

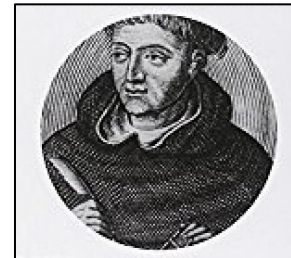
SEMIOTICS: THE *TRACTATUS DE SIGNIS* OF JOHN POISNOT

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

[SPRING 2021]

DESCRIPTION

You stand today on the edge of a road: a road little used and oft neglected for the previous four centuries, but for the occasional intrepid traveller—its development abandoned very nearly at this spot where you stand today. Where does it go—where ought it to go? And from where does it come? To answer the latter, we must know something of the former: and it is this knowledge that the seminar intends to provide, with indications for where the road leads and where it ought to lead.



There are few works which have received less of the attention they deserve than the *Cursus philosophicus* of John Poinsot—more commonly known as John of St. Thomas, for his professed fidelity to the teaching of Thomas Aquinas. Within this *cursus*—a tome spanning 2348 pages—Poinsot addresses logic both formally and materially, as well as many intricacies of natural philosophy pertaining to physics, life, and psychology. But dispersed through these considerations there exists an implicit treatise, one concerned with an element essential to understanding not only topics logical but also natural; namely, the treatise on signs. This treatise was extracted, translated, edited, and compiled by John Deely (following a cue from Poinsot himself) and published in 1985 under the title *Tractatus de Signis: The Semiotic of John Poinsot*, with a second edition released in 2013. By carefully surveying this text we will discover the Way of Signs—that long-abandoned road—and thereby reclaim not only the history of thought abandoned by modernity but find a way forward past its recalcitrance to the realist thought of semiotics.

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 Poinsot's *Cursus Philosophicus* with occasional supplements intended to help improve our understanding of this difficult text. Participants are expected to have read the assigned reading and listened to the lecture prior to the discussion 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 and preferably a **deep familiarity with Thomistic Psychology**. 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 will be made available in a digital format but with the requirement that a copy of the *Tractatus de Signis* be purchased if at all possible. The book may be [purchased directly from St. Augustine's Press](#) or from other common booksellers. Additional required and supplemental readings may be provided via Teams. **Readings are subject to change.**

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 1:00-2:00pm 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

March 20	<p>Preliminaries – Entry into the <i>Tractatus</i></p> <p>Lecture 1: An Abbreviated History of Semiotics</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus</i>, 4-39. • [Supplement] Deely 2009: <i>Augustine & Peirce</i>, 3-59.
March 27	<p>Cognition-Dependent Being</p> <p>Lecture 2: <i>Entia Rationis</i> and the Constitutive Acts of the Mind</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus</i>, 40-76. • [Supplement] Maritain 1959: <i>Degrees of Knowledge</i>, 118-144.
April 3	<p>Relational Being</p> <p>Lecture 3: The Nature and Kinds of Relation</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus</i>, 78-112. • [Supplement] Deely 1985: “Editorial Afterword” in the <i>Tractatus</i>, 472-489.
April 10	<p>Sign Relations</p> <p>Lecture 4: The Being Proper to Signs</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus</i>, 114-152 • [Supplement] Deely 1990: “Signs: The Medium of Semiosis” in <i>Basics of Semiotics</i>.
April 17	<p>Triadic Elements of the Sign Relation</p> <p>Lecture 5: Cognitive Powers and Objects</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus</i>, 153-192. • [Supplement] Deely 2009: <i>Purely Objective Reality</i>, 14-37.
April 24	<p>The Causality and Extension of Signs</p> <p>Lecture 6: The Degrees of Specifying Causality</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus</i>, 193-219. • [Supplement] Deely 1994: <i>New Beginnings</i>, 151-182.
May 1	<p>Division of Signs, Part I</p> <p>Lecture 7: Toward an Understanding of Concepts</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus</i>, 220-261.
May 8	<p>Division of Signs, Part II</p> <p>Lecture 8: Toward an Understanding of Language</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus</i>, 262-283.