

“TELL ME, WHERE IS
MORALITY BRED?”¹
THE SEMIOETHICS
INTERVIEWS² I: JOHN DEELY

April 7, 2009

The actors: John Deely (hereafter ‘JD’) and Morten Tønnessen (hereafter ‘MT’).

The scene: An apartment by Raekoja Plats (Town Hall Square), Tartu (where Deely was a visiting professor the spring term of 2009)

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MT: *My impression is that semioethics first of all concerns the foundation of ethics, or of moral responsibility. Would you agree with that?*

¹ The current work has in part been carried out as part of the research projects "Dynamical zoosemiotics and animal representations" (ETF/ESF 7790) and "Methods of biosemiotics" (ETF 6669).

² The author's work with semioethics started out a little before the 9th World Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Helsinki/Imatra 2007 (June 11-17th). After I presented a pointed critique of Susan Petrilli's framing of semioethics during my talk 'Where I end and you begin: The threshold of the self and the intrinsic value of the phenomenal world', Petrilli invited me to partake in a dialogue on the topic. This article represents the first literal outcome of such a dialogue – here with John Deely, who has joined Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio in their endeavor by grounding the notion of semioethics in philosophical terms. Three more interview articles involving Deely is planned, on the basis of recorded talks dating from April and May 2009. In the second volume of his Poinot trilogy – which happened to be published ahead of the first volume – Deely (2008: vi) stipulates that “[t]he implications for ethics as ‘semioethics’ will appear in our third and concluding volume, and require further development in volumes devoted to the challenge of a semiotic understanding of responsibility.” The third volume of that trilogy is entitled *Peirce & Poinot: The Action of Signs from Nature to Ethics* (cf. Deely 2008: i; Deely 2009: i).

JD: The foundation of moral responsibility... Semiotics didn't really get started, as distinguished from semiology, until after Sebeok. So far as there was any shaping influence during the whole development of the later part of the 20th century, it was Sebeok. Now, in Sebeok's work, and in the work of the 20th century, there was almost no talk whatsoever of ethics in semiotics. It was all pretty much just theoretical. And then all of a sudden, right as the 20th century was ending, there started to be some interest in the ethical implications. I know that in the case of Susan [Petrilli] and Augusto [Ponzio], the Bari school – their interest in that went way back, in fact, they went through a whole series of different names that they tried out... It wasn't until 2003 that they published that book entitled 'Semioethics' [*Semioetica*, cf. Petrilli and Ponzio 2003]. But back in [2000], Eero Tarasti came up with that book called *Existential semiotics* [cf. Tarasti 2000], and that was a turn, the same kind of turn toward the ethical. Now, Thomas Aquinas had this distinction between speculative intellect and practical intellect that goes all the way back to Aristotle. And in Aristotle, the basic difference was that speculative understanding concerns the world of nature, the things that are what they are independently of human beings. Of course in Aristotle's time, and also in the time of St. Thomas, the world of nature was considered in some ways much more vast than what we consider it today – in contrast to the practical – because the practical, for them, was a realm of human behavior and human making – in other words, the things which we can control. But the things that we can control are extremely limited. There was human behaviour – and the control over that was ethics, taking responsibility for action – and then the realm of making they also considered part of ethics, along with politics; but the realm of making didn't extend all that far into nature itself. So that was your basic division, between speculative and practical. But Thomas made the – really quite brilliant – [observation that] what distinguishes human understanding is precisely the ability to come to know things as they are. And it's from the knowledge of the way the things are that practical knowledge follows. So there's not just a *split* between speculative and practical, there's a sequence: The human intellect comes to understand things, and on the basis of what it understands becomes able to exercise control over what is understood.³

