

# Deely's Augustine: Ethics, Semiosis, and the Revelatory

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## *Abstract*

The analysis outlines John Deely's commitment to Augustine's implications for a value-laden semiotic understanding of postmodern inquiry. Deely's value-laden project centers on semiotic signification and semiosis. His work announces the inexorable link between semiotic theory and the search for understanding that matters. He uplifts the importance of engaging signs via context and relational association, uniting ethics and semiotics. Deely's orientation shaped his inquiry on biosemiotics, semioethics, and ongoing discussions of Augustine. My inquiry centers on Deely's explication of value-laden signs that illuminate Augustine's understanding of existence, comprehended as God's world. Thus, I explore Deely's value-laden semiotic mission through an examination of Augustine's God-filled background narrative assumption.

*Keywords: semiosis, semioethics, Augustine, Deely, signum, the revelatory*

John Deely (2001) states that Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) was born into a fading emphasis on Greek philosophy within a shift from pagan beliefs to Christianity. The decline of the Roman Empire, for Deely, was a medieval Dark Ages announcing that the previous light of Greek insight no longer sufficiently propelled an understanding of existence. Augustine lived within an era of cultural and social semiosis that acted as a background for his revelatory project.

My explication consists of five sections that tell Deely's story about Augustine and his vital contribution to a postmodern understanding of human existence. The first section, "Background for an Augustinian Figure", discusses Deely's analysis of the four ages of human history, beginning with ancient Greek thought, which gave way to Augustine's Latin Age. Next, "Poinot's Revelatory Echo" focuses on Deely's contention that the work of John Poinot continued the project of Augustine by arguing against an understanding of sign tied to nominalism and proposing instead the connection between sign and the revelatory. The third section, "From the Latin Age to the Postmodern", explicates Deely's treatise of semiotics in postmodernity, which draws heavily from Augustine's *signum* in an effort to

connect culture and context and the particular and the transcendent. Fourth, “Postmodernity as Hypertextuality” associates Augustine’s understanding of sign with Umberto Eco’s notion of hypertextuality, which attends to the multiplicity of concurrent historical moments. Finally, “Implications: Deely and the Hypertextual Revelatory” contends that Deely elaborates upon a hypertextual story of the medieval world informing the current moment, announcing revelatory semiosis, or what Deely termed a postmodern acknowledgement of ongoing multiplicity and difference in God’s world.

Augustine’s assertions and omissions helped frame the unfolding of a Latin Age. Theologically, he stressed original sin. Practically, his limited knowledge of Greek philosophy and language led to creative revelations (Deely, 2010a).<sup>1</sup> In Book I of *De Doctrina Christiana* or *On Christian Doctrine* (AD 397), Augustine differentiates between signs and things. A thing does not signify something, whereas an object embodies signification and the ongoing revelatory possibility of semiosis. Deely (2010a) notes, “In Chapter 1 of Book II we learn that a sign is anything perceived which makes something besides itself come into our awareness” (p. 92). Deely makes the point that for Augustine the penultimate focal point was not the sign but the scriptures and the sacraments of the Church. For Augustine, the notion of sign is revelatory and illuminates God’s world, acting as a form of existential grace.

## 1. Background for an Augustinian Figure

Deely (2001) discusses the four ages of human history—ancient Greek thought, the Latin Age, modern thought, and postmodern thought—with an ongoing emphasis on the Latin and the postmodern. He begins with Augustine’s “general notion of sign”, which later serves as his foundation for understanding the Latin Age of the 4th century (p. 18). Deely narrates a story in which Augustine’s conception of sign is a significant piece of philosophy with contemporary implications. Deely sets the stage for his introduction of Augustine with an emphasis on the interplay between monism and pluralism composing a single/diverse principle, a *unity of contraries*. For Deely, Augustine’s insights eventually lend themselves to a postmodern rendering of a unity of contraries. Deely explicates a unity of contraries in order to understand Augustine, refusing to place him in one extreme position or another. Eventually, Deely insists that the connection between Augustine and postmodernity is contextual, experiential, situated, and constituted by multiple narratives. Just as Deely takes Augustine into a contemporary world, he brings the ancient world into Augustine’s Latin Age.

Following the theme of the many and the single, Deely (2001) stresses Thales of Miletus’s (625-545 BC) commitment to moral philosophy. Thales, unfortunately, left behind not a single fragment of writing; the most complete description of his philosophy comes from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Thales emphasized a first principle, specifically water, as an original form and as a final destiny. His philosophy connects everything to water, pointing to monism as an underlying principle uniting difference. Monism unifies a soul, connecting what appears to be disparate parts. After Thales, Deely describes how Anaximander (610-545 BC) and Anaximenes (580–500 BC) took the principle of singularity and moved it to a higher degree of abstraction, stressing the term *apeiron*, translated as the indefinite. Anaximenes, the student of

Anaximander, returned the conversation to the concrete with an emphasis on monism tied to air.

It was not until Empedocles of Acragas (495-435 BC) and Anaxagoras (500-428 BC) that monism overtly connected with pluralism. Empedocles stressed four elements—fire, air, earth, and water—and Anaxagoras proposed pluralism through his assumption of mixing and separating that continues infinitely (Deely, 2001, p. 27). Unlike his contemporaries, Anaxagoras did not center on the sun as a god; his orientation on biological development unfortunately required him to escape Athens. Such history reminds one that ideas matter to the point of self-risk.

