

A World of Signs In Memory of John Deely (1942–2017)

Morten Tønnessen, University of Stavanger
Yogi Hale Hendlin, University of California
Jonathan Beever, University of Central Florida

Who was John Deely? For many years to come that question will be raised. Opinions will differ. He was a passionate intellectual. He was not always right, but when he was wrong, he tended to be wrong in interesting ways. He was a learned man and a lover of cheap puns.

His thinking was radically historical, radically independent of the considerations of others, and in some respects radically new. He wanted to rewrite history. Not only the history of semiotics, but furthermore the history of philosophy, or more generally the history of human being in the world.

Provocatively, he stated that semiotics was the future of philosophy (Deely 2001), thinking that no valid philosophical enterprise could disregard the world of signs and what semiotics has to say about human being. He likewise thought that semioethics was the future of ethics. He was a supporter and practitioner of biosemiotics, and thought that in order to grasp the full range of the world of signs, biosemiotics would have to make up an important part of semiotics at large. Like modern Peircean semioticians, he was convinced that nature is perfused with signs (Peirce 1998 [1906]). He thought that ethics had to start with the realization that it is the semiotic capabilities of the human being that results in moral responsibility and thus a unique perspective on the world. On this simple fact he dwelled in paper after paper. His genius was that he saw marvels where others saw matters of facts.

Biosemiotics, and semiotics in general, owes more to John Deely than it might recognize. From its terminology to the slowly dawning awareness of the background of semiosis against which all human semiotics functions, John had an vertiginous ability to follow his fractal thoughts to the minutiae of medieval history and to the grandeur of the logical infinity of semiosis. His serious defiance against small-mindedness in the semiotician's imagination pushed those in the field to reassess their assumptions about the limits and origins of semiosis. Forging into uncharted waters almost com-

pulsively, John's pace of inquiry displayed an uncanny stamina and exactitude: he wrote and thought with more efficiency and lucidity than most of us are ever capable.

For those of us fortunate enough to have known him, we have a representation of who John Deely was; or we think we do. One of his leading stars was his historically-grounded conception of the sign, pointing back to Peirce and Poincaré (Deely 2008, 2009a and 2009b) and pointing forward to what he saw as the future of philosophy. His project was the full development of this study of what he took to be genuinely, uniquely human; namely, the capacity to not only use but also understand signs. Given the assumption that the world of signs is largely equivalent to the world as such, his project and life work was ultimately one of ontology.

In matters of God, heaven and hell excluded, John was a true believer. There were many things he did not know, but he made it his mission and life work to convince people of those he did know. As a result of his zealousness, he could appear simplistic, hammering away on the same points that stubbornly others may have failed yet to grasp. That was because he was a master of consistency, always true to his conception of the sign. He could appear provocative. That is because through his rapier prods he was determined to awaken thinking men and women from dogmatic slumber. To yet others, he appeared incomprehensible. That was because he was a master of precision. He wrote volumes on the emerging, always dynamic field of semiotics, its history and its future. He had a vision of mankind – its history and its prospective future. This was not a man of small words. Nor was he a man of small community. Supporting and being supported by a wide network of friends and colleagues, along with the loving support of his wife, Brooke, John will have a wide and lasting influence.

Philosophically, he cared only for two things: our history and our future. Some considered him narrowly as but a semiotician. But he was a true semiotician and a true philosopher, aiming, as he always did, at human self-comprehension. He was a historian and a futurologist. In his visionary outlook, the here and now was just a means to get to the future. Semioticians and philosophers alike have a lot to learn from him. Indeed, our inspiration as editors for this special issue on biosemiotic ethics came in large part from John's 2014 talk at the 12th World Congress of Semiotics in Sofia, Bulgaria (cf. Deely's contribution to this issue). Biosemiotic ethics owes him a great debt that, like the semiotics he so thoughtfully examined, can only be carried out through its development, refinement, and passing of the torch through time in a wonderful world of signs.

References

- Deely, John (2001), *Four Ages of Understanding – The First Postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press.

- Deely, John (2008), *Descartes & Poincaré: The Crossroads of Signs and Ideas*. Scranton: Scranton University Press.
- Deely, John (2009a), *Augustine & Poincaré: The Semiotic Development*. Scranton: Scranton University Press.
- Deely, John (2009b), *Peirce and Poincaré: The Action of Signs from Nature to Ethics*. Scranton: Scranton University Press.
- Peirce, Charles Sanders. 1998 [1906], "The Basis of Pragmaticism in the Normative Sciences". In: *The Essential Peirce*. Vol 2. Ed. The Peirce Edition Project. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 394.

Prof. Morten Tønnessen, Ph.D.
Department of Social Studies
University of Stavanger
4036 Stavanger
Norwegen
Email: morten.tonnessen@uis.no

Prof. Jonathan Beever, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy
University of Central Florida
4111 Pictor Drive, Orlando
FL 32816, USA
Email: jonathan.beever@ucf.edu

Yogi Hale Hendlin, Ph.D.
Department of Medicine
University of California, San Francisco
530 Parnassus Ave., Suite 366
San Francisco, CA
94143-1390, USA
Email: yhh@yogihendlin.com