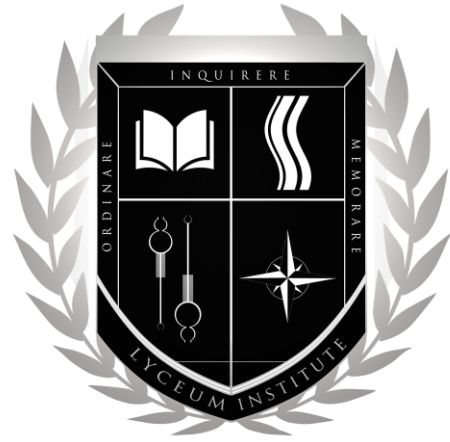


# SEMIOTICS: THE *TRACTATUS DE SIGNIS* OF JOHN POINSOT

SEMINAR SYLLABUS

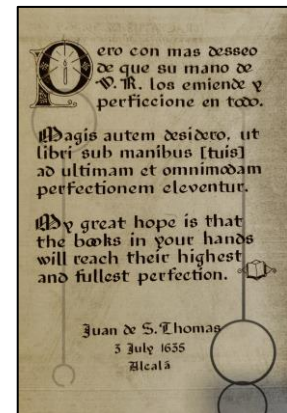


[SPRING 2023]

## DESCRIPTION

You stand today at the edge of a road: a road little used and oft neglected for the previous four centuries, except by the occasional intrepid traveller—its development abandoned very nearly at this spot where you stand today. This is the *Way of Signs*. 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—commonly known also as John of St. Thomas, the religious name he adopted on entering the Dominican Order as a profession of his fidelity to the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas. Within this *cursus*—a tome spanning 2348 pages in its modern edition—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 beyond its recalcitrant roadblocks to the realist thought of semiotics.



The *doctrina signorum* we here undertake to exposit and better understand will comprise eight distinct topics: 1) the history of signs in Western thinking; 2) the meaning of *entia rationis* in the Scholastic tradition; 3) the central role of *relation* in understanding the functioning of signs; 4) the being proper to signs themselves; 5) the elements by which signs are irreducibly constituted; 6) the causal efficacy of signs; 7) the nature of concepts as significative; and 8) an insight into how language signifies.

## METHOD

This is an **advanced seminar**: anyone not well-versed in Scholastic philosophy, and especially the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, will likely find this course an insurmountable struggle. The difficulties of the material to be

read and the inquiries to be undertaken in discussion are tantamount to a graduate course in philosophy. Those familiar with other semiotic traditions, so long as that includes the work of John Deely, may keep pace with supplemental reading concerning the scholastic background.

The seminar consists in three distinct phases. The first is the **preparatory phase**, which runs from **18 March—April 8**, and consists of a wide range of available readings and textual discussions. Participants are encouraged to read from both the primary and the supplemental material in order to fecundate their minds with relevant thoughts and questions.

The second phase consists in **active discussion**, occupying a span of 8 weeks, with one recorded lecture and one discussion session each week (see more below on the conduct of these lectures and discussions, and their schedule farther down). Each discussion session is structured around a reading from Poinso's *Tractatus de Signis*. 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.

The third phase of the seminar, which runs from the final discussion session on **10 June—July 1**, is the **writing phase**. These three weeks are given to reflect upon and digest upon the material so as to produce a quality essay concerning some relevant issue of John Poinso and the *doctrina signorum*. Final essays are due by **July 2 at 2:59am ET** and are required to **complete** (rather than merely **audit**) the course.

## READING

The primary text for this seminar is the *Tractatus de Signis* translation of Poinso by John Deely. The second edition may be purchased directly from [St. Augustine's Press](#) or other booksellers. A first edition from University of California Press may be found used and is also acceptable. Digital editions of the assigned reading may be made available for those who have difficulty obtaining a physical copy in a timely manner. The instructor will also provide several secondary sources to aid in understanding of the primary text and the relevant issues. **Readings on the syllabus are subject to change.**

Extensive reading during the preparatory phase is *required* for any participant wishing truly to profit from the seminar.

## LECTURE

Each week there will also be at least one audio lecture posted to Teams at the beginning of the week. This lecture—which will vary in length but approach or exceed an hour on most occasions—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. Some of these considerations may be particularly relevant to the future of semiotics.

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 2:15-3:15pm ET**): where all the thoughts emergent and encountered throughout the preparatory phase and in each active 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 the questions that are thereby raised. 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.

## AUDITS OR COMPLETES

All Lyceum Institute seminar participants will be able to either *audit* the seminar or *complete* the seminar. To complete the seminar, the participant **must** submit an essay of 3000+ words pertaining to the subject. This essay may be evaluated for publication in *Reality* and will be included in each Lyceum Institute member’s profile, along with the mark of auditing or completing. Non-members are also welcome to submit and be considered for publication in *Reality*.

## SESSION SCHEDULE

April 15	<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"> <li>• [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>Tractatus (TDS)</i> 4–39.</li> <li>• [Secondary] Deely 1994: “A Morning and Evening Star”; 2009: <i>Augustine &amp; Peirce</i>, 3–59; Kemple 2022: “Augustine: Instituting the Given Sign” and “Aquinas: The Metaphysics behind Semiosis”.</li> </ul>
April 22	<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"> <li>• [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>TDS</i>, 40–76.</li> <li>• [Secondary] Maritain 1959: <i>Degrees of Knowledge</i>, 118–44; Doyle 1994: “Peirce on the Knowability of Beings of Reason”.</li> </ul>
April 29	<p>Relational Being</p> <p>Lecture 3: The Nature and Kinds of Relation</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>TDS</i>, 78–112.</li> <li>• [Secondary] Deely 1985: “Editorial Afterword” in <i>TDS</i>, 472–89.</li> </ul>
May 6	<p>Sign-Relations</p> <p>Lecture 4: The Being Proper to Signs</p> <p>Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• [Primary] Peirce 1932: <i>TDS</i>, 114–52.</li> <li>• [Secondary] Deely 1990: “Signs: The Medium of Semiosis” in <i>Basics of Semiotics</i>, Kemple 2022: “Peirce: The Essence of the Sign”.</li> </ul>

May 13	BREAK
May 20	<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"> <li>• [Primary] Peirce 1955: <i>TDS</i>, 153–92.</li> <li>• [Secondary] Deely 2009: <i>Purely Objective Reality</i>, 14–37.</li> </ul>
May 27	<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"> <li>• [Primary] Peirce 1955: <i>TDS</i>, 193–219.</li> <li>• [Secondary] Deely 1994: <i>New Beginnings</i>, 151–82.</li> </ul>
June 3	<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"> <li>• [Primary] Peirce 1955: <i>TDS</i>, 220–61.</li> <li>• [Secondary] Beuchot 1994: “Intentionality in John Peirce”.</li> </ul>
June 10	<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"> <li>• [Primary] Peirce 1955: <i>TDS</i>, 262–83.</li> <li>• [Secondary] Maritain 1957: “Language and the Theory of Sign”.</li> </ul>