For Deely, it was Empedocles who engaged both monism and pluralism. Empedocles understood nature as an ongoing movement of attraction and repulsion, a love/hate, which impacted the four basic elements of fire, air, earth, and water. Empedocles worked between monism and infinity, implying a changing world that is more than one but not without limits. Leucippus (470-390 BC) also permitted one to understand the creative interplay of monism and pluralism by giving us dualism and the interplay of two factors.

Deely (2001) then provides more detail in his ongoing philosophical examination of the early ancients, such as Democritus (460-385/362 BC), who expanded upon the work of Leucippus; Pythagoras (570-495 BC), who introduced a mathematical conception of the universe; and Heraclitus of Ephesus (540-480 BC) and Parmenides of Elea (515-450 BC), who were key thinkers from the presocratic period and set a foundation for philosophical questions later engaged by Plato, Aristotle, and the Latin Age. Deely's point to this history about monism and plurality renders caution about singularity of position and conviction. Deely contends that the uniting of contrary positions continues through Augustine and the Latin Age.

Deely highlights values signified by themes of monism, plurality, understanding, and sensing that compose a background *a priori*. For example, he points to the interplay between the *a priori* of understanding and the realism of sense, as explicated in the fourth stage of understanding—postmodernity—via the sign:

Science in the modern age will establish itself principally by concentrating on the physical dimension of the outer world; mystics of all ages will concentrate primarily on the inner world; but, as we shall see, not until the emergence of the Fourth Age of understanding in postmodern times will the action of signs be sufficiently thematized to account for the interdependencies of the two realms in the constitution of integral human experience, from mystical to scientific, sensible to intelligible, through the action of signs without which there would be neither self nor world to speak about. (Deely, 2001, p. 117)

Humans as semiotic animals unite understanding and senses, which give rise, according to Deely, to the Latin Age that situates the project of Augustine. Deely contends that Augustine “introduces the general notion of sign as a theme for development alongside others”, launching the local maturity of Latin philosophy (p. 207).

Deely's story of Augustine repeatedly emphasizes his disinterest in the Greek language, articulated in the *Confessions* (AD 397). For example, Augustine engaged Plato in Latin, bypassing the original Greek. Augustine's work would define major

issues in philosophy for the next thousand years. For Deely, to tell the story of Augustine is to retell the tale of the Latin Age, which sought to unify differences. Augustine's pivot from Greek to Latin is a substantial historical sign in understanding. Deely states that, of course, the work of John Locke and Charles Sanders Peirce provides a later template for understanding action and signs in the engagement of human knowledge and experience. However, it is Augustine's notion of sign that becomes central in the development of modern philosophy. Augustine emphasized both *signum naturale*, or natural sign, and *signa ad placita*, or conventional sign, for understanding existence. Additionally, Deely (2001) emphasizes, "It was Augustine who first proposed a 'general semiotics'—that is, a general 'science' or 'doctrine' of signs, where sign becomes the genus of which words (ὀνόματα) and a theory of signs (σημεῖα) are alike equally species" (p. 217). Augustine provided an understanding of sign that went beyond a natural sign into a linguistic, or general, sign.

Deely's humor emerges as he emphasizes Augustine's creative genius and naïve innocence, which permitted him to discern existence in a more profound fashion (2001). Augustine understood sign without spending an inordinate amount of time attempting to thematize its implications. Perhaps this is why one of Augustine's biographers, Peter Brown, deemed him "a man 'for whom communication was always an inscrutable mystery'" (Deely, 2001, p. 218). The significance of this statement cannot be overestimated: Augustine did not attempt to possess the inner soul of a sign. Instead, he followed its revelatory implications in what is now known as semiosis.

Augustine had no means to understand the novelty of his own thinking and project as he opened *De Doctrina Christiana* with a distinction between signs and things. For Augustine, all signs are things, but not all things are signs. Signification points to implications. Deely emphasizes the difference between a form of cogitation and signification. The former aids one in knowing and the latter in implications beyond the immediate. For Augustine, the scriptures and the sacraments of the Church are signs. The revelatory implications and significations of the scriptures and the sacraments center Augustine's project.

Deely (2001) states that Augustine's understanding of sign is ultimately too narrow, but ironically in that narrowness there is conceptual strength. The scriptures and the sacraments for Augustine are signs, sacred vessels that suggest implications beyond: "A sacrament is a manifest species of Augustine's sign" (Deely, 2001, p. 223). Augustine points to what Deely (2001) terms "high semiotics" through a sacramental theology of implications and signification and semiosis of transformation (p. 224). Augustine's general definition had strength in that both the sacraments and the scriptures of the faith connected with signs involving the senses while pointing beyond. Multiple authors support such a position, with John Poinsett, or John of St. Thomas (1589-1644), being the prime champion (Deely, 2001, p. 224). Deely emphasizes that Augustine attended to the question of monism and pluralism through his general conception of sign.

Deely argues that Augustine moves sign theory beyond mere nominalism with an *ambiguity* that does not fully explicate whether a sign is the thing itself or an imaginary linkage. Deely (2010a) states that Augustine's general notion of sign overcame the "ancient dichotomy between the causal relations linking natural phenomena to the things of which they are signs and the imaginary relations linking

cultural phenomena to the things of which *they* are ‘signs’” (p. 133). Deely (2001) vindicates Augustine, stressing the revelatory nature of his work as a form of “philosophical spiritualism” (p. 257). Augustine’s temperament disallowed separation of sense perception and religious belief. Deely restates that Augustine’s general sign had both a general and a specific mode, with the general mode tempering the sense of nominalism. Deely’s comment is that Augustine simply gives us the general notion of sign as an assertion. Armed with an ignorance of Greek, Augustine framed for the Latins a general understanding of sign as a sense-perceptible object that leads to an awareness of something other than itself.