³ Cf Deely 2005: 206-207, where he refers to “the point of Aquinas' maxim that speculative understanding becomes practical by enabling human control to extend to ever new areas of the universe as understood, the universe of objects”. Cf. also Deely 2009: 212, where it is stated that today's “semiotics, like the theology of medieval times (but without the appeal to revelation), is neither determinately speculative nor determinately practical but extends to both.” Aquinas' phrase that “the speculative intellect by extension becomes practical” (“intellectus speculativus per extensionem fit practicus”) is from *Summa theologiae*, Prima Pars, Quaestio 79, Articulus 11, *sed contra*, cf. Aquinas c1252-73, and is a paraphrase of Aristotle's statement (*De anima*, II, 10 433a 15) that “the practical intellect [...] differs from

MT: *In one of your articles you more or less equate existential semiotics with semioethics. Would you really say that they are about the same thing? I mean, they both have an ethical inclination, but isn't it to go to far to say that it's different names for the same thing?*

JD: No. Following the same point as I was making earlier, about the speculative intellect becoming practical by extension... When you start to move from your understanding of semiosis to the question of the specifically human involvement in it, and the responsibility that humans have for what happens through semiosis that involves a human, it really doesn't matter what name you give it. It's essentially the same movement. Suddenly there's an interest in the practical implications of the understanding of semiotics. Eero called it existential semiotics – I don't think that name has any future, I don't think that name is as good a name as "semioethics", because it harks back too much, for example, to Paris of 1968; but...

MT: *Is semioethics a good name?*

JD: I think semioethics was an absolutely brilliant choice of terms.

MT: *And why is that better as a name?*

JD: Because it directly ties in to the whole idea of semiotics. You've got *semiosis*, you've got *semiotics*, you've got the *semiosphere* – within the semiosphere, the ethical dimension – I just think it fits.

MT: *How attractive a term do you think it is for non-semioticians?*

JD: I don't care how attractive a term it is for non-semioticians, because – that's like saying, "how attractive is the term 'semioethics' for people that understand nothing of semiotics?" Let them gain an understanding of semiotics, and they will find the term attractive – I think.

MT: *Right.*

JD (*laughs*): That's a funny question...

MT: *One of the reasons that I am asking whether a proper understanding of semioethics is to understand it as a meta-ethical theory, a theory about the foundation of human moral responsibility, is that it doesn't seem to go very far beyond that. Further questions I have are as following: What are the norms of semioethics? What is the practical moral stance of semioethics? What is the practical political analysis, for instance, in today's world of semioethics? All of these questions you can simply say you're not interested in answering, if semioethics is all about the foundation of ethics as such.*

the speculative intellect by the end at which it aims" ("intellectus) speculativus differt a practico, fine"), cf. Aristotle c350 AC.

JD: First of all, as soon as you bring in the term ‘meta’ – it’s like putting a warning signal, because the term is almost always abused. I’ve had some discussions with Susan and Augusto about this. They started to use the term ‘metasemiotics’. It’s an oxymoron. The only person that has metasemiotic knowledge is God!

MT: *But ‘metasemiosis’...*

JD: ‘Metasemiosis’ – yes, it makes sense. It’s not a term that I would have chosen, but it at least makes sense: semiosis become aware of itself. ‘Metasemiotics’ does not. When you start talking about ‘meta-ethics’, you’re back into the analytic tradition. It’s a complete waste of time. ‘Meta-ethics’? No.

A WHOLE NEW BEGINNING FOR ETHICS?

MT: *Then, let’s talk about the foundation of ethics. Isn’t that a main focus of semioethics?*

JD: The main question of semioethics, it seems to me, springs from the discovery that the human being has responsibility that goes beyond the human world. That’s the main discovery, that’s what basically distinguishes the idea of semioethics from the traditional ideas of ethics, because the traditional ideas of ethics – it’s pretty much restricted to the human world.

MT: *I guess part of this semioethical realization concerns what real-world consequences all our human actions have, and to what extent the human world practically – ehm – messes with a natural world that is non-human.*

JD: Did you say ‘messes’?

