

# Human understanding

The key triad

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## Introduction

One of the principles that convinced John Deely that semiotics is central to the development of a post-Cartesian and a post-modern consciousness was that “all thought is in signs” (Deely 2002: 12). In Descartes’ view, Deely shows, the self in thinking is different from the thinking but can only be accessed by thinking; in Aristotle’s complementary view of perception, it cannot be ascertained whether objects that are not present in sensation can be said to continue to exist (Deely 2002: 13). Yet, the crucial point for Deely, which will be discussed in the following, is that while thinking cannot take place without existence, there cannot be existence without an environment. “Whenever I think”, Deely (2002: 13-14) wrote,

both my physical existence and something of my physical environment enter into my awareness. What in fact of my environment is objectified depends on what I am thinking about and where I am as well as upon my biological constitution. Thus the entrance of the environment into my awareness is more variable than the entrance of myself, although there is always necessarily something of both.

As Deely goes on to argue, it is only through the use of signs that humans come to realize any distinction between the physical, physicality as it is ‘objectified’ and the realm of what he called the ‘objective’, where a view of the world specific to the given species prevails.

Arguably, this perspective has transformed semiotics in the last couple of decades. Certainly, it has suffused biosemiotics. Deely’s early work on evolution and species, his co-authored manifesto for a semiotics that comprises the whole sphere of life (Anderson et al. 1984), his elaborations of zoosemiotics, phytosemiotics and Umwelt, as well as the concept of the semiotic animal, have all contributed significantly to broadening semiotics’ remit from its erstwhile agenda of elucidating texts voluntarily produced by humans (Cobley, Favareau and Kull 2017). Key to this broadening has been Deely’s concern not just with human-produced texts but, instead, with human understanding amidst the context of semiosis in general, including realms beyond that of the human. Underpinning that concern is his triad of sign, object and thing. A definite re-orientation of the theory of the sign, in what follows it will be suggested that the triad, exemplifying suprasubjectivity and the primacy of relation, not only establishes the ground for rethinking common understandings of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity, it also provides a basis for re-conceptualizing other areas of social thought. In particular, how humans exist within their environment, both in terms of ‘affordances’ – which generally facilitate human action – and ‘ideology’ - which generally constrain it to the exigencies of determined circumstances.

## The sign relation

The concept of semiosis and the existence of humans in an environment cannot – and, indeed, have not – been taken to be neutral. An understanding of semiosis as a neutral phenomenon,

involving the simple flow from one sign to another, can only ever be a first-point theoretical construct. Debates about semiosis, or often the singular sign, have tended to revolve around the extent to which it is determinate or indeterminate. If it is considered to be the former, then semiosis, it is frequently concluded, is also determining, featuring fixed co-ordinates which shape and delimit subjectivity (as in some systems theory and post-structuralism). If semiosis is considered to be indeterminate, then it usually follows that signs are fully interpretable and, sometimes, susceptible to the will of the subject. This has been witnessed in the move from 'code semiotics' to 'interpretation' semiotics in recent decades, but also in a plethora of work on what Umberto Eco (1979) called 'the role of the reader'.

Yet, the re-orientation to interpretation semiotics should not necessarily be accepted as an endorsement of the indeterminate status of semiosis. Instead, it signals the growing emphasis not just on the flow of sign to sign (semiosis) but on the sign's constitution as a *relation* rather than just a configuration of parts. A sign is not simply a matter of two parts with a relation to a particular terminus. What has been forgotten in the history of sign study is that semiosis inheres in the *sign relation itself* rather than in its components' reaching of the terminus. If the sign and semiosis are indeterminate, then what is required for the effectivity of semiosis is what is commonly understood as 'intersubjectivity', the sharing by subjects of their semiosis in order to reach some kind of consensus or working agreement. Indeterminacy thus renders the sign user/maker merely as "being-in-between" (Deely 2002) sign and terminus. Partly for this reason, Deely objects to the insufficiency of intersubjectivity as a theoretical concept. For him "over and aboveness" is the most important feature, the distinctive being, of relation, also according to Aristotle. Deely (2009: 22-3) writes,

Relations, however [ . . . ] are not in the substances that are related. Relations are over and above subjectivity *tout court*. Relations, if they are anywhere in *ens reale*, are between individuals, and 'between' is not a subjective mode of 'in', as '*in se*' and '*in alio*' are subjective modes of 'in': what is in between two subjectivities is in neither of the subjectivities. It is over and above them, suprasubjective, if you like, or, more precisely and restrictively in Aristotle's limited categorial sense (limited, that is, to the order of *ens reale* within  $\tau\omicron\delta\nu$ ), intersubjective.