Deely critiques the mistaken conception of the Augustinian understanding of sign as limited to realism. Deely remarks that it is ridiculous to say that Augustine restricted our understanding of sign; he associated it with both the natural and the cultural. Deely (2001) reiterates Eco’s contention that “Augustine flagged the notion of sign so as eventually to dissociate it from nature” (p. 418). Deely makes the point that Augustine paves the way for an eventual postmodern reading of sign. The contention from some is that Augustine only described an instrumental understanding of sign, but Deely continually returns to the revelatory implications of the general notion of sign offered by Augustine. Deely contends that the stumbling of Augustine not only pointed to the revelatory, but also explicated the revelatory nature of sign.

## 2. Poinsot’s Revelatory Echo

Deely once again takes on the question of whether Augustine’s *signum* was a mere nominalism—this time in his retelling of Poinsot’s acknowledgment of the importance of Augustine. Deely restates Augustine’s inability to read Greek as an asset, this time citing Poinsot, a “late-medieval [Catholic Dominican] philosopher who notably embraced the mantle of Augustine in the development of the sign”, vindicating him (Smith, 2016, p. 178). Deely (2001) contends that Augustine’s project on *signum* revolved around a single question: “Does the sign as the means of knowing have a being which transcends the divide between nature and culture?” (p. 430) Deely’s answer is “yes”, citing Poinsot’s *Tractatus de Signis* (1632), or *Treatise on Signs*, as a signature defense of Augustine. Poinsot shifted the conversation from what a sign *is* to the *function* of a sign. The shift from *is* to *function* annuls distinctions between real and imaginary, truth and falsehood, and culture and nature. It is this position that guided Umberto Eco’s (1976) famous understanding of semiotics as the ability to lie.

Like Augustine, Poinsot differentiated representation from signification, underscoring the distinction between signs and objects. The object represents itself, and the sign represents something other than itself:

Thus, representation is involved in the being proper to a sign as the foundation for the relation of signification, but the signification itself always and necessarily consists in the relation as such, which is over and above that characteristic of a material being or psychological state of an organism upon which the relation itself is founded. (Deely, 2001, p. 431)

Signification cannot be confused with a material entity. Signification is the subjective

being that moves meaning beyond its individual foundation. For Deely, this understanding of sign is intersubjective. The sign finds life in “the relation between sign-vehicle and object signified, effected as such through an interpretant, an actual or prospective observer, as we might say” (Deely, 2001, p. 431). An object signified may or may not equate with an existing thing. According to Deely, Poinsoot’s insights permanently disassociated Augustine’s *signum* from nominalism.

At this point, Deely argues that Poinsoot uncovered Augustine’s development of a semiotic consciousness inclusive of the general sense of sign that propels postmodernity. Deely recognizes modernity as, indeed, a moral cul-de-sac (Arnett, 1997, 2019); postmodernity connects to a medieval world, not modernity. The latter attempts to control nature rather than attend to the revelatory intersubjectivity emerging from a general sense of sign. Deely considers modernity a mere interlude between a medieval world and a postmodern one. After Poinsoot, Deely contends that much of the development related to sign assumed instrumental signification. Poinsoot’s *Tractatus de Signis*, published at the time of Galileo,<sup>2</sup> went largely unattended in an emerging modernity. Poinsoot offered a way in which the sign transcends and simultaneously weaves an interpretive web. Poinsoot’s work predates the semiotic web of Thomas Sebeok (1920-2001), which engaged the entire biological community situated within communication with and by signs inclusive of both organic and inorganic elements.

Deely sides with Augustine and his later advocate, Poinsoot, in his dismissive critique of modernity. First, Deely (2001) considers Descartes’s theory of idea problematic, rejecting rationalism in “the representative theory of ideas” (p. 520). Deely reemphasizes *signum* and its relationship to words and natural phenomena, with the general sign offering a dwelling for the possibility of revelatory insight. For Deely, the Latin Age centered on Augustine’s lack of familiarity with Greek, his commitment to *signum*, and his refusal to understand sign as empty nominalism. Modernity and Cartesian rationalism gave rise to a different worldview, an aberration based more on control than on the revelatory, as in the medieval world.

For Deely, modernity unleashed Dr. Jekyll, the modern scientist, and Mr. Hyde, the modern philosopher. Deely (2001) claims that these literary characters represent the two extremes of the physical world and the abstraction of the thin air of theoretical speculation, respectively. Deely refers to “Augustine’s notion of *signum* as superior to the division between what is from nature and what is from the human mind” (p. 591). Augustine’s understanding of *signum* was more general, inclusive, and holistic in its revelatory considerations than that of modernity. Deely (2008) asserts that, for Augustine, the sign is a material object that represents something when met by the gaze of an onlooker. Augustine rendered this insight into signification more fundamental than the material object alone (Deely, 2008, p. 472).

Comparing Augustine to modern thinkers, Deely (2006a) argues that “[w]hereas, before Augustine, there were only natural signs, so after [Ferdinand de] Saussure [(1857-1913)] there are only conventional signs. But for Augustine himself, as for semiotics in its difference from semiology, there are *both* natural *and* conventional signs” (p. 12). Deely unites Augustine’s description of sign with verification from Poinsoot and Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017). They indicate that words do not “directly designate things; they only make them expressed” (Deely, 2006a, p. 22).

