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Review of "Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation"

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Book Review | *Intentionality and Semiotics: A Story of Mutual Fecundation*

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John Deely holds the Rudman Chair in Thomistic Studies at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas and is an expert in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and John Poinsot. This book also serves as volume 1 of the series, “Approaches to Postmodernity,” published by the University of Scranton Press; the series is edited by Deely.

From the beginning, Deely is determined that readers not misunderstand his intentions for the book. In the *Aviso*, preceding the preface, he goes to great lengths to expose and then correct an error in perspective made by one of his anonymous reviewers. According to Deely, the anonymous reviewer thought the book was a treatise on “the concept of intentionality from medieval to modern times using semiotics” (p. xiii). However, to the contrary, it is a re-imagining of philosophy as a postmodern concept, focused on the development of intentionality as Aquinas meant it using the tool of semiotics. When Deely uses the term “postmodern,” it is without some of the familiar baggage the term carries in current thought. By postmodern, Deely is primarily distancing himself from Husserl’s modern use of intentionality vis-à-vis phenomenology and is attempting to restore the Latin concept of intentionality in realistic terms. In addition, Deely shows that semiotics is the proper interpretive science to partner with intentionality since thinking “of” or “about” something is really done through mental and communicative signs. Therefore, the book is a postmodern exploration of a medieval concept, using Thomistic thought and the postmodern doctrine of signs. Although it is a bit unusual for an author to take an anonymous manuscript reviewer to task in his book, it may serve its purpose if the reader is disabused
of any misconceptions that may be had with the book.

Therefore, Deely proposes to recover the original Thomistic, or Latin, meaning of intentionality through the doctrine of signs. He moves beyond linguistics to a consideration of how the use of signs conveys meaning in a richer, fuller context. By dismissing the modern use of intentionality, he completely revitalizes philosophy instead of putting patches on an ailing infrastructure. A postmodern accounting is needed for a new world.

One of the greatest strengths of the book is Deely’s historical layering of references. He resists the temptation to selectively choose topical texts to prove his point. Instead, he layers his argument, using writings that are dated within the lifetime of the person referenced. He uses primary sources, including those in Latin, throughout. Graciously, however, he includes an English translation, except in one instance, to help the reader who is not familiar with Latin. His particular reference style is that of the Semiotic Society of America and the reference section at the end of the book gives all references in this style, including dates of publication for all source texts.

Deely develops his thesis through the course of 15 short chapters. In chapter 1, he defines intentionality as “the property of the mental whereby a mental state is always of or about some object, in contrast to physical being, which simply is what it is” (p. 3). Deely also gives some background on Husserl’s phenomenological perspective of intentionality and reveals that Husserl was originally introduced to the idea of intentionality by Franz Brentano, initially trained as a Dominican priest. As a Dominican, Deely surmises that Brentano must have known about the writings of Thomas Aquinas, who Deely perceives to have had the original idea of intentionality, and John Poinsot (John of St. Thomas), who was the last pre-modern scholar holding to Thomas’s idea of intentionality. In a sense, Deely seems to infer, though not directly, that Husserl hijacked intentionality and departed from the classical use and formulated his own interpretation based on phenomenology, of which Deely disapproves because he does not think that consciousness and the physical being are necessarily separate but intertwined in the perception and understanding of things. Therefore, Deely does not contend the physical is all that is, nor does he contend that the only real perception is the cognitive (intellectual) perception; he bridges the gap and posits that the physical object is necessary to evoke cognitive perception, but meaning about a “thing” is best conveyed with signs that are not the actual thing but represent the thing so that it can be conceptualized and understood. Deely’s argument reminds this reviewer of René Magritte’s painting of a smoker’s pipe, in which he boldly writes on the canvas Ceci n’est pas une pipe (This is not a pipe). Truly, it is not a pipe, only the representation of a pipe, but it allows the viewer to see and understand a pipe in the essence in which Magritte intended.
In chapter 2, Deely briefly addresses Etienne Gilson’s objection to reviving realism under the auspices of Thomistic intentionality. Realists are too anxious to use Thomas’s writings as a springboard, Deely asserts by way of Gilson. Deely finds the seed thoughts of intentionality present in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, but not explicitly stated. It is his later commentators, such as John Poinsot, that the classical definition and usage of intentionality is refined. In the spirit of objectivity, Deely discloses having known and shared correspondence with Gilson during Gilson’s later life.

Chapter 3 is important because Deely takes up the debate over immateriality and intentionality. In this chapter, Deely contends that Thomas Aquinas uses the term *esse immateriale* (material being) but means *esse intentionale* (intentional being), and gives a text from St. Thomas as an illustration of this assertion. Deely also takes up Gilson’s objection to Poinsot’s assertion that St. Thomas is in fact discussing *esse intentionale* and attributes Gilson’s objection primarily to his historical orientation to the study of St. Thomas. Deely, on the other hand, perceives the idea of intentionality, although not explicitly stated in that exact semantic term, as present in Thomas’s writings.

Chapter 4 takes up Deely’s criticism of the modern definition of intentionality and presents a postmodern context in which to understand intentionality. Chapter 5 focuses on Heidegger’s perspective and the neothomist approach. Chapters 6 through 11 are concerned with the difference between things and objects. In short, things are real things that are present, but they may not be immediately known by a subject. Objects are things that are known and this knowledge is communicated through concepts. Again, signs are instrumental in knowing because they transmit knowledge about a thing so that it can be cognitively perceived as an object.

Deely also makes use of St. Thomas’s conception of being as a living thing that can cognize, or think about, things as objects. For example, all living things cannot cognize. Some living things, such as plants, microscopic organisms, and such are alive but cannot cognize. However, animals, and specifically humans, can cognize. Through an example, Deely demonstrates that this distinction is not limited to just humans. Animals too can learn to recognize signs, such as hand movements, words, things (objects), and alter their behavior accordingly. In other words, an animal can associate an instrument of punishment with the act of punishment. Therefore, when an animal sees the instrument, it alters its behavior so as to avoid the instrument and thereby avoid punishment.

Chapter 12 covers signs as vehicles of subjective factors. Chapter 13 explores the ontological implication of *esse intentionale* and chapter 14 is a discussion of the idea of essence, or being. Deely demonstrates that essence can be purely objective, as in physical being, but can also be associated with known characteristics and can be subjective. For
example, we can know John, the person who works in the next office, but we can also know a fictitious character in a novel who works in a fictitious office. This chapter segues nicely into the final chapter. Chapter 15 wraps up with the observation that all humans struggle with the desire to understand. Only humans, Deely contends, care to know the truth because only humans can know the truth as it is related through objects, social construction, and the making of meaning. Things are more than mere things, and they are even more than objects; they are conveyors of meaning and only through the doctrine of signs can we completely conceptualize the cognitive implication of those things. As Deely points out, “[E]very animal is a realist … but … only human animals come to see the world under the aspect of being and of the many ways in which being can be said” (p. 199).

The audience for this book includes anyone interested in intentionality, either the modern Husserlian or the classic Latin (Thomistic) version, and the debate over internal and external perception. In addition, semioticians interested in the intersection of signs and cognition would benefit. This book is best appreciated by those with a basic understanding of Thomas Aquinas’s writings, but that is not absolutely necessary. This is not an introductory text since Deely is writing from years of experience researching and writing about St. Thomas and intentionality. The literature on intentionality and Thomas’s perspective is quite robust and easily accessed if the reader cares to do some background research before, or while, reading this book.