The concept of *ens reale* will be revisited below. For now, the point to note is that relations, to be intersubjective, must obtain between or among existing subjects, while relations of existing subjects to non-existent objects, although suprasubjective, fail to be intersubjective (although they can become so in discourse).

A typical Deely example (2017: 25) distinguishes between intersubjective and suprasubjective relations:

We are supposed to meet for dinner; you show up and I don't (or vice-versa), and you are annoyed until you find out that I died on the way to the dinner. At my moment of death, at the moment I ceased to have a material subjectivity encounterable in space and time, the relation between us went from being intersubjective as well as suprasubjective to being only suprasubjective; yet under both sets of circumstances I (or you) as the objective terminus of the dinner engagement remained suprasubjective (if not intersubjective!) as a constant influencing the behavior of the one still living in whom the relation retained a subjective foundation as a cognitive state provenating the relation as suprasubjectively terminating at an 'other'.

This scenario seems to indicate a somewhat different definition of signhood from that which persists in the opposition of determinate and indeterminate. Indeed, one could say that the

scenario here constitutes a workable proposal for a kind of radical indeterminacy. That is, the sign – or semiosis – on the one hand, consists not in an ‘objectivist’, determinate entity that is sustained by intersubjectivity, but in a thoroughly malleable *relation* that is indeterminate in respect of its terminus except insofar as it is understood by agents within the relation. On the other hand, the sign is *suprasubjective* in that its force – like that of fictions and the law – endures even when one or more of the subjects is removed.

Some of the consequences of this acknowledgement of *relation* will be considered later in this article. In the meantime, the constituents of the suprasubjectivity of the sign relation need to be presented in a little more depth.

### **Subjectivity, objectivity and the key triad**

Through his stress on *relation* over and above the sign’s components, Deely rescues the ontology of the sign not only from the grasp of dualism but also from dogmatic triadic thought. The sign is to be considered not in the relations of its elements but in its subsistence in a relation as a whole. Many theories of signification posit a ‘sign’ or a ‘symbol’ – or, even, sometimes, a ‘signal’ – which has a relation to some kind of object, reference or terminus. In turn, that sign is found to have a relation to sign ‘users’. Then there is left the strenuous task of somehow explicating the operation of the ‘sign’ in its relation to ‘context’, with attendant wrangling about what is germane to the concept of ‘context’, followed by a struggle to ascertain the possible relations between the sign and that context. One can see how such an understanding of the theory of the sign might be derived from an oft-quoted line from Charles S. Peirce: “A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (2.228). Yet, perhaps the most important Peirce quote on the ontology of semiosis in this respect is “A sign is something by knowing which we know something more” (CP 8.332). The new knowledge is not simply in the indication of a referent but in the establishment of a relation through which a sign user is enmeshed in apprehending a quality, digesting what that quality means for them, how the result associates to further relations and, if the sign user is human, potentially acknowledging how that relation invokes a sphere that can be conceived but never fully known.

The relation constituting a sign is crucial to human understanding as it is enacted in an environment. The Peircean triad of representamen, object and interpretant embodies the relation constituting the sign. However, the Deelyan triad of sign, object and thing, complements and considerably extends that relation, showcasing the difference in degree and the difference in kind of human, as opposed to all other, semiosis. Without eradicating context, Deely’s triad effectively renders redundant the strivings of many sign theories. The most comprehensive summary of the consequences of the triad appears in Deely (1994: 11-22), but also elsewhere in Deely’s later works (2001: 431-5; 2002: 98-9) and also in commentaries by others (Cobley 2005; Cobley and Stjernfelt 2016; Cobley, Favareau and Kull 2017). In *The Human Use of Signs* (1994: 11), Deely writes,

There are signs and there are other things besides: things which are unknown to us at the moment and perhaps for all our individual life; things which existed before us and other things which will exist after us; things which exist only as a result of our social interactions, like governments and flags; and things which exist within our round of interactions – like daytime and night – but without being produced exactly by those interactions, or at least not inasmuch as they are ‘ours’, i.e. springing from us in some primary sense.

In contrast to these ‘things’, ‘objects’ are “what the things become once experienced” (1994: 11), bearing in mind also that experience takes place through a physical, sensory modality. In this sense, even such entities as unicorns or the minotaur can be considered objects *embodied* in the physical marks of a text. Deely’s exposition of the term retains some of the flavour of Peirce’s ‘object’, yet it is elaborated much further and considerably more cogently. Deely argues that a “thing of experience” – an object – requires more than just embodiment: for example, the colosseum and the Arc de Triomphe preceded us and are expected to exist after us; but the point is that their existence as such is the product of *anthroposemiosis*. There are plenty of things – such as some metals in the earth and some things in the universe, as Deely suggests (1994: 16) – that anthroposemiosis has not yet touched. Objects are thus sometimes identical with things, a fact that Peirce struggled to convey; moreover, as Deely shows, objects can even “present themselves ‘as if’ they were simply things” (1994: 18). Already, it should be clear that this description of relation in the sign is a great distance from the positing of linear relations between a sign vehicle and referent.

