of mind—a character defect it may be—that likes to turn over problems that have no solution, or at least no solution that can be provided outside of thought itself (if there). One day, after nearly two years of weekly seminars and intellectual visits with Mauricio Beuchot at the national university in México City in particular, the habit led to this book. Begun on the 25th of February, 1996, and completed on the 20th of March of that same year . . . It comes as a surprise to me still that, having grown on the banks of the Rio Grande, so many years later I had to cross that river and go more than a thousand miles into México to reach the spot where the inspiration for this book found the circumstances for execution. In a casa rented from Alberto Diaz de Cosio, ceramista and friend, on the Privada de los Compadres, in Santa Maria Ahaucaatlan, Morelos, over the intense twenty-four days of its first draft, each night . . . Paco—Fransisco Tellez Fernandez—would come from work and



we would talk intensely, he, Teresita,<sup>[1]</sup> and I, all in Spanish, sometimes resorting to 50% or more of hypothesis, about the progress of the grand vision. (Deely 2001: xxvii)

The Dominican Mauricio Beuchot, a renowned Poinsoot and Peirce scholar, as well as poet, had translated Poinsoot's *Tractatus de Signis* into Spanish before he and John had met. I felt at home listening to some of their good spirited discourse on the Dominican tradition in semiotics, disputation at its best. Mauricio is also a champion of the poetry of John of the Cross, as was Maritain, so all the more did I feel at home, beyond disputation! He and John also went in search of a lost manuscript in philosophy by Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, a heroine of mine since my undergraduate days.

I reflect how, over our extended time in Mexico, we were learning more and more Spanish on the roads of Mexico, so that by now only 50 percent guessing was pretty good for us! By the time John wrote that passage I have already quoted in *Four Ages*, Paco, in two more months, would become my godfather for my Confirmation. It was on Pentecost, in the neighborhood colonial church. Many people in the neighborhood had by now become our friends, as well as two guard dogs a stone's throw down the one lane dirt road where no one dare set foot except us. My Confirmation name, "Teresita", is after St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

The Dominicans flew Fr. Ralph Powell down to this neighborhood to concelebrate and to convey a message to the people. Fr. Powell spoke . . . well, to me, just as always, lost in the clouds of Latin learning, with a smile on his face. He spoke to the people about the distinction, you know, between human and angelic intelligence! John's attempted translation into Spanish reminds me of one of his attempted Latin exams. A learned neighborhood friend, who owned the only English radio station in Mexico City, left his pew to come to the rescue by translating Fr. Powell into words everyone could understand, except for me and my deaf friend Francisco. From our first days in Mexico, this dear friend had welcomed me in the church with his radiant smile and grunts of joy, no matter what language I spoke. Now, this day on Pentecost, Francisco was smiling enthusiastically no matter what language anyone spoke. The Spirit descended, beyond words, uniting us all as one people.

I reflect now on that dog who sat by John's side while he wrote *Four Ages*. That young dog says more about our life in Mexico than I can in words. He lived outdoors, off leash a stone's throw down the road, guard-

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<sup>1</sup> John refers to me by my confirmation name in Mexico.



ing his territory. Upon our arrival in our rusted old van, he had leaped at my window to show me his long white fangs. I was impressed. His family had named him Bethóven, after the musical composer, Beethoven. After John and I had befriended this dog, daring as we did to walk on his road, he stood his ground against a neighboring dog pack outside our gate. Bethóven conquered not for land but for love, in order to gain entrance into our enclosure to be with us. I have written his story in the children's novel, *Soulmates*, based on letters to my mother that I wrote from Mexico. All I can say here is that our arrival as foreigners changed the ecology of that neighborhood, which, over time, went to the dogs. As our friend Paco said, "Before you foreigners arrived, no one talked about the dogs. Now that's all they talk about."

Only in Mexico did I learn how to howl with a dog as if I were singing a Psalm. Only in Mexico did a dog, Bethóven's big brother Oso, save me from a thief escaped from prison, while John was away at a conference in Monterey. Only in Mexico did Bethóven follow me to church and circle the priest all during his homily.

One day in the future, to avoid a threatened poisoning, Bethóven's family gave Bethóven to us before our departure from Mexico. Only in Mexico did John call his publisher in New York to tell him to cancel their meeting about moving forward with a major book publication. "Why?!", asked the incredulous publisher, who knew how persistently John pushed books through press. I heard John reply, "I'll explain later—I have to get a Mexican dog without a license or official papers across the border, and I don't know yet how to do that."

Finally, the ferocious dog flashed fangs at the frontier police dog sniffing our rusted old van for drugs. Some days later, in his new land, the Mexican dog from the land of eternal spring sniffed and tasted snow, for the first time in his life, to see what it was.

No wonder I chose for John's memorial card the photo of John with that Mexican dog sitting with him while he wrote *Four Ages*. No wonder John himself had chosen that same photo for the cover of his book, *What Distinguishes Human Understanding* (Deely 2002).

My analogy of the inner game of sport has splendidly failed to express the love that is inexpressible in words. So, too, we know that John had wanted no eulogy. Pressed by his sister, he designated our rescue dog Bruno. Pressed by his brother for a human homilist, he designated Fr. Ted Baenziger, a dear friend, who knows when—and when not—to pull his punches, and a Maritain scholar who is also a dear friend of our dogs.

In concluding my random reflections on how the future indeed lends new meaning to the past, I return to my first long conversation with John, at the 3rd Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, in 1978. Since we are both Maritain scholars, he showed me his foot-high manuscript of Poinot's *Tractatus de Signis*, and he read to me some of his footnotes, interspersed with Latin. When he took out his red pen to add some Latin to a footnote, I was impressed. Then he asked me to say something about myself. I said I had recently retired from international competition in track, and that before that I was on the USA world table tennis and an official national coach, having left the California tennis circuit when in high school.

He responded, as men often did to me about their manly sports prowess, "When I was in high school I was on the football team". I was more impressed with his footnotes in Latin. His next words astounded me. He said, "And whenever I suited up, the team *lost*." I was indeed impressed. Here is a man who has no need to prove his male prowess.

Perhaps a better analogy to John's inner game of life is the dog Bethóven, who not only showed fangs but also soaked up our love like the Cuernavaca sun. So as not to blur John's own distinction between human and other than human animals, I reflect that perhaps Maritain said it best, in speaking of John at play: "He is a child".

All I can say is what a man!

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