

Commentary on John Deely: Ethics and the Semiosis-Semiotics Distinction

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In questions of the truth-value of various ethical considerations, semiotics is rightly playing an enlarged role. John Deely's recent approach is to draw a potentially untenable distinction between semiosis and semiotics, and to assign ethics to the province of the later. This semiotic rendering of the NOMA¹ principle offers both possibilities and problems: following the principle of falsification, this commentary focuses on the later so that we may better access the former.

Deely articulates his discussion of ethics "backwards" – a most commendable choice. While 'clear' and 'distinct' become absurd when taken as absolutes, 'more clear and distinct' can be distinguished from 'less clear and distinct'. He rightly dismisses the notion that ethical behavior on our part is grounded in human feelings of empathy and respect for maternal devotion or the enduring of pain on the part of the non-human. He contrasts this muddled romanticism with a semiotically defined notion of responsibility, which "applies only to a being capable (whether it actually does so or not) of looking beyond its own boundaries" so as to "reckon with the larger picture of the biosphere sustained within a framework of relations that perception alone cannot reveal". This sets the stage for Deely's larger arguments: it also limits ethics to a subset of species-specific epistemology. Here I focus this review.

Deely's articulation of semiotic ethics begins with the most basic ontogenetic agreement (there exists a single shared physical world, within which there exists evolving things). From this, Deely patiently constructs a view of existence wherein biotic/semiotic subjectivity generates consequence (i.e., is generative of what-is), but not ethical considerations, which he sees as limited to semiotic behavior. In so doing, Deely builds on several strands of Biosemiotic argumentation: that life is co-extensive with sign use as well as the consequent existence of subjectivity, that the subjective is necessarily intersubjective, and that all this is entailed by how living things (multifariously) go about the business of living (i.e. find, or avoid, what they

must so as to go on living). The argument is that: “the ‘colors seen’ result from the subjective constitution on both sides of the interaction, not simply on one side or the other”. Deely furthers this by arguing that while intersubjectivity is the common norm of life, transsubjectivity – which is co-extensive with metasemiosis (or, semiotics), is a rare (human specific) exaptation, entailed by (human) culture and entailing a relationship of ethics, epistemology, and responsibility:

Ethical behavior is not “doing what you are told”; ethical behavior is acting responsibly in whatever circumstances you find yourself. And seeing the difference between being responsible and being skillful is what metasemiosis – semiotics – alone makes possible, and this only in the world of human culture.

Yet it is not just a question of relationships: all sign use is relational. (Moreover, relatedness is the stuff of all being, while the generation of actual relations out of mere possibility is the stuff of life.) Rather, *semiotics* (as Deely uses the term) is a specificity of relating made possible by semiosis that transcends it by taking on novel function. It is a specific form of sign use that generates meaning not in relation to physical (or physically perceivable) phenomena, but from some heritage of usage within (human) culture (i.e., Peirce’s *legisigns*). Deely defines this distinction as a semiotic/semiotic divide, and argues that the concept of *ethics* exists only on the later (and rarer) side of things. While all living things are semiotic, few are semiotic:

The answer to Morten [Tønnessen]’s question about recognizing signs as signs, in its bearing upon ethics, depends upon the animal’s ability or inability to deal with relations in their own right as distinct from, even though dependent upon, related objects and things. Because once you have realized that what makes a sign a sign is always a relation, and that no relation can be directly instantiated to perception, you have reached the point where human understanding goes beyond animal estimation.

It is not entirely clear whether or not Deely sees this divide as ‘hard’ – one of kind, or ‘soft’ – one of degree. I am reminded of Chauncey Wright’s classic argument that all animals (I would say all living things) are aware (function semiotically), and that self-awareness is a matter of degree of awareness and not of a different kind of awareness, but that difference in degree can generate difference in kind of consequence. Deely is clearly not unaware of this argument, as he plays it evocatively, but does seem uninterested in resolving it. This leaves room for others to use his work not just in furthering our understanding of the supposed semiotic/semiotic divide, but in bridging it within a larger biosemiotic framework – and thereby clarifying questions of ethical behavior, the role of signs in the evolution of ethical norms, and the role ethics has played in the evolution of self-consciousness (and more). These are just a few of the issues wai-

ting to be resolved which would rightfully feature Deely's *Ethics and the Semiosis-Semiotics distinction*.