Signs themselves can seem to be mere objects of experience – the light from a candle, the scent of a rose, the shining metal of a gun; but a sign also signifies *beyond itself*. In order for it to do so, a sign must be: not just a physical thing; not just an experienced object; but experienced as “doubly related” (Deely 1994: 22), standing for something else in some respect or capacity, again as Peirce argued. It is this respect or capacity that is the ‘context’ – not a feature of the world as such, nor even a component of the ‘environment’, but a feature of the way that the sign signifies or ‘relates’. This is in contradistinction to the way that experience is implicated in an object and not in a thing. To illustrate this point, Deely employs the image of an iceberg’s tip: the tip protrudes into experience as an object; moreover, it is, as such, a thing whose full qualities exist independent of experience, inextricably tied as such to all that is below the surface; so, above all, as is known in the popular phrase, the tip of the iceberg is a sign that there is much more below (1994: 144). That is, through signs the human can be aware of the possibility of what s/he does not know. An important corollary of this is that whatever is beneath the tip of the iceberg cannot be *approached* as a thing. It is possible that experience could make it an object but, even then, through the sensations it provokes, the feelings about them and their consequences, it is only available as a sign. The characteristic of the sign, then, is that it is simultaneously of the order of what Deely, drawing from the late Latin scholars, called *ens reale* and *ens rationis* (or ‘mind-independent being’, existence which does not require a mind for it to exist, and ‘mind-dependent being’, existence that is the product of or sustained by mind).

In an extremely dense passage, featuring a seemingly interminable sentence, Deely (2006: 13-14) rewards the tenacious reader with a summing up of the interconnectedness of the orders of being in *relation*. Here, it is the destiny of humans to develop culture with an awareness, if not full comprehension of, the world of things. He writes that

neither Aristotle nor the medievals generally recognized — indeed this was Peirce’s chief originality in the opening up of the Way of Signs we have come to call “semiotics” — that the unique feature of relation which allowed its positive actuality to be realized indifferently to the distinction between mind-independent (*ens reale*) and mind-dependent (*ens rationis*) is what opens the way, for animals capable of dealing with relations as such in their difference from related objects or things, to establish linguistic communication as a species-specific modality making possible the creation of a world of culture that is not, as long thought, opposed to the world of nature so much as it is (Sebeok first and best brought this point to the fore in contemporary semiotics) the species-specifically human form that the development of nature takes through the social interactions especially of human beings. Culture is

precisely “nature for humans”, just as sense-perception is “nature for animals”. In both cases, what we have to do with is a species-specifically objective world which includes something of but does not at all reduce to the physical environment, the “world of things” as such.

For the human, then, the world is much different from the way it is for other animals. It should go without saying that this is not a groundbreaking point. Yet, that the difference lies in the human relation to the “world of things” is instructive in respect of how “my physical existence and something of my physical environment enter into my awareness”. For humans, the physical environment and the knowledge that there lies more beyond the way that the physical environment impinges on human awareness, is definitive of the species. The human use of signs is fundamentally fraught: it does not bracket off one or the other orders in an attempt to render the sign as either solely object or thing. Instead, a sign partakes of both orders. Its ‘relation to reality’ consists of this partaking rather than its existence in a dyadic mode of representation. Hence, Deely repeatedly cites Peirce’s famous statement that “to try to peel off signs & get down to the real thing is like trying to peel an onion and get down to the onion itself” (see Brent 1993: 300 n. 84; see also Deely 1994: 19, paragraph 58).

What the dyadic mode of representation does define is objecthood. An object is an *experience* of a *thing*. Yet, if a representation refers also to something else, thus going beyond the mere rendering of an object, then it is a sign. Personal objects are common examples of this fact: the cuddly toy that has accompanied you since infancy; the watch given to you by your father; the beer stein you bought in Munich; the jar of powder that, in a Proustian moment, smells like the joss stick you burned in your bedroom some time during your first year at university; and so on. Deely’s outline of sign, object and thing in this way is an expansion and clarification of some of the arguments of Poinsett and the late Latins regarding the “action proper to signs” (Deely 1994: 27). Poinsett introduces his definition early in the *Tractatus* (1632 [2013]: 25-6), where the object is presented as “stimulative”, “terminative” and “stimulative-terminative”. Yet Deely has taken this initial insight of Poinsett and made it into an ontology of the sign (as well as object and thing) that is far more workable for contemporary semiotics and is also suggestive for social thought.

