

## Ethics and the Semiosis-Semiotics Distinction\*

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**Summary.** This essay focuses on the turn to ethics within biosemiotics and rearticulates the difference between semiosis and semiotics in order to orient biosemiotic ethics to the fundamental importance of human responsibility in and to the semiosphere.

**Zusammenfassung.** Dieser Essay behandelt die Wende zur Ethik innerhalb der Biosemiotik. Der Unterschied zwischen Semiose und Semiotik wird reformuliert, um die Biosemiotik an die fundamentale Bedeutung menschlicher Verantwortung innerhalb und gegenüber der Semiosphäre anzuschließen.

### 1. Setting the Frame: from “Unethical” to Ethics

The “turn to ethics”, the development of a focus on ethics within semiotics, is quite a recent development. It took place under the moniker “existential ethics” with Eero Tarasti (2000); Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio introduced it under the label “semioethics”;<sup>1</sup> and now we have talk about “biosemiotic ethics” (Tønnessen 2014a; see also Beever and Tønnessen 2013). What exactly does all this come down to?

Let me start backwards. What does “unethical” mean? I’ve given a lot of thought to this topic, but in a so to speak private context. For as I have watched this 21st century “turn to ethics” in semiotics develop, I have seen that emphasizing empathy in animals, or their care for their young, or whether an organism can feel pain – all this and more has its importance and interest yet misses the seminal point that ethics must be an outgrowth of responsibility, and responsibility applies only to a being capable (whether it actually does so or not) of looking beyond its own boundaries as a biological individual or type to reckon with the larger picture of the biosphere sustained within a framework of relations that perception alone cannot reveal.

So what does unethical, not “ethical”, mean? I propose that “unethical” means “failure to live up to a responsibility”. So, then, the fundamental question of what ethical means depends upon the understanding of responsibi-

lity. Some years ago I saw a cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine picturing two gentlemen in a tree, one a little higher than the other, with a couple of tigers trying to get them from below. And one gentleman says to the other: "Will you please explain to these animals how much we have done for them?" – the hope being that, once that has been explained, the hostile tigers will feel some gratitude and perhaps even some obligation not to harm the two foresters. If only they could be made to appreciate the work of the two men they would refrain from threatening their lives. Of course, there is the problem that, as Sebeok so effectively and in so many ways demonstrated, one cannot communicate linguistically with any other than human animals. Sebeok had revised Lotman's idea of primary modeling system to show that verbal language is but an exaptation from the human *Innenwelt* as species-specifically distinct from the generically alloanimal *Innenwelt* in being biologically undetermined in its conceptual interpretation of sensible objects, enabling it to deal directly with relations in their difference from related things as uninstantiable to perception. What Lotman characterized as "primary" in this regard, namely, the role of linguistic communication – a matter of *Umwelt* rather than *Innenwelt* – is actually, and perforce, secondary, not primary. On the other hand, culture as Lotman's "secondary" modeling system is actually tertiary.

## 2. Physical Environment in General and Environmental Niche in Particular

So let us start out from a point that we can all agree upon: that there is a physical environment which is in some sense the same no matter what is in that environment, whether it is a rock, a butterfly, a tree, a human being: the earth goes around the sun, and it doesn't matter what the Bible says on this point or what the Koran says or what the ancient and medieval philosophers believed. That's the physical environment. Then there is a rather common notion of the "environmental niche", completely part of the larger physical environment or "cosmos", but crucially that part of the larger whole upon which some given organism or even inorganic substance depends or requires in particular to continue in existence. For this entire universe – niche plus cosmos as a whole – consists of finite beings which are in constant interaction with their surroundings. And that interaction determines whether, how, and to what extent the individual substance, organic or inorganic, will continue to exist. A stone that would last a million or more years on earth wouldn't last a second on the sun. Every single thing that exists in the universe depends on an environment in this niche sense.

## 2.1 *Anticipating Lebenswelt:<sup>2</sup> a Species-Specifically Human Concept Formed from within the Umwelt*

But take note that this notion of “physical universe” is a species-specifically human concept. No other animal has this concept. And you have to consider the difference between the physical environment, which simply is what it is, and the physical environment as it exists within the awareness of some animal organism. For this is where we come to the concept of Umwelt. What part of the physical environment do we become aware of? That absolutely depends upon what type of body the animal has. Even a perceived color scheme depends not only on the “colored things” but as well on the subjective constitution of the visual organ interacting with the environment: the “colors seen” result from the subjective constitution on both sides of the interaction, not simply on one side or the other. The “specific color” exists only in the relation of awareness arising from the *agere et pati* of the animal body with its surrounding bodies. The same is true for the perception of all objects insofar as that perception is rooted in sensation first of all (with conceptual interpretation often temporally simultaneous but always logically posterior).