MT: *In search of a better word – ...or interferes in a non-human world. Isn’t part of the realization that there is not a sharp distinction between what concerns humans and what concerns others than humans?*

JD: Yes, but when you start to speak about the human world as ‘messing with’ the world of nature, you’re coming from an almost Rousseauian, romantic idea of nature: that nature is what we need to just leave alone. And that’s completely naive, because we’re part of nature. They’re talking about – you know, it’s so criminal that we would eat the flesh of animals, etcetera. I like the cartoon – I think it was in *The New Yorker*, where there are these three characters who are very ecologically friendly, and there’s a couple of lions that are trying to eat them. And they’re up in a tree, and then two of them say to the third one: “Would you please explain to this guy [the closest lion] how much we’ve done for him?”

MT: *I gladly admit that these are not simple questions. But, part of what I am trying to sort out here is to what extent semioethics attempts to answer concrete questions about norms, ethical norms for instance. Or, whether it is rather limited to revise our understanding of human beings, and leave it at that.*

JD: You can't revise your understanding of human beings without having some impact upon the idea of ethical norms.

MT: *No, but then it's only ontology, so to speak, indirectly influencing ethics rather than something explicitly ethical.*

JD (pauses): With semioethics, you face the same problem that [Paul] Bouissac pointed out semiotics faced at the beginning: The question of taking pre-existing paradigms to make them fit into the semiotic framework, as opposed to thinking the things through on the basis of the paradigm proper to semiotics. So, whenever you start talking about meta-ethical theories... what you're basically doing is trying to take a preexisting paradigm and fit it in to the semiotic framework. The whole genius of the semioethics idea was – just as semiotics basically is a whole new beginning for philosophy – a starting over...

MT: *That might work, but in that case you would need – norms. Because what is an ethics without norms?*

JD: Well, what do you mean by norms?

A CALL FOR MORAL TREATMENT

MT: *By a norm I mean a statement of value somehow giving you an idea about what kind of behaviour is good or legitimate.*

JD: What do you think is the basic norm of ethics?

MT: *Well, I have certain ideas about that, and I think it might even be possible to express in semiotic terms...*

JD: Let me hear – what do you think is the basic norm of ethics?

MT (pauses): *Then I'll start by quoting...*

JD (laughs): Not Nietzsche, I hope.

MT: *No. This is something I have phrased myself. In 2003, I published 'Umwelt ethics' [cf. Tønnessen 2003], which was an attempt to approach ethics, and especially*

environmental ethics, from an Uexküllian point of view. It was published in 2003, the same year as Susan and Augusto first published on semioethics⁴.

JD: See what I mean? It's like, something of the time.

MT: *There I tried to define a moral agent – a traditional term – in the following way [p. 291]: “In a biosemiotic context, a moral agent can be defined as someone who stands for itself” – himself, herself – “as one who is required to act according to certain moral standards, i.e., a being who takes part in the functional cycle of the moral subject.”*

JD: OK, but you're already begging the question...

MT: *I'll get to that. This doesn't answer your question quite yet. Further: “When this functional cycle” – the functional cycle of the moral subject – “comes into use, the moral subject, i.e. the subject in the subject-object relation, has a moral tone – in other words, the moral agent experiences a call for moral treatment.” In that sense, it is of course a very individual or subjective matter to what extent you feel ethically responsible, and to some extent I think you can say that our norms for ethical behaviour have to be based on the identity of the one responsible.*

(The two discuss the term 'moral agent'.)

MT: *You're not familiar with the term?*

JD: I am very familiar with the term. But what does it mean?

MT: *Many in contemporary ethics would simply assume that in order to deserve moral consideration, you should yourself have moral agency. That's one line of arguing that many use also to exclude non-humans as relevant for ethical treatment, at least in any way that is the same as normal, individual human beings deserve it.*

JD: Is there any ethical system that thinks that non-human animals should have exactly the same treatment as humans?

