BOOK REVIEWS

BASICS OF SEMIOTICS. By John Deely. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). Pp. xiii + 149. $25.00; Paper $10.95.

John Deely has long been at the forefront of a semiotics that moves decisively beyond the obsession with language (a form of "glottocentrism") toward an analysis of signs within the context of a signifying nature. His own intellectual roots go back to the Latin tradition, with particular emphasis on the 1632 work of John Poinsot, the *Tractatus de Signis*, and the essays of C. S. Peirce. This dual lineage makes it possible for Deely to rework medieval semiotics in the light of the Peircean analysis of sign/object/interpretant and to rethink the correlation of transcendental and ontological forms of signification. Further, like Thomas A. Sebeok, with whom he has often collaborated, Deely takes seriously the concept that all living things participate in unique forms of semiosis tied to what the German biologist Jakob von Uexküll called the *Umwelt*. This configuration of biosemiotics, Peircean triadic semiotics, and late medieval theories of signification represents a uniquely powerful synthesis that brings semiotic theory to a new level of sophistication.

Deely redefines the philosophical tradition along semiotic lines so that it can be reshaped to better serve the needs of a more global understanding of meaning. Semiotics is held to be not so much a method of methods as a point of view that can use several methods for its articulation. This point of view insists that all ideas are about objects other than themselves and never about themselves alone. An idea is by definition a sign of something that may or may not be another idea. Yet even other ideas are embodied and are thus part of a world that is in some basic sense physical. Deely redefines the physical to include anything that exists independently of human thought. Ideas are fully semiotic and do not represent detached sense data that somehow need to be opened out to a larger order of signification.

Signs, whether ideas are not, serve to make objects present in the first place. More basic than objects are things which are independently real existents that may not yet be part of a web of signification. Insofar as a thing enters into relation with an experiencing organism, it becomes an object. The thing now stands within cognition in some respect, and is thus an object. An object becomes a sign when it stands for something else. Thus there is a fairly straightforward evolution from the presemiotic status of the thing to the fully semiotic and mediated status of the sign itself. For Deely, the thing is fully embodied and is physical and is thus part of a semiotically dense nature that lies underneath culture and the more arbitrary codes of anthroposemiosis (i.e., human and linguistic forms of

semiosis). Objects are always embodied as well but may not be physical.

Deely lavishes some care on the distinction between a transcendental and an ontological relation. Underlying these two forms of relationality is a deeper sense of relativity that insists that all things and objects are relative to some context. This is further refined to show that an object or sign may have an asymmetrical form of relevance to another; that is, it may influence some other order but not be influenced in turn. This acknowledgment of asymmetry saves Deely from falling into a form of process naturalism in which each order is held to be relevant to each other order in some basic respect. Put differently, Deely acknowledges that nature contains genuine forms of discontinuity.

A transcendental relation involves relationality across and through the various modes of time. At the same time, a transcendental relation pertains to the object itself and involves its conditions of knowability. Such relations are not "real" relations but, "... comparative requirements of action and intelligibility" (p. 42). In this sense, a transcendental relation involves the possibilities that obtain within the object itself regardless of any actual or potential physical forms of interaction. Yet, a transcendental relation is more than the set of possibilities inherent within an object but functions as a kind of dynamic interpretant guiding and shaping the semiotic moves of the sign-using organism. The transcendental relation serves as the ground for the ontological relations. In other words, a transcendental relation is an anticipation of relation and lives at the heart of nature itself.

An ontological relation, on the other hand, involves interaction between the object and other orders that lie outside of the internal possibilities within the object. It should be noted that Deely uses the technical term "subjective being" (via Poinsot) as his equivalent to the object as it is in itself prior to its extrinsic forms of relationality. That is, an object will have subjective roots that are pre-relational. Any given object will participate in both forms of relationality and one mode will be privileged over the other in given contexts.

To clarify the differences between a transcendental and ontological relation, Deely gives the example of a gardener finding a bone while digging in the garden. From the gardener's perspective the bone has no intrinsic meaning. Yet, from the standpoint of a paleontolotogist the bone takes on a far different meaning:

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

Thus, the paleontologist transforms the mere "rock" into a bone that has an ontological (or physical/objective) relation to its deceased owner. Yet, this possibility remained "within" the "subjective being" of the bone as one of its transcendental possibilities. The effect of the bone on the optic nerve is, of course, a bare physical

relation. The semiotic move of seeing it as a dinosaur bone involves an awareness of both ontological and transcendental traits. The unveiling of a transcendental relation involves thirdness (intelligibility and generality) while an ontological relation, especially if it is physical/objective, may remain on the level of mere secondness (brute causal interaction).