## 2.2 *Why Umwelt Formation Is Necessary in the First Place*

So it is the kind of body you or any animal has that determines what you are aware of in the physical environment and we know that, from the standpoint of the physical environment as a whole, the awareness is extremely limited, extremely partial. Now especially if you are an animal that has to wander around to get what it needs, being aware however partially of the physical surroundings is not enough. You have to interpret what you become aware of precisely in terms of what is good for you (+), what bad for you (-), and what safe to ignore ( $\emptyset$ ). (Plants organize their surroundings as well but without the psychological dimension; whence for them  $\emptyset$  is really “zero”, not “safe to ignore” but simply “nothing”. The animal is aware of the  $\emptyset$  but judges it – rightly or wrongly! – not to be a threat, not something that needs concern.) And for the animal the (+) / (-) / ( $\emptyset$ ) categories are not simply fixed but depend more or less (again depending upon the type of the animal’s body) upon estimation and perceptual judgment. The categories can change, and the animal may misclassify – to its peril. In any event, that “realm of awareness” or “objective world”, in contrast with an environmental niche as simply reducible to components of the physical universe, is the Umwelt, the “meaningful world” as species-specific to animals according to their bodily type. The Umwelt is the physical environment insofar as the animal becomes aware of it in combination or entanglement with the interpretation that the animal introduces into that awareness to guide its interactive behavior with the world.

### 3. On the Difference between Umwelt Objects and Environmental Things

So pay attention to this decisive fact. The animal introduces concepts precisely in order to interpret according to its needs the physical surroundings as sensed. Concepts as cognitive psychological states are always accompanied by cathectic states, and these two differ from physiological states in that the physiological states give rise to relations only contingently and as long as the subjectivities of interaction both continue in existence (suprasubjectivity realized only intersubjectively), while the cognitive and cathectic psychological states provenate<sup>3</sup> relations always necessarily; and so, even when the cognitive interpretation is mistaken or deluded, an objective terminus is presented to the animal within but suprasubjective respecting its awareness. That's what objects are: the terms of cognitive and cathectic states (psychological states) as suprasubjectively attained via the relations psychological states necessarily provenate. Thus objects begin in the world of things resultant upon the interactions between the animal body's organs of sense and surrounding bodies acting thereon, but through the formation by internal sense (and then also intellect, in the case of human animals) of conceptual interpretations (see Deely 1971) this nascent objectivity becomes part of a larger objective world which does not and cannot be reduced simply to the physical things of the environment which it – the generically animal Umwelt – includes but transcends.

Thus an animal with food present to its awareness objectively goes looking for that food in its subjective dimension which does not reduce to but is recognizable within the animal's objective world or Umwelt. The animal knows what it's looking for! Reducing objects to ideas (an inevitable consequent, by the way, of Ockham's doctrine on relations) was the real mistake of Descartes, fatal for any semiotic understanding. Everybody, every animal body at least, has its own ideas, more or less "in your head". But the objects of those ideas are not in your head; the ideas as part of your subjectivity are but the fundamentals provenating relations which terminate suprasubjectively at objects which are not "in your head" but are always "other" than you even when the objects don't have a subjective dimension of their own as "things".

#### 3.1 *What Intersubjectivity Presupposes*

The usual terminology for relations as "intersubjective" only applies when the termini of the relations, the "others" for your awareness, do have the subjectivity of existing also as a thing. The proof that that terminology for relations – "intersubjective" – is insufficient is the realization that what is true of all relations is that they are suprasubjective, while only sometimes are they also intersubjective. Everyone, or nearly everyone, reading this knows that Othello was a general in the Venetian army with a wife named Desdemona and Napoleon Emperor of France with a wife named Josephine; but only the relation between Napoleon and Josephine was ever intersubjective as well as

objective, while the relation between Othello and Desdemona never was and never could be intersubjective because neither Othello nor Desdemona ever had existence as subjects physically interacting. There was a time when you could shake hands with Napoleon. There never was a time when you could shake hands with Othello. Napoleon and Othello have in common that they are both objects, and as such “other than ourselves”. They differ in that Napoleon was once a subject of existence, while Othello never was.<sup>4</sup>

### *3.2 Further on the Thing-Object Distinction*

Realizing the difference between a thing and an object is crucial, for a thing exists whether or not it is known, whereas an object (as such) exists only when and to the extent that it is known, i.e. only as terminating a relation to some finite mind. As a result, when the things that the animal becomes aware of enter into objectivity via sensation and are conceptualized in perception, the conceptualization raises the objects to a level beyond the world of things, a level which no longer reduces to the physical surroundings as sensible, to being in principle a part of “the world of things”. The animal looking for food is looking for an objective reality that is also a physical reality; but in so looking the animal is guided by an objective reality which, in contrast to physical things, is not – as object – “located” specifically here or there in the physical environment as things (as such) necessarily are.