Poinsett also provides the germ of the idea for two of Deely’s key corollaries regarding human signification. Firstly, the world of humans is dominated by a “conventionalizing of objective relations” (Deely 1994: 68); that is to say that the anthroposemiotic *Umwelt* – the realm in which a human apprehends and sends signs according to the abilities of his/her sensorium – is “cognition-independent, even if originally provenating from apprehensive action, as Poinsett noted” (1994: 68). This “coding” by humans might be taken to be the whole of the humans’ world because it constitutes such a “familiar path” (1994: 70); but to take it as such is to overlook both the “zoosemiotically familiar” (1994: 70) and the fact that the human has call, for survival purposes, to look beyond its own coding into the further reaches of signs. A non-human animal, by contrast, is less likely to answer this call. As Deely recognizes, the non-human animal’s *Umwelt* is precisely its ‘objective’ world - it is where an animal relates to ‘objects’ (not as often to signs and with no conception of thinghood). This insight paves the way for the later formulation regarding the ‘semiotic animal’ (see, especially, Deely 2010) in which Deely illustrates the specific responsibilities falling upon the human as a result of its semiotic capacities.

In redefining human and non-human animal worlds, the sign-object-thing triad also provides the grounds for renewing the objectivity/subjectivity couplet. There is a philosophical dimension in this act, since Deely, having written earlier in his career a book on Heidegger (Deely 1971; see also Lanigan 2016), heeds the latter’s 1946 call for a total revision of understandings of the subject/object couplet, an audacious re-figuring of

objectivity and subjectivity that has been sidestepped by so many others. There is also, perhaps more troublesome, a demotic dimension to be traversed in this act. Customarily, 'objective' implies phenomena completely separate and closed off from the vagaries of subjects' apprehensions. Commonly, in speech, an 'objective view' is invoked - that which is untrammelled by opinion, partisan perspectives and, particularly contradictory, human experience. In an age when the demotic is deemed always to trump the academic, Deely insists on a re-figuration of objectivity. He demonstrates, logically, that the world that seems to be wholly independent of humans — 'objective' — can never be such. Rather, it is a specific kind of mixture of that which is independent of, and dependent on, humans. The 'objective' world, then, is a world of experienced things sometimes presenting itself as a world of 'just things'. Deely offers a thorough re-orientation of what is commonly understood as the dependency of the world on its subjects, a re-orientation derived, principally, from the distinction between 'signs', 'objects' and 'things'. His formulations upset both the demotic assumption that reality can easily be obtained in a Johnsonian kick of a stone, as well as the common contention, particularly popular in recent years, that reality is wholly subjective.

### **But why rock the boat of folk philosophy?**

Deely's reformulation of objectivity does not constitute the only time that he has tried to stem the tide of approval for existing terms and accounts of the history of human understanding. Indeed, his magnum opus, *Four Ages of Understanding* (2001) tries to reverse the orthodoxy of the history of Western philosophy in which 'nothing happened' between the times of Ockham and Descartes. Possibly the objectivity/subjectivity couplet and its demotic currency has sustained this orthodoxy, along with the idea that intersubjectivity is a phenomenon that somehow guarantees temperance, balance and a semblance of truth. Yuval Noah Harari's celebrated expansive history of humanity, *Sapiens* (2014), an extremely commercially successful survey of anthropic cognition, is certainly exemplary in this respect. Interestingly, one of its guiding points seems, at first sight, to be not too far removed from Deely's analysis of the social order as being rooted in 'purely objective reality' (2009). That is, Deely and Harari concur that some of most cherished principles, beliefs and rituals of collective human existence are constructs characteristic of an imaginary order. The detail of this shared argument, however, reveals what is at stake in Deely's re-casting of the objectivity/subjectivity couplet.

Harari (2014: 212) suggests, firstly, that the imagined order – he gives the examples of Christianity, democracy and capitalism - is "inter-subjective". One individual cannot change such orders without engaging in the daunting task of convincing the millions of others engaged in that order of the need for change. To understand this, Harari writes, it is necessary to grasp the difference between 'objective', 'subjective', and 'inter-subjective'.

An **objective** phenomenon exists independently of human consciousness and human beliefs [Harari gives the example of radioactivity, which existed long before it was discovered] . . .

