

SEMIOTICS: THOUGHT AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOHN DEELY

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

[FALL 2020]

DESCRIPTION

In the 2010 Routledge *Companion to Semiotics*, the entry for John Deely begins:

While Peirce is acknowledged as the greatest American Philosopher, John Deely (b. 1942), in his wake, is arguably the most important *living* American philosopher and is the leading philosopher in semiotics. An authority on the work of Peirce and a major figure in both contemporary semiotics, Scholastic realism, Thomism and, more broadly, Catholic philosophy, Deely's thinking has demonstrated how awareness of signs has heralded a new, genuinely 'postmodern' epoch in the history of human thought.

This "postmodernism", which will be a theme throughout the seminar, is not the post-structuralist movement of the 20th century, but rather a moving-past modernity which is affected principally by a retrieval of scholasticism, and especially the late scholastic work of John Poinsett, also known as John of St. Thomas.

Crucial to this retrieval, and crucial to the understanding of semiotics, is the notion of *relation*. Too long ignored or mistaken as to its nature, a successful retrieval and *advance* of our knowledge of relation is necessary to understanding the action of signs. For, by relation, the action of signs scales across the whole universe and unites nature and culture—or, at least, shows the possibility of such coherence. Thus, the major contributions to semiotics given by Deely, which will be covered in this seminar, are the **proto-semiotic history**, an expanded doctrine of **causality**, the retrieved and clarified notion of **relation**, the concept of **physiosemiosis**, the continuity of **culture** and **nature**, the notion of **purely objective reality**, and the **real interdisciplinarity** which semiotics fosters.



METHOD

The seminar is 8 weeks long, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week. Each discussion session is structured around a reading from John Deely. Participants are expected to have read

the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the session, so that they may engage in a semi-structured discussion directed and moderated by the instructor. As this is an advanced seminar, one *cannot* participate well without a *deep engagement* with the assigned reading. Moreover, *continual discussion* will foster that participation and engagement throughout the week. Participants will be expected to partake in these discussions on a regular basis, and will be challenged to do so directly.

READING

The primary texts for this seminar are Deely's 1982: *Introducing Semiotic: Its History and Doctrines* and 2007: *Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation*. As the latter is out of print, a PDF will be made available to all participants. Additional required and supplemental readings will be provided via Teams.

LECTURE

Each week there will also be a 20-40 minute audio lecture, posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture will be based upon the assigned reading, but will also stray into related topics, or may use the reading as a launching point for addressing some related issue (perhaps one more general, or perhaps one more specific). The primary (but not sole) purpose of these lectures is to help clarify some of the more difficult concepts and arguments contained within the reading, as well as to raise specific questions that should help structure and guide our discussion sessions.

There *may* be accompanying visual aids (not necessarily) in order to provide some clarity as to textual points, but one *should* be able, in most cases, to simply listen to the lecture (and perhaps consult the visual aids later). This should allow more flexibility: making the lectures suitable accompaniment for a commute, while doing chores, going for a run, etc.

DISCUSSION

The heart of the seminar is the discussion session (**Saturdays at 3:00-4:00pm ET**): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the week—via the reading, lecture, and on-going conversations in the Teams channel—are brought into explicit conversation. This allows us to attempt a concerted effort at bringing resolution to our difficulties, and—failing such a resolution—to direct our inquiry further.

Each discussion session will begin with a brief synopsis of the week's material and a focusing on whichever aspects of that material seem most pressing. Beyond the direction provided by the instructor, participants are encouraged to bring their own concerns explicitly into view and to engage with the instructor and one another in civil debate and collective inquiry.

CONTRIBUTION

It is hoped and expected that each participant in the seminar will provide a contribution: a piece of writing, recorded presentation, or something else, within one month of the seminar's conclusion, as a way of coalescing what has been learned in a demonstrative manner. Topics are suggested, and the instructor is available for discussions and assistance in composing your contribution.

SESSION SCHEDULE

October 17	<p>Introduction to the thought of John Deely</p> <p>Lecture 1: The Depth and Extension of Semiotics</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1985: "Semiotic and the Liberal Arts" • 1982: <i>Introducing Semiotic</i>, ix-46
October 24	<p>History and Basics</p> <p>Lecture 2: Proto-Semiotics and Semiotic Foundations</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1982: <i>Introducing Semiotic</i>, 47-123
October 31	<p>Retrieving Medieval Intentionality</p> <p>Lecture 3: Postmodern Retrieve</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2007: <i>Intentionality and Semiotics</i>, xiii-37
November 7	<p>Triadic Revisions of Medieval Cognition</p> <p>Lecture 4: Semiotic Recursions</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2007: <i>Intentionality and Semiotics</i>, 39-114 (101-14 optional)
November 14	<p>Signs, Being, and Understanding</p> <p>Lecture 5: A Metaphysics of Relation</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2007: <i>Intentionality and Semiotics</i>, 115-170 (164-70 optional)
November 21	<p>A Semiotic Thomism</p> <p>Lecture 6: The Semiotic Spiral in Action</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2007: <i>Intentionality and Semiotics</i>, 171-204
December 5	<p>Physiosemosis and Synechism</p> <p>Lecture 7: Universal Semiosis</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1994: "The Grand Vision" • 2001: "Physiosemosis in the semiotic spiral"
December 12	<p>Nature, Culture, and the Universe</p> <p>Lecture 8: Triadic Scaffolding</p> <p>Readings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2012: "Toward a Postmodern Recovery of 'Person'" • 2015: "Building a Scaffold"