AGENTS AND THEIR SUBJECTS (AND THEIR NEEDS)

MT: *It depends what you mean by 'exactly the same'. There are biocentric and ecocentric ethical theories, where some would say that in principle all life forms, for*

⁴ The very first publication to appear with 'semioethics' in the title (in English) was Petrilli and Ponzio 2003 – in *Sign Systems Studies* (coincidentally the very same issue as Tønnessen 2003 appeared in). Petrilli 2003 was derived from a congress presentation (held in Milan) dating to May 10-12th 2002. In 2003 Petrilli published a further three related titles in Italian. Since then she has published a further three titles in Italian and a further nine titles including the term 'semioethics' in English.

instance, have the same right to ethical consideration, if not right to be treated as a human – because no non-human needs to be treated as a human. That’s not really the issue. But some would say that they equally qualify as deserving our ethical consideration. That’s just to acknowledge that it matters how we treat that being or life form. But you still have an ethical choice, and moral dilemmas. But anyway, this is just reasoning from the very bottom and up. First defining a moral agent, and then – on the next page [Tønnessen 2003: 292], I go on to attribution of moral status, and I say, in very broad terms – you can consider this either bio- or ecocentric moral stands: “the reason why it makes sense to regard all semiotic agents – i.e., all bio-ontological monads, as moral subjects...”

JD: So, would a dog be a bio-ontological monad?

MT: Yes... Here, ‘monad’ is partly derived from Uexküll...

JD: It’s from Leibniz, actually.

MT: Yes, sure.

JD: But see, I would flatly and absolutely deny that the dog is a semiotic agent. It’s a semiosic agent, it’s not a semiotic agent.

MT: Semiosic agent. Right – let’s try to rephrase it like that. The reason why it makes sense to regard all semiosic agents as moral subjects – this is the claim – is that with respect to these entities, our actions make a difference.⁵

JD: But for me a moral subject would mean a subject capable of moral responsibility.⁶

MT: This might be a confused term, because by ‘moral subject’, I don’t mean the same as a moral agent, I rather mean an object of moral inquiry – something you inquire about.

JD: Let’s go back to this moral agent thing, if you don’t mind. What makes an agent a moral agent?

MT: Here I quote Kalevi Kull [2001: 361, cf. Tønnessen 2003: 292], who says that “everything alive has needs per se, not so the lifeless nor the dead”.⁷ So, to be alive is

⁵ Cf. Deely 2009: 210, where he states that “the human animal is the only animal capable of appreciating the requirements that the actions of signs imposes through the natural world on the well-being of all life-forms [...] Thus ‘global semiotics’ develops naturally in the direction of a *semioethics*.”

⁶ Deely comments: “Somewhere here we got into your distinction between *moral subject* and *moral agent* [cf. Tønnessen 2003: 291-2], which I had never thought of (or seen) before, only the equation of the two. I thought your way of making this distinction was a very promising one, and made for a considerably more enlightened discussion than simple claims of ‘animal rights’, for instance.”

to have certain needs. In a way you could say that any creature attempts to fulfill its own needs. That's not morality, that's just how a living being functions. So, morality has somehow to concern the needs of others, perhaps even for their own sake. It is to consider something that is not your own need, but the need of someone else – that's at least a start of morality. But I don't know if you would accept that that is already morality – if we talk about social animals... Where would you say it makes sense to start talking about morality?

AN EXPLICIT ACCOUNT OF OTHERNESS (OR: A PRETTY GOOD REASON FOR HITTING SOMEONE)

JD: Certainly all talk about morality has been, in the past, first of all of the relations of human beings to one another. Wouldn't you agree?

MT: *Yes, sure. And to some extent we have seen a gradual extension of this society of subjects that we think deserve moral consideration. Not systematically, but in some steps certainly.*

JD: Yes. The animal rights movement...

MT: *...to all of humanity – women's rights. Animal rights. And also nature beyond individuals.*

JD: I think 'moral agent' is the key concept to focus on. "A moral agent", you say, "can be defined as someone who stands for itself as one who is required to act according to certain moral standards". That doesn't help, that just goes in circle.