The **subjective** is something that exists depending on the consciousness and beliefs of a single individual. It disappears or changes if that particular individual changes his or her beliefs [he gives the example of children harbouring 'imaginary friends'] . . .

The **inter-subjective** is something that exists within the communication network linking the subjective consciousness of many individuals. If a single

individual changes his or her beliefs, or even dies, it is of little importance. However, if most individuals in the network die or change their beliefs, the inter-subjective phenomenon will mutate or disappear. Inter-subjective phenomena are neither malevolent frauds nor insignificant charades. They exist in a different way from physical phenomena such as radioactivity, but their impact on the world may still be enormous. Many of history's most important drivers are inter-subjective: law, money, gods, nations (Harari 2014: 219-20).

Clearly, there is a great deal of semiosis featured in this description of humans' imagined order. Yet, Harari seems to see no continuity between human consciousness, beliefs, institutions and the environment in which they develop. By contrast with Deely, there is no sense that the human and the human's environment are semiotically conjoined. For Harari, there is semiosis in subjectivity and inter-subjectivity; nature, however, is 'objective', apparently with no semiotic bearing whatsoever. Unsurprisingly, Harari (2014: 750) is puzzled, in conclusion, as to why humans are unsure, discontented and act in the 21<sup>st</sup> century like "dissatisfied and irresponsible gods".

The question regarding the discontents of modern humans difficult to answer, of course. Yet, an agenda for addressing such questions is surely stymied by the alignment of human understanding with the straightforward apprehension of what exists "independently of human consciousness and human beliefs" in an unproblematic objectivity. Suggesting that the human is subjective or inter-subjective when it comes to human affairs, with all the semiotic bearing that entails, then adding the corollary that the human must become 'objective' if s/he is to deal with objective phenomena, is not logical and is neither borne out by biology nor philosophy of science. Still, it is a depressingly common assumption, not just in the sciences that refuse to recognize semiotic phenomena in nature but also in folk assumptions regarding the 'objective reality' of aspects of the environment and the capacity of cognition to gain an untrammelled view of them. Deely's abolition of the objectivity/subjectivity couplet, on the other hand, provides a more graded and logical interaction of existence and environment for the human. It makes way for an explication of human signification as much more prone to shifts and negotiations in its relation to reality. In an extremely suggestive paragraph (number 191), of *The Human Use of Signs*, Deely writes (1994: 82),

We move from the idea of reality as an order of existence independent of the observer, no part of the Umwelt as biologically proportioned, to an idea of reality - the semiotic idea of 'reality' - as including also the observer in all that is dependent on the observer along with whatever in experience reveals itself as a part of something - the old idea of 'reality' - *independent* ('physical being' in its praeter-objective character as the *lining*) of experience. We move from the medieval and classical modern idea of reality as mind-independent being, *ens reale*, to the postmodern idea of reality as the text of specifically human experience. We move from communication in the service of biological ends to a communication system opening as well possible worlds beyond any species-specific objective one or any imaginary reductionistic purely physical one.

Deely paints a picture of contemporary, post-Cartesian consciousness as ideally placed to recognize the relation, through signs, of embodiment in its environment. If there is any lack of surety or any discontent, it is most likely that a major contributor to this is the repeated promise that 'objectivity', in the sense of placing oneself outside of signification in order to unproblematically view mind-independent phenomena, is something that normal people do every day. A feeling of unease is not just likely but inevitable at a time when the human is

gifted with an environment so laden with affordances yet experiences regular blocks, by ideology, to the path of inquiry.

### **Affordances and ideology**

Possibly the defining characteristic of humans' contemporary environment is the ease of access that exists with respect to information, communication, narrative and entertainment. Not only is there an amount of each of these available, on a scale unprecedented in history, the commoditization of them means they can all be procured at the click of a mouse. Another way to phrase this might be to say that humans are awash with 'affordances', referencing the term introduced by James J. Gibson (1986). To be strict, Gibson's definition of affordances refers more broadly to what enables respiration, permits locomotion, provides illumination to allow vision, facilitates detection of vibrations and emanations – "offerings of nature", "possibilities" or "opportunities" (Gibson 1986: 19). The largely electronic affordances which are so accessible in the contemporary world are, in fact, more in the way of extensions, in McLuhan's sense, of the environmental opportunities for the senses that Gibson identifies. That Gibson's concept is a semiotic one, though, should be beyond doubt. He writes (1966: 285),