By my read, the center of Deely's semioethics can be found at the intersection of the two block quotes pasted above. I offer several criticisms intended to further Deely's semioethic considerations:

As stated above, Deely argues that while semiotic experience is ubiquitous to life, responsibility for choices made possible by semiosis – both individual and collective along with all that it entails (summarized as *ethics*) – is uniquely human and properly tied to the ability to see (that is, to know) signs as signs: i.e., semiotics. On this point I argue that there can be no hard divide: human and not, the attentions of a living thing tend to rush from sign to thing signified. Humanity, no doubt, evolved so as to better notice signs as signs: it is our species specific knack – but the fact that cheetahs run faster than all other land animals does not mean that no other animal can run. I argue that a solid grasp of the softness of the distinction may be highly useful (i.e., true).² This may help us better understand the intersection human and non-human behavior (and resolve some of the many pressing issues of anthropomorphic ecological damage). Do wild predators who develop a particular taste for human flesh act out of vengeance – i.e., irresponsibly? And do 'civilized' humans who behave 'barbarically' do so out of their inherent animality – i.e., failure to see signs as signs? These distinctions are less clear to me than they seem to be for Deely.

In positing his epistemologically derived, species-specific notion of ethics, Deely argues: "Responsibility is an extension of speculative understanding, just as practical knowledge is an extension of speculative knowledge." This is a powerful claim but it lacks clarity and is, perhaps, empirically falsifiable. What Deely means by contrasting 'understanding' with 'knowledge' this article does not make clear. Moreover, within human culture practical knowing commonly comes to be *sans* the context of relevant speculative knowledge. That the physics of the day denied the existence of a vacuum did not stop the development of the suction pump. Bog iron was smelted and worked centuries before any speculative knowledge of biochemical oxidation occurred. In the process of science, practical knowing often precedes theoretical knowing (abductive inference, which is also vital to science, is an exception to this rule). Contra Deely, I argue pragmatically: speculative and/or theoretical knowing (plus all entailments) is abstracted *a posteriori*, and consists of a furthering of practical knowing/understanding.

Within non-human cultures, Deely's distinction is even less clear. Even if birds 'know' to build their nests only practically, might their ability to generate novel possibility (by nesting) at least imply potential speculation? Is this a practical 'knowing' that lacks 'understanding'? Or is it vice versa? Might not the bird have some 'understanding' that what it does is related to the business of procreation? Is this 'understanding' practical but not knowing? As species migrate in response to climate change, we can agree that they have extremely little or even absolutely no 'speculative' (theoretical) knowledge of anthropomorphic causes. But climbing temperatures does

render their former range less habitable (for them). Is their change of behavior simply a practical response to a felt but not understood, *umwelt* specific 'instinct'? If so, what is *t h a t*? How is "animal estimation" not *praxis sans gnosis*? And if it is, doesn't this argue against Deely? Again, these distinctions are less clear to me than they seem to be to Deely.

Moving on, Deely argues that the key to ethics is *culture* – not in a biological sense, nor in a 'postmodern' sense of ethical 'relativity' wherein the ethical is whatever some culture says it is, but in a rather strict sense of the post-biotic living thing (my words³) – i.e., the 'life' of symbols, cities, and notional 'selves' (etcetera), as measured by success/survival/thriving of the thing. For Deely, semiotics comes into play only with the "establishment of culture within an otherwise animal society" and functions only within such a culture. 'Culture' in this sense functions by taking on aspects that not only mimic biotic things, is not only analogous to biotic things, but functions as biotic things function. This is a most useful (true) argument, and I look forward to seeing it furthered by study into the nature of culture and the life of post-biotic biosemiotic phenomena (i.e., the intersection of biology and humanities).