So, you go looking for a pair of scissors. You go to the drawer where they are ‘supposed to be’ and they’re not there, at which point you express yourself so obnoxiously that your wife, who has the scissors in another room, comes in and plants the scissors in your head (the “dream of Descartes” come true!). The scissors weren’t in your head, but in order to look for them you had to have the idea of scissors in the first place. So it is clear that the object is different from the idea, and once a concept has been introduced the object need not even be real in the sense of having a subjective dimension to its being independent of its objective being in awareness.

## **4. The Bearing upon Ethics of “Recognizing Signs”**

But what has all this got to do with ethics? Is it the case that there are other animals besides humans that recognize signs as signs. Before we can offer a judgment on this point we have to agree upon what a sign is. We have in fact three definitions or “meanings of ‘sign’” to contend with.

### *4.1 “Sign” in the Most Common Sense of the Term*

First there is Augustine (354–430) who introduces the original general definition of “sign”<sup>5</sup> as anything which, when it makes an impression on the sen-

ses, also brings something other than itself into awareness. But to make an impression on sense the sign has to be a material thing, a physical reality in the environment. So here “sign” is first defined in terms of an ability to act upon sense, hence as a material object, something you can see and point to.

#### 4.2 “Sign” in the Psychological Sense

Second there is the psychological sense of “sign”: after about eight centuries (!) of thinking over Augustine’s definition, philosophers around the time of Roger Bacon (c.1214/20–1292) began to consider that ideas – cognitive states within animal subjectivity – don’t make an impression on the senses, but they do bring into awareness something other than themselves. Isn’t bringing an “other” into awareness more fundamental to being a sign than making an impression upon the senses? Aren’t ideas signs, even though they aren’t material objects in sensation? So a second idea of “sign” was introduced and developed (at least in the Scholastic circles of university life over the next few centuries; but this second idea of “sign” never seems, so to speak, to have crossed the mind of either Descartes or Locke in their “turn to the subject” beginning the journey of modern philosophy down the Way of Ideas<sup>6</sup>). But note that signs in this second sense are not themselves objects of direct awareness: they are not the terminus but the fundament of the sign relations in which they are directly involved.

For example, consider how many people looking at a clock to see what time it is reflect upon or even advert to the fact that if they did not already have the idea of a clock in their head they could not see a clock in the first place, let alone have what they “see” – a circular object, say, with a white background and black markings – tell them the time of day? The example illustrates the point that ideas are not objects but interpretations that present something sensed – some object “other” than the one sensing – as this or that. Animals other than human animals without doubt are aware of “signs” in Augustine’s original sense. Are they also aware of signs in this second sense of “sign”? Ideas can become objects, but only upon reflection. Can other animals than humans reflect upon their ideas, reflect upon the activity itself of consciousness in the first place and idea-formation? There is no doubt animals form ideas. There is no doubt that animals make use of signs in this second sense no less than in the first sense. But are they aware of signs in this second sense, semiosis as underlying and presupposed to the objective being of objects as perceived in the first place?<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.3 “Sign” in the Semiotic Sense of their Constitutive Formal Being

Without dwelling upon an answer to this question about animal awareness of “signs” in the second sense as introduced by the later Latin scholastic

philosophers, let us take note of the third sense of “sign” that emerges after another four-and-a-half or so centuries passed since Bacon’s introduction of a second sense of “sign” following upon Augustine’s first general definition. By the time of John Poinsett (1589–1644), semiotic consciousness in the Latin line awakened to the realization that what makes signs to be “signs” – in either the first sense of material objects impressing sense, or the second sense of ideas as presenting material objects interpreted as this or that – is precisely the relation whereby one object is enabled to present another than itself to the animal aware of both.