When the constant properties of constant objects are perceived (the shape, size, color, texture, composition, motion, animation, and position relative to other objects), the observer can go on to detect their *affordances*. I have coined this word as a substitute for *values*, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning. I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill. What they *afford* the observer, after all, depends on their properties. The simplest affordances, as food, for example, or as a predatory enemy, may well be detected without learning by the young of some animals, but in general learning is all-important for this kind of perception. The child learns what things are manipulable and how they can be manipulated, what things are hurtful, what things are edible, what things can be put together with other things or put inside other things - and so on without limit. He also learns what objects can be used as the means to obtain a goal, or to make other desirable objects, or to make people do what he wants them to do. In short, the human observer learns to detect what have been called the values or meanings of things, perceiving their distinctive features, putting them into categories and subcategories, noticing their similarities and differences and even studying them for their own sakes, apart from learning what to do about them. All this discrimination, wonderful to say, has to be based entirely on the education of his attention to the subtleties of invariant stimulus information.

What can be seen here, certainly in Deely's terms, is a shifting back and forth from mind-dependent to mind-independent being. What is afforded depends on the *properties* of the affordance, where 'property' can only mean its status as an object, corresponding to the experience of the sign user ('observer' for Gibson), with a hint for humans that the property entails some dimensions that cannot be grasped. Writing prior to Deely, Gibson understandably uses 'object' and 'thing' interchangeably. What is learned as these entities become affordances accords to the species specific *desires* of the sign user. That learning is an exercise in meaning or significance, particularly benefiting from the occurrence – which has been a core interest of semiotics – of invariance, in combination with discrimination.

A key issue in Gibson's ecological semiotics is that affordances furnish opportunities for good or ill. Many accounts of the term, particularly in the field of human-computer



interaction and other technology use, have popularised the definition of affordances as uniformly heuristic and facilitating (see, for example, Usability First, n.d.). Furthermore, there is often a suggestion, echoing Gestalt psychology, that the affordance has a 'demand' or 'invitation' character. Krampen (1990: 93) points out, however, that there is

an important difference between the demand character of the Gestaltists' object and the affordance as conceptualized by Gibson. For the Gestaltists the demand character belongs to the phenomenal and behavioral, not to the physical and geographical object. Koffka argues that an object, say a mail box, has its demand character only as long as the beholder needs to mail a letter. On the contrary, Gibson maintains that an affordance is an invariant that is always there to be perceived: 'The object offers what it does because it is what it is'.

Gibson, then, considers the object in an affordance as neither a completely malleable tool nor a simple receptacle for human desires. Instead, his formulation of affordance is more in line with the perspective of Jakob von Uexküll and, in turn, with that of Deely.

Deely, of course, was an admirer of Krampen (see Deely 1990: 29-30, especially). In addition, the theoretical biology of von Uexküll, particularly the concept of *Umwelt*, is integral to Deely's conceptualisation of the sign/object/thing triad. What needs to be brought out, however, is the special status of the object; in the process, Gibson's notion of affordance can be clarified. Krampen (1990: 93) suggests that von Uexküll "described something similar to affordance in what he called the 'counter-ability' (*Gegenleistung*) of man-made things". The passage from von Uexküll occurs as he relates a stroll through a town in *Bausteine zu einer biologischen Weltanschauung* (1913). Each chair, door, window or house carries the 'counter-ability' for the human, the meaning of the man-made object for human existence, what the designer had in mind for the user when the item was constructed. So far, then, there is a correspondence between the idea of 'counter-ability' and 'affordance' in the way that the latter has been used to understand processes of design and technology. However, as Krampen emphasizes, there is also a major difference in the conception of the object. "For von Uexküll", Krampen (1990: 94-5) writes,

the object - he calls it 'Gegengefuge' (counter-structure) - is only an episode in the function cycle ('Funktionskreis'). This cycle starts with a counter-structure's perceptual mark ('Merkmal') which is transformed into a perceptual sign ('Merkzeichen') in the organism. Depending on the organism's need, the perceptual sign triggers a behavioral sign ('Wirkzeichen') which in turn inflicts a behavioral mark ('Wirkmal') onto the counter-structure. The function cycle ends, because the behavioural mark cancels the perceptual mark, as von Uexküll puts it. It follows that depending on the needs of the organism, the same counter-structure may play quite different roles in the function cycle. For Gibson, these different roles would not depend on the need of the organism but on invariants in the makeup of the counter-structure, on an organism-environment fit.