Deely repeatedly underscores the revelatory project of Augustine, stating that his contribution of signs connecting with other signs gives birth to new insights, or to a “third” that Deely accentuates as communication.

Deely discusses the Latin development in philosophy under the rubric of protosemiotic, articulating that Augustine's sign in general moved forward and past a modern age. Deely (2006a) cites Bertrand Russell's contention that “modern philosophy had failed to move beyond solipsism” (p. 55). Augustine's insights appeared more foundational for understanding experience and knowledge. Deely identifies Peirce as central in the rediscovery of this understanding of sign. Peirce familiarized himself with the work of Augustine, John Duns Scotus (1266-1308), and Poincaré. Deely contends that much of modern development of philosophy kept the notion of sign in the margins, to the point of Sebeok defining modernity as a “cryptosemiotic” period more primitive and deadlier than the protosemiotic in the Latin age (Deely, 2006a, p. 55). Augustine's “general understanding of sign” transcended divisions, jettisoning the extremes of “‘real’ and ‘ideal’, ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’, etc.” (Deely, 2006a, p. 56). Deely contends that Augustine's discussion of sign, elaborated by Poincaré, embodied an ontological relation consisting of a triadic structure. Deely goes so far as to suggest that Peirce's work with semiotics laid the foundation for a postmodern understanding of philosophy that recalled Augustine's Latin project.

### 3. From the Latin Age to the Postmodern

In furthering the case of the natural linkage between medieval and postmodern understanding, Deely sides with a contextual line of thought extending from Augustine to Peirce. Augustine's project, which Deely (2006b) terms the “Way of Signs”, transcended the division of nature and culture as well as “the divide between inside and outside of consciousness” (p. 15). The contextual position of Augustine and Peirce contrasts with the semiology of Saussure's ultramodern project. Deely says there is little debate that a revelatory semiotics emerges in the contextual and social interplay of persons, deeply tied to culture.

Deely differentiates the ultramodern from the postmodern, with the latter having substantial medieval roots. He contends that semiotics is actually medieval and simultaneously post-ancient. It is interesting to note that Deely's understanding of semiotics rejects a world reducible to things. Deely puts in quotes Edmund Husserl's (1859-1938) “existing in themselves” (Deely, 2006b, p. 16). Deely rejects Husserl's phenomenological project of the things in themselves.<sup>3</sup> Rather, Deely argues that existence lives in an interactive mode of semiosis, which continually lends insight and clarity within contextual social and cultural experiences. The movement toward the things in themselves, without attentiveness to the cultural, social, and contextual nature of signs giving life, misses Augustine's original insights of the inner linking of sign and social contextual life.

Deely reiterates the importance of protosemiotics: the fact that prior to Augustine the action of signs was seldom engaged. Augustine required the notion of sign in general in the writing of *De Doctrina Christiana*. The action of signs extends beyond the natural world and is inclusive of culture and human language. The general

understanding of sign framed by Augustine is contextually attentive and is both cultural and natural. Augustine's emphasis on *signum* involved the subclasses of *signa naturalia* and *signa ad placita*. The key is that both natural signs and conventional signs in modernity are introductory moments of particularity, while Augustine's alternative of *signum* embraces and transcends particularity with a conception of sign in general. The general understanding of sign moves beyond particularity into semiosis. This general understanding of sign both transcends and unites, embodying the revelatory and ongoing semiosis.

The term protosemiotic, as Deely details, dwells between presemioticians and full semioticians:

Augustine thus marks a divide between the *presemiotic* thinkers of ancient Greek philosophy and the Latin Age, respecting which he stands at the beginning . . . Augustine is not yet fully a semiotician: but neither is he any longer a presemiotician. He is, in the expression of Sebeok, a *protosemiotician*, one—the first, in fact—of the pioneers or founding figures of semiotics as such, those thinkers who originally undertook consciously the struggle to establish the essential nature and fundamental varieties of possible semiosis, not as contained within, but as transcending, the world of φυσικς and σημεία. (Deely, 2003, p. 11)

Deely indicates that Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (AD 475-524), who came after Augustine, added little to Augustine's insight but did begin to outline this understanding of sign as a "general mode of being" (Deely, 2003, p. 11). This position understands the situated and contextual nature of signs that yields connection to Being. Boethius is an exemplar of philosophical hypertextuality, carrying forth both a Greek and a Latin perspective.

#### **4. Postmodernity as Hypertextuality**

Giovanni Manetti engages Deely's assertion that Augustine's insights lend themselves to a postmodern rendering. Manetti contends that Deely links the modern age to Descartes, "an exploration . . . [that] leads to what the author defines as a bankruptcy" (Manetti, 2010, p. 257). Augustine's insight was otherwise than convention and moved toward a more "proper development" of sign (Deely, 2010a, p. 353). Consistently, Deely works within a unity of contraries in order to understand Augustine, refusing to place him in one extreme position or another. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for Deely's insistence on the connection between Augustine and the term "postmodern", which is contextual, experiential, situated, and constituted by multiple narratives; postmodernity does not embrace the subjectivity of the agent and simultaneously does not discount its embedded influence (Arnett, 2018). Modernity invites the adage of the death of the author, which is provocative. Within a postmodern understanding, however, the real death is that of an *unsituated* agent or author.