#### 4.3.1 Sign Vehicles (or ‘Representamens’) in contrast with Signs as Triadic Relations

The so-called “signs” in the first two senses alike are in reality but the vehicles (Peirce sometimes calls them “representamens”) or, so to speak, the bodies of the being proper to signs;<sup>8</sup> but the being that makes these sign-vehicles – “signs” in the ordinary or in the psychological sense – actually be “signs” at all is the relation that suprasubjectively unites the three terms as one instance of signification. And this relation, irreducibly triadic, as a relation, shares in common with dyadic physical relations the distinctive feature of being invisible to sense and indifferent to distance and location regarding its terminus (though location especially is anything but a matter of indifference for the animal seeking a physical instantiation of its object of desire!).

#### 4.3.2 Animals Generically Semiotic in contrast with Animals Specifically Semiotic

It is certainly true that “there are other animals besides humans that recognize signs as signs” (Tønnessen 2009) as regards “signs” in the first sense as identified by Augustine, and the second sense of “signs” is certainly applicable within alloanimal behavior (for all animals are semiotic). Nonetheless, it is with regard to the third sense of sign that human animals stand apart as not only semiotic but also semiotic – i.e., able to deal with that dimension of objectivity which does not admit of direct instantiation to sense and hence remains invisible to sense-perception. Only intellectual concepts can deal with signs in the third sense. “Signs” in the first two senses are rather sign vehicles, “representamens”, and it is nothing in their proper being but only their foreground position of presenting an other than themselves to a third – that is, their position under a triadic relation – that makes them to be “signs” in the first place, even in the ordinary sense of the word. Yet, throughout it is not that object than can be seen and pointed to or that concept formed in the mind that constitutes a sign formally; only the positioning under a triadic relation provides the formal being of any sign – it is from relations as triadic that semiosis springs.

The sign as a relation which suprasubjectively unites three terms creates an Umwelt when at least one of the terms united is a psychological state. Thus every animal lives in an Umwelt, in the sense of the term von Uexküll established. It is a pity, but a matter of fact, that von Uexküll was overly influenced by Kant; because if the human mind works the way Kant proposed that it works, trying to communicate with one subjectively other is a waste of time, for each of us is locked inside the bubble of our private consciousness—Leibniz's idea that "monads have no windows" was precisely systematized in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Nothing enters from outside and nothing exits from inside; it only seems that we communicate because our objective world is formed from the same a-priori patterns. Yet all this is but a consequence of the erroneous affirmation that relations have being only in awareness (see Deely 2013).

In contrast, Poinset, a figure in time who could have shaken hands with Galileo and Descartes, pointed out that what is unique about relations – singular – is not at all that they are formed in awareness, but that what makes any given relation dependent upon or independent of awareness is simply the conditions or circumstances under which the relation obtains. One and the same relation, unchanged in its positive being as relation (i.e., in its existence as irreducibly suprasubjective), will be real under one set of circumstances and fictional under another set of circumstances.

We are supposed to meet for dinner; you show up and I don't (or vice-versa), and you are annoyed until you find out that I died on the way to the dinner. At my moment of death, at the moment I ceased to have a material subjectivity encounterable in space and time, the relation between us went from being intersubjective as well as suprasubjective to being only suprasubjective; yet under both sets of circumstances I (or you) as the objective terminus of the dinner engagement remained suprasubjective (if not intersubjective!) as a constant influencing the behavior of the one still living in whom the relation retained a subjective foundation as a cognitive state provenating the relation as suprasubjectively terminating at an "other".

Thus it is because reality, especially for the animal, is not only physical but also objective, that the Umwelt never reduces to the "environmental niche" as discussed above. But in the human Umwelt we encounter Sebeok's idea of the "primary modeling system" underlying the eventual establishment of culture within an otherwise animal society. This is the unique, biologically underdetermined manner in which the human Innenwelt models the objective world of animal awareness, by adding to the (+)/(-)/(Ø) categories of animal objectification relating objects to our interests a relation of "self-identity" enabling the objects to appear further as "things in their own rights", objects which regardless of their status in relation to our desires and interests "are what they are" independently of the (+)/(-)/(Ø). It is the ability to form relations in their difference from objects related that distinguishes the human Innenwelt, and that capacity for dealing objectively with what is uninstantiable for sense perception enables us to exapt relations formed as networks sustaining the objective world (entangled with it) which

establish the invisible boundary lines between the social world of animal life and the cultural world of human animal society.