The *Gegengefuge* or counter-structure is of considerable importance to understanding what objects are for humans and other animals. For von Uexküll, Gibson, Krampen, Deely and a good many other semioticians, animals do not apprehend value-free objects "to which meaning is associated in a second phase" (Krampen 1990: 95). There is already a perfusion of meaning in objects when they are apprehended. In von Uexküll's functional cycle (von Uexküll 1934: 49-50), by which animals' sensoria incorporate and 'create' their environment by means of circulation through receptors and effectors, the *Gegengefuge* or counter-structure

lies between perception organ and effect organ, perception mark carrier and effect mark carrier. It connects these parts in the process of meaning but von Uexküll (2010: 148) insists that “the greatest part of the body of a carrier of meaning only serves as an undifferentiated counterstructure”. That is, the object as *Gegengefuge* is perfused with meaning but harbours in the majority of its brute existence a remainder that is beyond meaning or inaccessible to interpretation.

*Gegengefuge*, then, indicates the predominant aspect of the object that makes up its erstwhile thinghood, remembering that objects, for Deely (1994: 11), are “what the things become once experienced”. It is at least the remnant of mind-independent being for all animals; yet, for humans, who are able to conceive of such a domain, it is definitive of the ability to presciss, as Peirce (EP2: 270-1) would say, what is most beneficial for the species rather than just for the individual member of the species. As Krampen (1990: 95) notes of affordances in their ‘ill’ bearing, “many of us have in a hurry bumped their heads against a glass door mistaking it for an opening”. Humans suffering this misfortune can carefully place a sign warning other humans to avoid the same calamity. In so doing, they recognize the objecthood of the glass door (something that hurts my head), but also the door’s thinghood (harbouring qualities which I cannot know in any way intimately beyond their impingement on my head but which I know will contribute to the pain visited on someone else’s head). The fly, by contrast with the human, will not receive a hint of thinghood; it will continue to bump against the glass to the point when its wings become exhausted. Therefore, when humans are confronted by *Gegengefuge*, it is simply the most blatant reminder that the human use of signs characteristically takes place and oscillates between mind-dependent and mind-independent being. The human’s relation to the environment cannot logically consist of a thoroughgoing semiotic character which might be suspended whenever the need to register ‘objective phenomena’ (in Harari’s sense) is required. Those ‘objective phenomena’ - or ‘things’, in Deely’s sense – must surely be part of a continuum within the order of signs. The fiat of ‘objectivity’ cannot deliver humans from embroilment in the order of signs.

One important area of theorising about the social order that has been very much concerned with reaching ‘objectivity’ or a ‘scientific’ perspective is the body of work defining ‘ideology’. Here, the general problem under discussion is the impediment to a truthful and rigorous outlook that might beset academic, social and quotidian thought. What makes ideology, as a political representation, different from the mere voluntary lie, as well as what makes it an enduring topic of interest, is the fact that it frequently consists of semioses in the range of “conscious lies to half-conscious and unwitting disguises; from calculated attempts to dupe others to self-deception” (Mannheim 1936: 49). Indubitably, ideology is a semiotic topic through and through. This is not just because of its specific deployment of signs. It is also because conscious agency, as Mannheim attests, is not the chief source of its existence and, furthermore, ideology constitutes a correspondence in semiosis between existence and environment. Certainly in the classic Marxist formulation, for example, ideology functions to ‘naturalize’ modes of living and working; specifically, it advances the capitalist bourgeoisie – and its environment, the relations of production - at the expense of proletarian workers (Marx and Engels 1970). However, ideology’s mediation of existence and environment cannot simply be equated with falsity, lies, ‘subjectivity’ or, despite much theory which protests that it can, the lack of ‘objectivity’. As Eagleton (1991: 222). puts it,

Much of what ideologies say is true, and would be ineffectual if it were not; but ideologies also contain a good many propositions which are flagrantly false, and do so less because of some inherent quality than because of the distortions into which they are commonly forced in their attempts to ratify and legitimate unjust, oppressive political systems

Of course, what is puzzling about ideology is how it so effortlessly perpetuates and extends existing power relations. Frequently, ideology is sought at the level of representations and stereotypes (see, for example, Albertazzi and Cobley 2009). In the re-booted Marxist theory of ideology since Althusser (1963, 1971), it has been persuasively argued that ideology is the lived reality, often endorsed and organised by institutions, but seamlessly woven more often into the quotidian interactions of civil society. Mannheim (1936: 49-51), in his classic non-Marxist formulation of ideology, did refer to the “life-situation” and suggested that ideology must be a result of how psychology is moored to that life-situation. Yet, both non-Marxist and Marxist theories of ideology have generally confined their theories and investigations to signs in social life; they have not engaged with the possible roots of ideological signs in semiosis beyond the polis or the anthroposemiotic. Indeed, why would they need to do so – is not ideology the preserve of humans rather than alloanimals and plants?