MT: *It does, but it points to the identity, and the self-understanding that morality starts not with a claim from outside but as something that is regarded as a claim upon oneself.*

JD: But I think that if you go from the beginning of this sentence to the period, you simply go in a circle. So to break the circle, I would say that the moral agent, in a biosemiotic context, can be defined as someone who stands for itself as one who is required to *take an explicit account of otherness*.

MT: *An explicit account of otherness...*

JD: Yes. And then you have your different kinds of otherness. There's the otherness of a stone, there's the otherness of a tree, there's the otherness of a lion,

⁷ "Wherever there is semiosis, there are needs," I comment following the quote, "and even though actual moral treatment is also a question of practicability, attribution of moral status is a principal one."

there's the otherness of a crow, there's the otherness of a dog, there's the otherness of another human...

MT: *What's the minimum requirement for taking an explicit account of otherness?*

JD: The minimal requirement, I would say, is the capacity to have an awareness of the thing in itself, the thing as existing in its own right.

MT: *But – awareness... Usually, ethics is regarded as something that is related to behaviour and actions. Awareness is surely relevant for behaviour, but you don't address behaviour – or norms for behaviour – explicitly.*

JD: Morality is a certain kind of consciousness. It presupposes consciousness.

MT: *I would agree with that – I guess.*

JD: So, a consciousness is just awareness. And what is the kind of awareness that creates a moral agent? It's the kind of awareness that can have an awareness of the other as other – which requires a notion of things as opposed to objects. Two kids get into a fight at the school grounds. You call them in – the principal, the teacher. "Why did you hit Patrick?" "Because I don't like him". That's actually a pretty good reason for hitting someone. That's exactly the reason why animals attack one another. But now you say: "Hey, wait a minute, that's not sufficient, Johnny. Patrick is a being in his own right" (*laughs*), "he has rights that you have to respect" etc. And so you try to teach children – but if you get a dog that attacks someone, you don't take it aside and say "hey – why did you do that? Don't you understand that that person has rights?". You train a dog, but you teach a child.

"YOU MAY RECOGNIZE OTHERNESS AND STILL SHOOT THE GUY"

MT: *Here it seems clear that morality is something that transcends not only your own identity, but also your own feelings or emotions – urges. Even though I hate Paul, I will not hit him, because he's a person in his own right. Then it's a conception of the other not only as something different from one self, but also somehow of an equal standing. Right?*

JD: Not necessarily of an equal standing. You can say that other human beings are of an equal standing, but you can't say that an elephant is of an equal standing with a human.⁸ I mean, you can, if you want to, but...

⁸ Cf. Deely 2005: 133, where – in the context of an evaluation of Martin Krampen's phytosemiotics through a comparison with zoösemiotics – Deely observes that "[t]here seems to [be] a basic sense in which semiosis is hierarchical, a series of irreducible levels or zones that are integrally actualized only in the final layer".

MT: *Could you not say simply that the needs of this elephant, like the needs of – me, or my wife, should be met to the extent that it is practically possible? And that’s an ethical stand.*

JD: Yes – and then the question becomes – what does it mean, ‘practically possible’? And you’re right back to the whole business of understanding of the world, and your actions have to be based on your understanding – whether it’s moral action, or any kind of action. It has to be based on your understanding.

MT: *But this doesn’t solve any moral dilemma.*

JD: No.

MT: *At least it constitutes the scene...*

JD: I would say that it is required to recognize others, and – to – take – that – into account. *Into account.*

MT: *This seems like: ‘Let others be... what they are’.*

JD: No. Taking into account in one’s own action. You may recognize otherness and still shoot the guy. Legitimately.

MT: *That’s a rejection of otherness.*

JD: That’s not a rejection of otherness, it’s a rejection of what he’s doing. You come in and the guy is trying to rape your wife. You call him on, he turns around, he has a gun, and you happen to have a gun too, so you shoot him first. There’s a context where... you know, taking a human life is not necessarily wrong. What makes something wrong is the motif. Why are you doing it?

MT: *Or the context.*

JD: Context.

MT: *But in what context is it right to kill another person? You just did...*

JD (*laughs*): Yes, I just did state one such context.