## 5. Ethics Understood (or ‘Redefined’) in Semiotic Terms

Now the clearest statement regarding the matter of ethics as far as concerns the semiotic tradition is the one given by Jeff Bernard. What is needed, he said, is “an ethics stringently derived from semiosis” (recorded in Deely 2010b: xv–xvi). If we understand by ethics the identification of responsibilities, then, much as we might find empathic the behavior of animals that are not human, we will find that an ethics which is not anthropocentric is not an ethics, because only human animals can become aware and take account of relations as such. In the past, ethics has been conceived almost exclusively in terms of the socio-cultural interactions of human beings. But only in the last hundred years or so, and thanks to the development of science in the modern sense, have we come to realize that what we do has effects not only within our species but upon the whole living world. Responsibility follows not upon “instinct” or animal estimation; responsibility follows only upon the knowledge of “the way things are” as well as the context which makes them so. Conceptual knowledge at the intellectual level alone generates responsibility. Alloanimals (non-human species) may care for their young, protect their mates and offspring, etc.; but they do not do any of this out of a sense of responsibility (cf. Cobley 2016: 72–74). Responsibility is an extension of speculative understanding, just as practical knowledge is an extension of speculative knowledge.

### 5.1 *The Manner in which Semiotics Expands the Scope of Ethical Consideration*

Human animals not only are unique in having responsibilities, but also in the extent of those responsibilities: for we have learned through and on the basis of semiosis become “metasemiosis” or semiotics that our interactions involve us in the whole of Gaia, not just in the human socio-cultural sphere. That is why Jeff Bernard considered the best name for ethics as we must come to understand it today is precisely as Susan Petrilli has proposed: semioethics.

Getting off into the question of whether a living being is sentient or not is interesting, but it can have ethical relevance only indirectly and in the context of human responsibility as a species-specific obligation to seek the good – an obligation incompatible with selfishness in contrast to self-fulfillment, be it noted – as circumstances allow. After all, all animals including the humans share one thing in common: they require nourishment to survive and something other than themselves must perish in order for human bodily nourishment to be achieved. Whether it’s a carrot or a cow, something

has paid with its life to satisfy your appetite. Baldly put, you can't eat a very broad range of food without killing, directly or indirectly;<sup>9</sup> and whether what dies in order for you to have food to eat is an animal or plant is not what makes you more or less "ethical": only the manner in which you acquire the needed nourishment falls directly under ethics. We are obliged to do what is "good", and what is good depends on so many factors that a single definition for all circumstances is not even possible. So the question of ethics goes way beyond social interaction among animals, human or not, and including the subordination of alloanimals to the human good; the question of ethics concerns the human beings' responsibility for the human good, the species-specifically human good, always centrally and first of all but not exclusively: for now, thanks to the development of science in the modern sense (ideoscopic science), we learn that this "human good" depends not only upon socio-cultural organization and interaction but also upon our relationship to the physical environment as a whole, including especially the biosphere (and Umwelten thereof) in totality. That's the real development of ethics in semiotics; that's the idea of "semioethics" (I'm not so sure that's exactly Susan Petrilli's idea of it, but that's the real idea that follows from Jeff Bernard's definition).

## 5.2 *A Semiotic Ability Found Only in Human Animals*

The question, then, of recognizing signs as signs in the third or full sense arrived at in Poinsett's work and taken up after the Latins by Peirce<sup>10</sup> depends upon the ability to deal with relations directly, an ability found only in human animals, and the ability which opens the way not only to culture within social organization but also to the recognition of the difference between responsibility, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, simple behavior guided by (+)/(-)/(Ø) at the alloanimal level – the level of Umwelt generically considered in contrast to the Umwelt as species-specifically human which I call Lebenswelt.<sup>11</sup> There's a quotation I like to use from Jacques Maritain, to the effect that while all animals make use of signs, only human animals know that there are signs; only human animals thus are semiotic animals: "Animals make use of signs [in senses 1 and 2 above] without perceiving the relation of signification [sign in sense 3 above, sign explicitly recognized as the being from which semiosis follows]" (1957: 53).<sup>12</sup>

## 6. **Revealing the Ethical Import of the Recognition of Signs**

The answer to Morten'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. (I am confident that there are other animals besides earthly human animals capable of knowing signs in all three senses, and the third sense particularly; but these are extraterrestrial animals from other planetary systems of stars other than our sun, not the earthly alloanimals).

By bringing this speculative realization to the fore, semiotics inevitably expands to consider the ethical dimension as one of (if not the principal one of) the “practical applications” to which perforce semiotic knowledge leads.<sup>13</sup> Note that Deely (2010c) is dedicated to “The Semioticians of the 22nd Century”, because that’s how long it is going to take the university world to figure out how to incorporate semiotics into its central curriculum. It took about 250 years to incorporate science in the modern sense into our universities; semiotics, the antidote to the specializations required for idioscopic science as the only inherently interdisciplinary perspective on human experience and knowledge, has much resistance from established academic habits to overcome – as does semioethics.