Finally, in this article, Deely appears to contradict a distinction made his 1990 *Basics of semiotics*, which clearly states that semiotics is the study of semiosis, with semiosis being a "private to you" functioning of signs that remains inaccessible even to the semiotic individual experiencing them – except at a remove, through a distant but contiguous study of signs (or, semiotics). In so doing, he ties semioethics to Sebeok's use of *umwelt* and *innenwelt*: It strikes me that he leaves much ground to be covered in this regard. I argue that the terms are often interchangeable, and the second is largely meaningless. Clearly every *innenwelt* is necessarily an *umwelt* (as organisms are also ecosystems), though not every *umwelt* is an *innenwelt* (there are phenomena to which the concept *life* – along with all that it entails: not only semiotics, but also semiosis – has no useful application). To speak as though there is a clear distinction between *umwelt* and *innenwelt* is to use the scale of the multi-cellular organism as the base-line of life, and to claim exceptionality for 'our' scale of life – that of the (at least potentially) self-reflective organism. While this claim is itself irrational, it is not irrational to further the notion by claiming (as per Deely) that reflexivity (esp. in the sense of Mead) and all that it entails is the ground of ethics. That Deely largely ignores the scale-thick⁴ quality of life to focus on the level of the organism and the human experience thereof does not invalidate his argument (all science, indeed all knowing, necessarily involves focus – the fact that there exists phenomena beyond some given aperture does not necessarily invalidate claims made within it). It does, however, leave to others the work of furthering his notions (often via counter-punctuation) *vis-à-vis* questions of larger universality (i.e., usefulness across multiple scales of life) as well as whatever larger epistemic/ethic relationship is therein entailed.

And yet, if (as Tønnessen questions⁵ and Wright argues⁶) alloanimals are (at least somewhat or even just potentially) capable of noticing signs

as signs (the hallmark of reflexivity as understood from a semiotic perspective), then the concept of semioethics is necessarily larger than Deely articulates. The difficulty in establishing regularity in interpretation is well established (as a necessary consequence of the transformative nature of semiosis function), but legisign function (which occupies most of Deely's focus) necessarily exacerbates this. It turns the attempt to know what self-reflective life knows into a metaphysics of narration for symbols (as well as symbolically derived psychologies, social sites, cultures, etc.) evolve: as the conventions of a given community experience their own evolutionary pressures, they write their own stories.⁷ Though alloanimals may well (and certainly appear to) be less capable of noticing signs as signs, and are thus less affected by legisign function than human animals, do we not remain ethically obligated to allow them their stories (conventions, etc.), such as they are? And does this not render Deely's distinction ethically questionable?

This problem is not merely exacerbated, but compounded by several orders of magnitude if (as I argue) life is scale thick such that meaning is oft generated as consequence crosses multiple scales of life (e.g., endo-exo- and eco-) to entangle scale-specific differences of semiotic function within a heterarchy capable of defying binary distinctions as handily as ready sorting.⁸

As with all evolutionary phenomena, the usefulness (truth) of Deely's coupling of ethics with a semiosis-semiotic divide can be measured only by success in furthering (by the 'life' of) the generalization as it is transformed by encountered (perceived) specificities. Indeed, "from so simple a beginning endless forms [biotic, semiosis, and semiotic] most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved." Deely understands this, and my intent in this commentary has been to point towards avenues by which Deely's concepts may be successfully challenged – and thereby furthered.

Notes

- 1 Gould (1997): NOMA stands for Non-overlapping Magisteria.
- 2 Here I presume upon the Pragmatic notion that 'truth' has not two, but three criteria: coherence, correspondence, and use. Re: Chauncey Wright "A theory which is utilized receives the highest possible certificate of truth": Wright (2000: 51).
- 3 Re: Ostdiek (2016).
- 4 Havel (1996): a phenomenon is scale thick if it is meaningful and/or consequential on more than a single natural scale. A 'scale' is differentiated when some different set of markers (methods or measurements) becomes necessary to distinguish a particular phenomenon discovered therein.
- 5 As referenced by Deely and quoted above.
- 6 Wright (2000: 199) and Madden (1963: 128): Wright's Evolution of Self-Consciousness is structured on the proposition that animals are (at least potentially) capa-

ble of recognizing signs as signs. Madden's *Metaphysics of Self-Consciousness* details its entailment within Wright's work and through his influence on others, particularly in the logical structure of the psychologies of James and Dewey. I will add that Peirce's doctrine of synechism blatantly posits that there can be no hard semiosic semiotic distinction.

- 7 On the life of symbols and its consequence, see Nöth (2013), and Ostdiek (2016).
- 8 See the special issue on multi-level semiosis in the journal *Biosemiotics* (2016).

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