Once these primal forms of relationality are clarified, Deely moves on to exhibit the semiotic structures of prehuman orders. Animals inhabit an *Umwelt* that itself functions as a biological order of meaning serving the needs of the species. The inner cognitive map of the animal, the *Innenwelt*, serves the needs of communication and makes it possible for the individual animal to live in consort with the species-specific *Umwelt*. Deely wishes to show how the basic categories of semiotics apply to the animal kingdom and thus link the realm of zoosemiotics more closely to anthroposemiotics. Animals also live in a world in which *aliquid stat pro aliquo* (one thing stands for another).

The plot thickens when Deely struggles to illuminate the realm of physiosemiosis (physical semiosis). Unlike Peirce, he refuses to entertain panpsychism ("matter is effete mind") or import teleological categories into the non-living realms of nature. As is well known, Peirce was never fully clear on the status of psychic traits within nature as a whole. For example, does a physical interaction involve an interpretant (sign generated by the representamen/object correlation)? Deely argues that physiosemiosis is in the realm of secondness (brute interaction) and that it involves what is best termed a "virtual" semiosis. This move frees Deely from the panpsychist plunge while still giving him the maneuvering room to show how all of nature has at least an implicit semiotic structure.

Deely concludes with a brief retrospective look at the evolution of semiotic theory in the West with particular attention to Augustine, Locke, Poinsot, Peirce, and Jakob von Uexküll. The inner logic of this movement points toward a semiotics of nature that locates the semiotics of culture as one of its sub-species. The priority of nature comes out most strongly in Uexküll's analyses of *Umwelten* and in Peirce's three categories (firstness, secondness, and thirdness).

This work is in many respects an impressive achievement. It makes it clear that no semiotic theory will long prevail that ignores the utter supremacy of nature in any analysis of sign functions. At the same time, it explores new conceptual territory on the boundary between late Medieval conceptions of transcendental relations and the Peircean triadic semiotics of sign/object/interpretant. Deely is to be commended for grappling with the metaphysical issues that remain relatively unexplored at the heart of semiotic theory.

Yet, a vexing question remains. Has semiotic theory probed as deeply into the heart of nature as is required in order to find a truly general framework for explaining the ubiquitous world of signs? It is one thing to engage the biological sciences in a quest for a pre-human form of semiosis, but it is yet another to develop a metaphysical perspective that locates signs within and among orders of relevance that may not be semiotic. Deely is certainly on the right track when he talks of "virtual" semiosis, but it is even more imperative that he enter into the elusive momentums of a nature that is forever beyond the grasp of sign-using organisms. Put differently, the concern is not only

with finding a more encompassing framework for semiotics but with letting go of the implicit pansemioticism that fails to honor the presemiotic powers of a nature that is largely unconscious and is indifferent to the needs of sign users.

It is not clear, then, at least to this reader, whether Deely goes too far. I have some theoretical reservations that further work needs to clarify. Still, *Basics of Semiotics* does provide a basic reference for anyone seeking to understand what semiotics, at this point, is all about. This book deserves a wide readership and will, no doubt, move semiotics beyond the grooved and the obvious.

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POLITICAL OBLIGATION IN A LIBERAL STATE. By Steven M. DeLue. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989. Pp. xiv + 179. Cloth $39.50; Paper $12.95.

In this short volume, Steven DeLue addresses the question of political obligation in a liberal society. His focus, however, is somewhat narrower than that suggested by the title. DeLue omits the historical discussion of the problem and, instead, concentrates on the debate in Anglo-American political theory of the past two decades.

According to the author, a liberal state is the only one which provides the basic rights and liberties (including minimum standards for the distribution of basic goods) necessary to the self-respect and the maximum development of persons. Although one might think that all good liberal citizens would naturally support such a state, DeLue notes that these benefits alone are not enough to warrant a strong obligation to it, for there may be serious disagreement over what basic rights and liberties involve.

DeLue traces this disagreement to two distinct and irreducible strains of liberalism. Individualists insist that the state be neutral and provide support to as many diverse ways of life as possible; "communalists" (identified with the "republican" tradition in political thought) insist that the state should promote a comprehensive moral doctrine that will serve as the basis for social life and individual development. Thus, what a communalist would consider as the basis for a morally dignified life, would be seen by the individualist as a "hindrance to freedom" (p. 53), and *vice versa*. As a result, if a state does not reflect the particular strain of liberalism that a person supports, his sense of obligation to the state may be weak and he may well engage in non-civil protest. This, paradoxically, could lead to the state having to defend its existence by acting with extreme coercion—that is, illiberally.

In Chapters 1 to 3, DeLue argues that an obligation to the state cannot be based on the protection of "formal" rights and liberties alone. One must, rather, look to something which allows these rights to have "real significance" (p. 58), namely what DeLue calls an "enlarged culture." This culture, in turn, both provides the ground for, and depends on, an "enlarged discourse." Such a discourse is open-ended and "accomodationist" (p. 34), reflects basic liberal principles and values (such as fairness and equality), allows individualists and communalists alike to promote their respective conceptions of the good, enables them to be critically reflective,