Animals have “rights” because of human responsibilities, not because they are sentient. Within semiotic understanding, plants have rights too, even if less conspicuously. Animals don’t have “rights” because of the kind of animal they are, or because they feel pain, etc. Alloanimals have rights precisely as part of and essential to the biosphere within which the human animal has responsibilities to see to it that good overall needs to be done. That is, the accomplishment of good as human flourishing – a “species-specific” or “common” good, not the hedonism of individual human pursuit of pleasure. This latter effectively reduces anthroposemiosis to its zoösemiotic component by changing the relevance of what distinguishes human understanding to the determination of behavior. Doing this good lies within our power as animals exercising (not merely capable of exercising) responsibility.

But human animals are the only animals that have responsibilities, and these responsibilities are a consequence of our being semiotic as well as semiotic animals; for animals that are only semiotic, even though cognizant, remain incapable of dealing with perceptually uninstantiable objects, with the result of having no responsibilities. Rights are derivative from our responsibilities, the responsibilities attendant upon a metasemiosis as distinguishing the being of semiotic animals. You can teach a cat to use a litter box, but you cannot teach a cat not to be irresponsible. Of the many things you can teach a cat, responsibility is not among them. For the cat as for every alloanimal is necessarily semiotic but is not and cannot become semiotic. Metasemiosis, in short, while still semiosis, is the semiotic dimension that distinguishes human understanding.<sup>14</sup>

## 7. Summary

### 7.1 *Triadic relations*

Semiosis is the consequence of the provenance, whether in nature or in culture, of irreducibly triadic relations. In these relations the third element, what Peirce called “the interpretant”, is at a different level than the representamen and its significate. The introduction of this new level is a basic, perhaps the basic,<sup>15</sup> version of “thirdness”. In the world of nature prior to life you have semiosis going on, but here it operates simply to move the universe in the direction of being able to support life, in the direction where, from “nothing but” you get unexpectedly, as it were, “something more” – unexpectedly, because the “something more” is not part of the final causality of inorganic interactants but is rather a chance event, a “side outcome” of the interactions.

It was at a conference in Lund, Sweden, that one of the participants – and I wish I had asked his name so I could credit him for the insight – proposed that a basic problem of semiotics is how do you get something more from nothing but? But once human life has emerged as the “something more”, responsibility emerges as well, for the human animal is the only animal capable of being irresponsible, while being responsible is what ethical demands come down to. 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.

### 7.2 *Free will*

What does “free will” mean? All animals make choices; choices are unavoidable, so what makes them “free” in some cases but not others? What makes some choices by human animals “free”, in contrast to generically animal choices, is that they be made on the basis of the appetite which follows upon this aspect or feature of the *Innenwelt* which does not reduce to perception of the sensible. So it comes down to this. Awareness of the environment for all animals begins with sensation as resulting from the physical interaction between the animal body and its surroundings. Perception then adds to that the objective level of experience organized in terms of (+)/(-)/(∅) relative to the animal type. Free will comes in only at that level beyond perception where the human animal perceives “the good” as not wholly reducible to the (+)/(-)/(∅) perceptual organization of objects but as concerning further the world of things as they are in themselves and not only in relation to my sensible desires. That is where “responsibility” arises, in seeing something as “should be done given these circumstances” regardless of “what I would prefer to do considering matters only in relation to

myself". There is not only the generically animal Umwelt as objective world, there is further the species-specifically human Umwelt, the Lebenswelt, which concerns the being of things as involving my pattern of desires but at the same time being able to see intellectually that there is a pattern of interactions among things, a patterns of physical interactions, which not only preceded but here and now surrounds the pattern of individual animal desires and must be taken into account in order to decide what is "good" here and now even within the pattern of my desires as animal based on the (+)/(-)/(∅) organization within the Lebenswelt's zoösemiotic dimension.<sup>16</sup> In short, choice becomes "free" only when it is based on an intellectual recognition of things as more than objects of animal desire. The good which doesn't reduce to the sensible is the object of choice when the "choice" goes beyond the immediate world of animal interests in objects organized perceptually as (+)/(-)/(∅). Such choices may turn out to be wrong or based on mistaken understanding; but the point is that at the moment they are made the "choice" is based primarily on an intellectual understanding of "the way things should be" as subordinating the perceptual estimations of "the way I want things to be for me".