The answer to this last question is obviously “yes”. However, the question truly concerns, again, the relation of the human animal with its environment. Ideology must also be firmly embedded in the way that humans, through signs, partake of mind-independent and mind-dependent existence, as well as their negotiation of signs, objects and things. Sidestepping the main trajectory of the theory of ideology, Deely’s (2009) concept of ‘purely objective reality’ is bound up in humans’ constant shifting - from instant to instant, not simply because of a changing life-situation - between mind-independent and mind-dependent reality. These shifts are part of the process of apprehending ‘things’ (mind-independent) which, once apprehended, are necessarily ‘objects’ (mind-dependent) and always susceptible of translation into ‘signs’ (partaking, with effectivity, of both mind-dependent and mind-independent reality). ‘Purely objective reality’ is a fiction that nevertheless suffuses, is suffused by, and guides experience. Noting that ‘objective reality’ is a complete misnomer, Deely (2009: 243-4) shows how

The most important point in the social construction of reality, no doubt, occurs in the political order, when the semiotic animals sit down together to try to decide how to govern themselves, how to decide what is to be permitted and what not permitted in social behavior and arrangements. Thus the constitution of a state, for example, the document, I mean, which details what the arrangement shall be for a given human community, is a prime example of a purely objective reality which can yet be realized in the subjective order of living and interacting individuals. Reality as we experience it is neither purely objective nor purely subjective nor purely intersubjective, but rather a constantly shifting mixture and proportion of all three – a mixture and proportion of which it is not at all easy (perhaps not even fully possible) to keep track.

As purely objective realities, the state and other fictions share the ability for their objects to be continually invested and reinvested by experience. By this is not just meant the experiential shifts that occur in politics or social formations; instead, what the theory of ideology must confront is the capacity of signs to swing human users between mind-dependent and mind-independent realities on a moment-to-moment basis. In his ‘strolls’ through the world of animals and men, registering the counter-ability and counter-structure (*Gegenfuge*) in environmental objects, perhaps von Uexküll was already indicating the intractability of ideology. Each affordance and each *Gegenfuge* encountered will draw the human into exigencies that may change in a split second. Certainly, as Deely elaborates the object, it seems that ideology and affordances, no matter how they might be ahistorically or generally framed, derive their bearing from the primordial semiotic relation of the animal to

its environment. The role of the most banal and quotidian environmental objects in sustaining even the most self-evidently political ideology consistently spanning epochs has been routinely underestimated before the development of semiotics. What seems to be individual caprice in the shifting, in semiosis, between mind-dependence and mind-independence, is a species-specific impulse which should not be discounted in favour of a fixation on advanced social relations. Indeed, any organism's continuity of semiosis with its environment is always social in any case. It is a lived relation in semiosis. The sociality of the polis, without subtracting from any of its complexity or effectivity, for good or ill, is merely a rarefied version of the structural phenomena in the human-environment relationship.

## Conclusion

Describing it as the point on which “hangs the whole of semiosis”, Deely (2002: 99) states that, according to the rationale of the intersubjective, the objective order – made up of objects of experience – “cannot be completely separated from the universe of physical being” (emphasis in the original). In conjunction with a long footnote to Poincaré, he adds that the kind of objective order envisaged by Kant and the moderns, “a capsule of consciousness”, is a Chimaera, a mind-dependent being through and through, “which is not what its foundation is, namely, a situation existing in fact” (2002: 100). A truly objective order, a field where there is only experience, or phenomenal attributes, or even discourse, cannot exist. Deely's realism, in its fundament of the sign/object/thing triad, demonstrates how mind-independent being is omnipresent even when occluded in the objective order. It uncovers the ‘truth’ of ideology and the *Gegenfuge* of affordances.

The primacy of relation entails that semiosis, “unchanged in its positive being as relation (i.e., in its existence as irreducibly suprasubjective), will be real under one set of circumstances and fictional under another set of circumstances” (Deely 2017: 27). If the sign is suprasubjective, then it remains “over and above” the subject, as well as above the fluctuations caused in its environment. The sign is still determined by the agency of the subject, as in the settling of the relation in the Deely dinner date quoted above; but the suprasubjectivity of that sign relation is such that the sign is not nullified when the putative autonomy of subjects is shown to be illusory by the affliction of sudden death. What Deely exposes is that the suprasubjectivity of the sign tethers it, ultimately, to the order of mind-independence from which mind-dependence constitutes only a very limited escape. Perhaps what Deely shows, notably in his commitment to a ‘post-modern’ and post-Cartesian consciousness, is that the cognizance of where semiosis abounds and where it leads will go some way towards the reduction of humans' dissatisfaction, irresponsibility and pretensions to godliness.

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