Manetti (2010) reviews Deely's move from medieval to postmodern. He reiterates that the era between the medieval and postmodern forgot the Latin influence of Augustine, which understood sign as transcendent of the divide of culture and nature. With Descartes, this unity, or lack of division, ceased. With modernity ignoring the

Latin influence and embracing the ancients' view of signs dwelling in the natural, Deely contends that Saussure pursued the notion of conventional signs as "signs wholly of the mind's own making" in his project of semiology (Deely, 2001, pp. 669-670).

Deely argues that Augustine's contribution offered the word as a complete rather than a deficient sign, for the word joins together signifier and signified. Manetti outlines Deely's work on Augustine in reflection on *De dialectica* (AD 386-387) with a study of individual words. There is a differentiation of the *vox* or *sonum* of a word from the notion *dicibile*. The *vox* connects ear and signifier and frames "the material features of a word" (Manetti, 2010, p. 266). The perceived, or the sayable, impacts not the ear but the soul, a terminology resembling the Stoics' *lepton*, which links sayable with "the semantic component of an utterance" (Manetti, 2010, p. 266). In addition, there is the *res*, or the referent, which defines an object apprehended by the senses or the soul while escaping perception. Augustine emphasized a distinction between "mention"—a word that consists of a union of the signifier and the signified with the referent being itself, becoming a *verbum*, a word both in general and particular—and "use"—a word which, again, unifies signifier and signified but points to something else, termed a *dictio*. Deely contends that *dictio*, the unifier of signifier and signified, is fundamental in Augustine's *signum*, for it not only includes Augustine's and the Stoics' notion of *semeion*, non-linguistic signs, but embraces the vitality of linguistic signs.

For Augustine, words are signs capable of reminding us of things that we have encountered through other means. Words have a natural function of pushing us to discern new meaning. Interestingly, Deely notes that both Augustine and Saussure offer "a general category of the sign" (Manetti, 2010, p. 269). Deely differentiates the two, with Saussure grounding the linguistic sign as the fundamental directing principle and Augustine placing all signs within a non-linguistic class. Augustine brings together non-linguistic and linguistic with his notion of *signum*. Saussure's general understanding of semiology begins with linguistic signs that are essential in understanding other forms of signs.

Eco, in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (1986), examines the orientations of Augustine and Saussure, seeing limitations in each, with Augustine embracing linguistic signs within the larger rubric of non-linguistic signs. Interestingly, Eco finds greater difficulty with Saussure. For Eco, Saussure's project offers a flat equivalence between signifier and signified. Eco is more interested in an inferential model. Augustine's orientation does not get there precisely but is closer than Saussure's linguistic naming. Eco underscores the importance of Peirce's understanding of abduction, which harkens back to Augustine's focus on the revelatory. Deely contends that modernity assumes structuralism, whereas postmodernity unleashes the revelatory in a Peircean view of abduction, which generates creative consideration beyond and inclusive of induction and deduction. Additionally, Deely suggests that Émile Benveniste (1902-1976) offers another reminder of the importance of semiolinguistic concepts moving from structuralism to revelatory insight, which begins with the non-linguistic venturing into linguistic expression.

Richard Smith (2016) examines Deely's project, emphasizing Augustine's

distinction between natural signs and conventional signs, which Smith corroborates with a citing of Sebeok.<sup>4</sup> These philosophical figures differentiate between a sign and a thing, with a sign understood epistemologically, not ontologically, in order to understand a thing. Deely connects Augustine to a “Semiotic Age” working within a medieval and Catholic paradigm of the semantic animal (Smith, 2016, p. 175). Smith emphasizes that Deely (2010b) quotes “Ratzinger’s [later Benedict XVI] claim that ‘the undivided sway of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality’” (p. xv). This assertion moves the notion of sign and semiosis into the realm of ontology within a relational grammar.

Deely’s focus on the Catholic semantic animal begins with Augustine, Scotus in the 14th century, and Poinot in the 16th century. This orientation, according to Smith (2016), was ignored until the 1920s, at which time Jacques Maritain, a Catholic philosopher, re-emphasized Poinot’s approach. Deely’s definition of semantic animal owes much to Poinot, as Deely spent 15 years translating and editing Poinot’s primary work, *Tractatus de Signis*. Sebeok (1982) claims this work was “the ‘missing link’ between the ancients and the moderns” (p. x). The semiotic tied to an ontological understanding of relationality provides the ground for ongoing semiosis. This conception coincides with Deely’s emphasis on semiotics as relational and, indeed, revelatory. Deely understands semiosis as creation in action.

Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio’s (2018) discussion of semioethics contributes to this perspective; they recount the connection between ontology and the revelatory, citing the dialogic nature of Deely’s work with Augustine (p. 165). Deely (2015) understands human animals as inherently tied to responsibilities, learning through “semiosis [which becomes] ‘metasemiosis’ or semiotics that our interactions involve us in the whole of Gaia, not just in the human socio-cultural sphere” (p. 21). The connection between responsibilities and semiosis leads Jeff Bernard (2008) to applaud Petrilli and Ponzio’s emphasis on semioethics. Petrilli and Ponzio (2018) emphasize a “Poinot trilogy” in which Deely places Poinot in dialogue with Augustine in one of three major works (p. 167): *Descartes & Poinot: The Crossroad of Signs and Ideas* (2008), *Augustine & Poinot: The Protosemiotic Development* (2009), and *Peirce & Poinot: The Action of Signs from Nature to Ethics*, an unpublished manuscript originally planned as the third volume of the trilogy. Petrilli and Ponzio (2018) underscore the importance of semiosis in understanding the real and the mythological. They stress the ontological and revelatory as “indispensable to awareness” (p. 168). Deely’s understanding of Augustine’s intuited transcendence connects culture and nature, responding to the revelatory.