The distinction thus between zoösemiosis and specifically anthroposemiosis choices is by no means a simple contrast, for the two are always entangled in human action; but the aspect of being "free" attaches to choices made in the light of seeing responsibility, regardless of whether they are made under that light ("good") or in spite of it ("evil"). Goods that go beyond pleasure sometimes require to be sought, to be given priority. Recognition of that begets responsibility as something only human animals – semiotic animals – can live up to. Judgment and experience are involved in all animal choices; but only when the awareness surrounding the choice made has an intellectual dimension can the choice be properly called a "free choice"; and that dimension of awareness is not present in zoösemiosis but only in anthroposemiosis by reason of the difference it makes for awareness when the concepts involved transcend the dimension of (+)/(-)/(∅). Only human animals can make choices in that sense, while choices are unavoidable for all animals including humans. It is the dimension of awareness on which the choice is made that alone makes the choice a product of so-called "free will".

## Notes

- \* This essay is a revision of a talk given in 2014 at the 12th World Congress of the International Association of Semiotic Studies held at the New Bulgarian University in Sofia, Bulgaria.
- 1 The development and the origins of the term "semioethics" can be found in Petrilli and Ponzio 2003. In Ponzio 2010 (cf. Deely 2010c: 49–50 note 66; and Petrilli 2012: 185–186, and further Petrilli 2014: xv–xxii and 267ff.), Ponzio tells me that he first used this term as such in September of 1990 "as a displacement of 'e' in

the Italian word 'semeiotica': "a play that indicates in Semiotics the ancient vocation of Semeiotics (of Hippocrates and Galen) for improving or bettering life." He traces the semiotic mainstream search for a "proper name" – ("etosemiotica", "teleosemiotica", "semiotica etica"?) – under which best to develop the ethical dimension of semiotic understanding ("in contraposition to 'semiotica cognitiva'") from the early 1980s to "the landing, or final achievement" of a "long crossing of texts, conceptions, and words" in the 2003 Petrilli-Ponzio book. Quite unrelated to this development and in a far more restricted sense, the term "semioetica" was used by Francesco Aqueci 1998 and in the title of his 2007 book. Vailati corresponded with Lady Welby – see Petrilli 2009: 379–384 (commentary), 407–418 (correspondence); and also Petrilli 2015: chp. 6). In this context, Aqueci (1998: 54) speak of "L'esigenza di una semiotica, di una scienza generale dei segni, è in incubazione e matura tra la fine del XIX e i primi decenni del XX secolo con apporti dal versante filosofico (Peirce), linguistico (Saussure), filosofico-letterario (Ogden e Richards), logico-analitico (Morris). Ora, è degno di nota il fatto che Vailati, già in uno scritto del 1908, 'La grammatica dell'algebra', si ponga il problema tipicamente semiotico di studiare tutti i sistemi di segni, senza distinzione tra 'naturali' e 'artificiali'." How far Aqueci's reading of Vailati stands from the post-Sebeok semiotic mainstream development is suggested by his failure to give even passing mention of the fact that the notion in Vailati of sign as transcending the nature/culture divide echoes the first general notion of sign exactly as Augustine introduced it in his i. 397–427 *De Doctrina Christiana*. Specifically as regards the term in question, Aqueci (1998: 54) also notes that the idea of any 'semioethics' in Vailati's work was in fact quite marginal ("Ora, è vero che questa consapevolezza del carattere semioetico del linguaggio nel campo pratico restò sempre marginale nella riflessione di Vailati"), as well as thin ("Lo strumento, però, è sempre quello, il simbolismo logico, messo a disposizione dalla allora nascente logica formale"), and thus stands in a minor context quite subordinate within the major context of semiotic development channeled by Sebeok since at least 1963 (see Copley et al. 2011; Deely 2010b). Hence it remains that the term "semioetica" to name the practical extension of theoretical semiotics – carries a much richer comprehension than what Aqueci associates with his own work and that of Vailati. This pertains to the idea that was developed by Ponzio and Petrilli from the early 1980s to the term itself was independently coined for that development in 1990, then finally as appearing in their seminal volume of 2003. It is the sense of the term as utilized in the 2003 Petrilli and Ponzio title and summarily defined by Jeff Bernard in 2009, in contrast to the earlier unrelated and marginal occurrence Aqueci develops, that provides the mainstream influence within the 21st century global development of what began with Augustine's *doctrina signorum*.

- 2 "Human understanding recognizes the animal before it recognizes what is human within the animal" ("prius occurrit intellectui nostro cognoscere animal quam cognoscere hominem") – Aquinas c.1266: *Summa theologiae* I, Q. 85 corpus.
- 3 On provenation, see Deely 2010a: xiii–xiv.
- 4 The usual way we use the terms "subject" and "object" today is actually the sedimentation down to the level of "common speech" or "everyday language" of the

- philosophical views of Descartes and the early modern philosophers. We have to get beyond that.
- 5 Augustine esp. i. 397–426: *De Doctrina Christiana*. Full analysis in Deely 2009: Augustine & Poinot.
- 6 In the “standard modern histories” of philosophy, we encounter here, in effect, a “black hole” where the gap between the “high middle ages” and “early modern philosophy” is bridged in the main by “Renaissance Humanism”: see Deely 1994a.
- 7 Peirce c.1905: CP 5.534 makes some remarks illuminative of this question: “our faculty of language ... is itself a phenomenon of self-control. For thinking is a kind of conduct, and is itself controllable, as everybody knows. Now the intellectual control of thinking takes place by thinking about thought. All thinking is by signs; and the brutes use signs. But they perhaps rarely think of them as signs. To do so is manifestly a second step in the use of language. Brutes use language, and seem to exercise some little control over it. But they certainly do not carry this control to anything like the same grade that we do. They do not criticize their thought logically. One extremely important grade of thinking about thought, which my logical analyses have shown to be one of chief, if not the chief, explanation of the power of mathematical reasoning, is a stock topic of ridicule among the wits. This operation is performed when something, that one has thought about any subject, is itself made a subject of thought.”
- 8 Peirce 1904: CP 8.332: “Thirdness is the triadic relation ... considered as constituting the mode of being of a sign.” Cf. Deely 2002: “A Body Is Never Enough To Complete Semiosis”.
- 9 Tønnessen points out that one could in principle live off such things as milk and cheese, honey and eggs, without killing being involved; adding: “Relatedly, James Lovelock has suggested (somewhat foolishly) that we should all have diets based on minerals (no animals, no plants).” (cf. Tønnessen 2014b) Harvesting apples does not kill the apple tree, but eating the apple sure does the apple!
- 10 Who, though he knew nothing of Poinot’s own work did draw considerably upon the Latin semiotic development, not only upon Duns Scotus (c.1266–1308) but also upon Poinot’s principal university teachers, the Conimbricenses (1606/7, cf. Doyle 2001 with Deely 2001 “Foreword”. See further Beuchot and Deely 1995: “Common Sources for the Semiotic of Charles Peirce and John Poinot”; Deely 1994b. Doyle 1984, and Doyle 1998.
- 11 I exapt the term from Husserl 1936 to signify the generic Umwelt as species-specifically human, providing the answer to Heidegger’s question (1927: 437) as to “Why”, for the human animal, “does Being get ‘conceived’ ‘proximally’ in terms of the present-at-hand and not in terms of the ready-to-hand, which indeed lies closer to us?” – since indeed, as Aquinas c.1266: I, Q. 85c) put it: “prius occurrit intellectui nostro cognoscere animal quam cognoscere hominem” (“human understanding recognizes the animal before it recognizes what is human within the animal”).
- 12 Peirce’s c.1905 remark cited in note 8, above, very much echoes Maritain’s view.
- 13 Hence the title of the “Sequel” to Deely 2010b: “The ethical entailment of semiotic animal, or the need to develop a semioethics”.
- 14 See the Index entry “metasemiosis” in Deely 2009: 292, and the further development in Deely 2014: Sections 8.3 and 9. The conclusions in this matter, including

the realization that “metasemiotics” would be an oxymoron, were reached through discussions with Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio.

- 15 In fact, it was only in writing my essay on “Aristotle’s Triangle and the Triadic Sign” (Deely 2008a) that I finally got the point of what Floyd Merrell had asserted to me in 1993 at the 18th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America, namely, that the triadic relation cannot with full accuracy be represented by a triangle as a consequence of the fact that a triangle in principle is reducible to an intersection of dyadic relations, while the triadic sign is not thus reducible. Now that I have gotten the point fully, I am also at a loss to draw a truly accurate diagram of the triadic relation in any two-dimensional form!
- 16 Editors’ note: Deely distinguished between “zoösemiotic” (relating to the semiosis of animals) and “zoosemiotic” (relating to the semiosis of zoological gardens).

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