Deely’s connection to Ponzio and Petrilli began with the narrative framework of Augustine constantly understanding existence as a part of God. Ponzio and Petrilli (2003) push off the work of Sebeok and biosemiotics and move to semioethics as a narrative interpretive ground from which one understands the ongoing revelation of semiosis. Petrilli and Ponzio (2018), in turn, address Deely’s engagement with Poinot and Augustine with the term “metasemiosis”, which suggests a higher level of semiosis—a reflection on signs and their implications, akin to terms such as semioethics, dialogism, and Otherness (p. 174). The return back to Augustine and the Latins is a return back to the revelatory, metasemiosis (Deely, 2009), and semioethics (Ponzio & Petrilli, 2010; Petrilli, 2011).

With the stress on semiosis and ethics, Deely opens a conversation about the responsibility of the semiotic animal as an ontological being. Deely embraces the importance of Augustine and the responsibility of *attending* to God's world rather than *using* God's world. Metasemiosis goes "*beyond* semiosis"; it is the responsibility of a semiotic animal (Petrilli & Ponzio, 2018, p. 175). Petrilli and Ponzio (2018) stress semiosis and the revelatory in their discussion of metasemiosis and responsibility. They state that

both the origins of philosophy and of semiotics may be identified in the propensity to care for life, for the life of the other; and this confirms the notion that understanding starts from non-indifference towards the other, from an ethical implication or involvement in the life of the other. (p. 181)

This understanding of responsibility via metasemiosis outlines the underlying Catholic nature of Deely's project and his attraction to Augustine.

Richard Lanigan (2016) underscores the revelatory project of Deely, reflecting on Deely's critical contention with Heidegger. Lanigan argues that

John Deely detects a *moral flaw* (via a Thomistic critique) in Heidegger; the failure to adhere to Edmund Husserl's (1929) definition of *esse intentionale* as the maxim: "Subjectivity is Intersubjectivity" as *cultural, social, and personal position* in process, i.e., Husserl's "consciousness of . . ." (p. 286)

Lanigan emphasizes that Deely uncovered the moral shortcomings of Heidegger's "The Care of the Self",<sup>5</sup> indicating that the task is that of "The Care of the Self of the Other" (p. 287). Lanigan (2016) underscores Deely's project of outing the evil shadow of Heidegger's project. In Heidegger's personal diaries, or *schwarze Hefte* ("Black Notebooks"), one finds rampant moral failures via fascism and racism. Lanigan ends his essay by underscoring Maritain's (1937) reminder that "sign is that which renders present to knowledge something other than itself" (p. 1). The fundamental concern of Deely is that the self becomes not a sign but an object for Heidegger, for the sign is the self of the other, pointing to something beyond itself and calling forth responsibility for the other.

Göran Sonesson (2018) illuminates Deely's telling of the story of semiotics and of signs, clarifying for readers the abrupt leaps of faith that Deely makes as he moves through modernity and the Enlightenment. In fact, Deely, for Sonesson, largely omits the historical era of modernity. Sonesson does a succinct and thoughtful job of outlining the particularity of Deely's project. Sonesson laments Deely's disregard for modernity and its contributions to the understanding of the sign. He emphasizes a host of ignored contributions, generally within the rubric of neo-Kantian and phenomenological engagement. Sonesson refers to the scholastic commitment of Deely in overcoming a mind-dependent and a mind-independent understanding of being. Sonesson's conclusion is critical of Deely's short-play with modernity and philosophers within that moment. His assertion is correct, while missing Deely's objective. Deely engages an abductive move that privileges a world before and after the Enlightenment. Perhaps the most succinct description of Deely in response to the

Enlightenment and modernity is that it was a moral cul-de-sac.

Deely engages in two moves of abduction. The first considers modernity and the Enlightenment a moral cul-de-sac, an aberration. He affirms a postmodern view of the world as an extension not of modernity but of the medieval world. In postmodern language, there are competing narratives. Modernity harbors an obsession with the unleashing of the individual, celebrating the role of the individual agent in shaping the world. Medieval and postmodern renditions of existence unite in their opposition to modernity in that identity comes from the narratives in which we are situated, not from “me” and not from material circumstances alone. Deely senses in postmodern language a return to the revelatory, the way in which the narrative ground under our feet shapes human identity.<sup>6</sup>

Sam Whitsitt (1986) articulates Deely’s abductive rendering of philosophical history, particularly of Augustine and Poinot. Whitsitt (1986) states that Deely frames Poinot as someone who undertook “the most radical and fundamental critique ever made of Representation” (p. 70). Whitsitt then says, of course, that we know Poinot as represented by Deely. Whitsitt (1986) refers to two definitions of the sign from Augustine as presented by Deely that point in differing directions. According to the first definition, “A sign is a thing which over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into thought as a consequence” (Deely, 1981, p. 18). According to the second definition, “A sign is something which, on being perceived, brings something other than itself into awareness” (Deely, 1981, p. 57). Whitsitt wonders if this is sloppy scholarship, the first quote pointing to representation and the second quote providing a serious alternative to representation.<sup>7</sup> He questions what Deely is doing with Augustine and why he is not troubled by these differing quotations. For Deely, Augustine offers a beginning knowledge about the sign, and the contrary statements are understood as non-contradictory, a unity of contraries. Deely offers this contradictory/non-contradictory position through abduction, stumbling onto Augustine’s revelatory claim of sign, which unites the natural and conventional. Deely tells a story that points to practices beyond the terrain of a modern conception of accuracy; he works within an arena of narrative implications. Deely details narrative ground for semiotics with a general sign that unites and transforms, shifting one sign into another and making semiosis a defining revelatory reality of existence.

Deely (2010a) offers a statement that unfolds the hermeneutic mystery of his work:

Augustine’s main interest in any event was not at all that range of common experiences which portend [the particularity of] ideoscopy as necessary to their understanding but rather precisely that “high point” of [the general scope of] cenoscopic possibility, the being of God in relation to the world and to human beings within it; and his orientation to the questions so focused, as we would say today, specifically sectarian. (p. xxxiii)<sup>8</sup>

The Christian faith for Augustine was the absolute, the penultimate, presupposition that guides understanding. As Deely deals with *Medieval Philosophy Redefined*, he stresses Augustine’s consistent and ongoing background argument: This is God’s world. He takes the 4th-century proposal of Augustine’s notion of sign and connects it to Poinot’s early-17th-century contributions, disregarding the ontological differences

between the real and the fictive, or what he refers to respectively as the intersubjective and the objective.

The connecting link between Augustine and Poincaré is Boethius; he was “after Augustine the most important transition figure from Greek to Latin philosophy” (Deely, 2010a, p. 27). Boethius was the last person in the Latin era with full knowledge and linguistic ability to understand the ancient world and render translation.<sup>9</sup> Deely (2010a) considers Boethius to be the central link between “a pagan and Christian philosophy” (p. 96). Unfortunately, Boethius’s knowledge of Greek language and the Greek philosophers did not protect him from Italian political strife. He was accused of joining a conspiracy within the Senate, tried before King Theodoric the Great (AD 454-526), and then sentenced to death by garroting.<sup>10</sup> With Boethius’s death, the world moved with increasing energy toward its next major philosophical era (Deely, 2001). For Deely, there is a hypertextual accord between a medieval and a postmodern world that yields ongoing revelatory insight.

## **5. Implications: Deely and the Hypertextual Revelatory**

Deely (2010a) argues that Christian philosophy morphed into theology in the age of Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-74). Deely indicates that Augustine functioned differently, occupying an era in which God “[acts as] a pure eye, because he sees all” (p. 236). This position announces a fundamental presupposition about “God within” as the theological and practical background of a general understanding of sign. Augustine rejected fundamentalist attitudes of finding biblical truths scripturally. He was primarily concerned with the way in which biblical truths play out in existence in the spiritual and practical lives of people. For Deely and Augustine, the sign is inescapably relational. Augustine’s concern for the long-term future of a human mortal included the possibility of salvation. Deely understands fundamentalism as an imagined world of lost innocence; Augustine did not offer fundamentalism, but revelatory semiosis within the backdrop of God’s world.

Deely considers Augustine a genius, announcing ongoing development of revelatory acts of semiosis. Later, the term “evolution” would describe such a phenomenon, but, for Augustine, it was the revelatory of the divine meeting the demands of existence. Deely’s contention is that Augustine pointed toward a cenoscopic philosophical tradition. This meeting of the common in existence, which unites us all, requires disclosure; it contrasts with a science that is ideoscopic, driven by the particular and the unique. Individualism fits ideoscopic science. Narrative history and narrative ethics work within a cenoscopic view of the world.

Deely (2009) presupposes that the linkages among mind, nature, and culture yield sign relations of “never-ending growth” (p. 5). Deely bluntly states that the general understanding of sign from Augustine was formulated far from the impetus to construct a project on semiotics. For Augustine, the primary task was advancing, promoting, and understanding Christian doctrine. Deely indicates that some viewed Augustine’s understanding of sign and consciousness as a form of psychologizing an inner word. Such a position misses Augustine’s dwelling deep within the experience of the faith. Augustine worked with a hermeneutic appetite of consistently witnessing the unfolding of God’s world. Augustine understood that our sensory apparatus comes

from the voice of “the Teacher who speaks within” (as cited in Deely, 2009, p. 22). Deely (2009) states that Augustine’s writings are of little assistance as a theory on semiotics unless one begins and concludes with *De Doctrina Christiana*. For Augustine, there was a presupposed interdependence between material structures and interstates, with the human being born in God’s image and existence understood as an act of God’s revelatory creation.

Deely (2009) continually celebrates our debt to Poincaré for his work on Augustine, carried forth by Maritain, whose work was familiar to Sebeok. This relational orientation is what makes a sign accessible through its relational linkage—what Peirce eventually called “the triadic relation existing between a sign, its object, and the interpreting thought” (as cited in Deely, 2009, p. 69).<sup>11</sup> The revelatory in direct experience is always indirect, pointing to a relational third that leads to ongoing semiosis. Augustine’s position on the diversity of linguistic engagement and our dependence upon signs comes from an epistemological chaos rendered by original sin, which naturally gives rise to revelatory semiosis of change. With each philosophical gesture, Augustine weaves his understanding of general sign within a theological framing.

Deely indicates stages of the study of semiosis within semiotics: presemiotic (ancient Greek philosophers), protosemiotic (Augustine and the Latin Age), and cryptosemiotic (Descartes and modernity) (Nuessel, 2011). Semiotics proper sidesteps the cryptosemiotic stage of modernity. Deely recognizes that the cryptosemiotic development within modernity is “a Janus-faced situation” (Deely, 2009, p. v) that propels a third turning point

at which C. S. Peirce . . . turns back to the Latins and picks up again the threads of the semiotic development. He thus establishes himself as the last of the moderns and the first of the postmoderns in realizing that the being of signs as triadic relations holds the key not only to hardcore realism of ancient Greek and medieval Latin thought—the “scholastic realism”, as Peirce called it—but equally to the realism of social construction in the realm of objects which had so entangled the later moderns that they despairingly came to see “realism” as an illusory alternative to idealism. (pp. vi-vii)

Deely’s (2009) examination of Augustine and signs concludes as it began with the importance of a medieval era situated within the experience of faith.

Deely, like a number of scholars interested in postmodern considerations, understands modernity as a wrong turn, not as a universal answer. Through the act of abduction, Deely’s consistent return to Augustine’s revelatory understanding of sign in general leaps from a medieval world into a postmodern conception of existence. Postmodernity is a juncture or a space in which multiple historical periods exist simultaneously (Lyotard, 1979/1984). The term that exemplifies this juncture-like nature of postmodernity comes from Umberto Eco (1990; 2005): hypertextuality, which acknowledges the presence of multiple texts simultaneously. Deely’s own hypertextual interests return him to Augustine and the clarity of a narrative ground belonging to God. Deely returns not as a modernist presupposing that Augustine had everything right but as a postmodernist, recognizing that the clarity of ground on which Augustine labored still matters. Deely’s semiotics acts in conjunction with

narrative clarity that is far from metanarrative assurance; it is a background narrative with a clarity of values that drive semiotic interpretation and the ongoing revelatory possibilities of semiosis. Deely does not understand semiotics proper as a universal signature of truth, but as forever situated in revelatory possibilities for human understanding. When Augustine (1943) states, "I have become a question to myself", the answer does not emerge from a modern search for the self; the answer emerges from situating a life within a narrative that gives revelatory insight.<sup>12</sup>

Deely's view of semiosis is value-laden, tainted with standpoint and a narrative perspective attentive to God's world. Deely's commitment to Augustine assumes that modernity's fascination with the self alone was a mistaken path. The modern focus on the self deflects from understanding the origin and the creative development of semiosis, which comes from relational participation seeking the care of the self in the other. Deely does not point to a modern answer; instead, he takes us to a hypertextual story in which a medieval world can inform today, announcing revelatory semiosis, or, what he termed, a postmodern reality of ongoing multiplicity and difference situated within God's world. Deely's love of Augustine begins and continues with a revelatory semiosis that calls us to respond to that world with increasing responsibility for the signs we engage.

## Notes

- 1 For example, Augustine is known for his illumination theory. Ronald H. Nash (1971) writes: "The divine light is Augustine's answer to how man knows the eternal ideas that subsist in the mind of God. Since Augustine believes that a knowledge of the Forms is a necessary condition for any knowledge man might have of temporal reality, all human knowledge must be explained ultimately in terms of the divine light. Augustine's illumination theory cannot be understood apart from his discussion of such typically Platonic subjects as the distinctions between Forms and particulars, between knowledge and opinion, and between reason and experience . . . The interpretation I have advanced suggests that any adequate understanding of Augustine's theory must take account of the fact that there are two lights involved in any act of human knowledge. Augustine is very careful in *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* to distinguish between the uncreated light of God and a different, created light which plays a necessary role in knowledge, viz. the mind of man. In other words, human knowledge is possible because of *two lights*, the uncreated light of God and the created, mutable light which is man's intellect. Just as the moon derives the light it reflects from the sun, so the rational mind of man derives a created ability to know from its origin, God. The knowledge possessed by man can be regarded as a reflection of the truth originating in the mind of God" (pp. 48-49, emphasis added).
- 2 For commentary on the connections between Poincaré and Galileo and a modern turn, see Baenziger (2016).
- 3 Husserl's German is "*zu den Sachen selbst!*" ("to the 'subject matters/things' themselves"), not "*zu den Dingen an sich!*" ("to the things 'in themselves'", reflexive). Deely's interpretation is not without controversy. Note that Husserl's "thing" is the Greek *phenomenona* = appearance ("appearance" is not "in-itself").
- 4 See Sebeok (1979).
- 5 See Heidegger (1927/1962). Lanigan (2016) explains: "What is Heidegger concerned with? The short answer is: 'The Care of the Self' that is *Being-there-Being* [*Dasein-Da-*

*Sein*]. Deely argues that the *moral* answer should be: The Care of the Self of the Other' that is, a comportment of moral concern that expresses *there-Being-there [Da-Sein-Dasein]*" (p. 287).

- 6 On narrative ground, see Taylor (1989).
- 7 Deely is assuming the Kantian distinction between the sensible represented (*Darstellung*) and the transcendent presented (*Vorstellung*). It is not sloppy scholarship, just the presumption of a sophisticated reader.
- 8 Deely uses "ideoscopy", with Charles Sanders Peirce (1958) using "idioscopy" (8.199, p. 157).
- 9 See MacIntyre (2009).
- 10 This bit of historical information is controversial, with some suggesting that he did not actually participate in the conspiracy. Boethius (1969) denied the accusation.
- 11 Deely (2009) cites Peirce (1958, 8.332, p. 226).
- 12 This position is a restatement of the Greek concept of *aitia* [explanation] which is best explicated as "finding an answer in a question", more commonly called the "Socratic method" of dialogue.

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