MT: *OK, let me throw in another question here: What war would you defend?*

JD: What war would I defend? What war would I defend?

MT: *Or, what would it take for you to defend a war?*

JD (*pauses, then mumbles*): What war would I defend?

MT: *What was the last American war you supported?*

JD: Probably I would support World War II – I wasn't old enough, but probably I would support World War II. And I would have supported an invasion of Saudi Arabia, instead of the invasion of (*laughs*) Iraq. That's a joke, but...⁹

KALEVI KULL ON WHY GOOD IS TO BE DONE

JD: But you see the difference in this way of thinking and... This doesn't go in a circle. This shows something that only the semiotic animal can do. And that's the starting point of ethics. But now, the basic moral question concerns the difference between good and evil.

MT: *Let me just quote Sextus Empiricus [c160-210], about going in a circle. Sextus Empiricus, I guess you're familiar with him*¹⁰.

JD: Indeed.

MT: *Sextus Empiricus has demonstrated, as you might be aware, that any argument has a circular form, or it starts from something which you can not investigate, or it ends up in eternal regress. So, they each have their weaknesses, and they're all legitimate forms of arguing – to the extent that you can argue at all.*

⁹ Deely comments: "I never supported the invasion of Iraq. My position was that I didn't know if invasion of Iraq was justified or not, but if all Bush accomplished was the establishment of another Islamic state, then he ought to be impeached for the invasion." Though Deely acknowledges that "there are some good spiritual leaders within Islam", and points out (see Deely 2001: Chap. 5) that "it used to be the brightest spot in human civilization", he by and large portrays the Islamic world (or the Arabic world) today as "an island of backwardness", characterized by illiterate people, arbitrary authorities and, not least, by no separation of church (mosque) and state, and an archaic denial of there being any interpretation involved in the reading of holy scriptures. "Anytime you have an understanding, it involves interpretation – that's what concepts are, interpretations. So to think that you can have a context where there are no interpretations, it's just... pure obscurantism." – Later on in this interview session I would teasingly suggest that Deely would hold "that the modern intellectual era was in some sense – backwards" (to the effect that the world of Islam would be no worse than, say, modern analytical philosophy). Cf. Deely 2004: 43, where he refers to the modern era as the 'semiotic dark ages', putting the following words into the mouth of the 'Semiotist, voice 3': "Nor do the semiotic dark ages simply end with Peirce [who Deely conceives of as the last of the moderns and the first of the postmoderns], I am afraid. They extend into the dawn of our own century". Cf. also Deely 2009: v, where he states that the beginning of science in the modern sense was "a great advance for human understanding, yet on the side of science as cenoscopic – philosophy – took a wrong turn in the work of Descartes". Descartes, in other words, was good for science, but bad for philosophy. – But Deely would have nothing of a blanket dismissal of modernity as backwards: "No, definitely not backwards. Definitely not backwards. All the capabilities we have for travel in space, for construction of bridges, for manufacture of automobiles, all of these are achieved through science... Science was a great achievement."

¹⁰ Cf. Bury and Litt 1933.

JD: Thomas [Aquinas] has a much better way of putting that than Sextus Empiricus. (*JD presents Aquinas' view on self-evident truths*). And there are two principles he regards as self-evident, one for speculative understanding (that a thing can not both be and not be at the same time in the same respect), the other for practical understanding (that good is to be done)...

MT: *Why not? Why can't a thing both be and not be at the same time in the same respect?*

JD: Because it's impossible.

MT: *But this is about intuition, and human intuition changes through history, and is different in different cultures.*

JD: No, no. It's not different in different cultures, that's the whole point of it. And the other self-evident principle that he says is a starting point for practical thought is that good is to be done.

MT: *That good is to be done.*

JD: That good is to be done. So a thing can not both be and not be at the same time in the same respect – that's not something that can change from culture to culture...

MT: *In a strict sense, sure. But my point here is rather that concerning these eternal truths...*

JD: I didn't call them eternal truths, I call them self-evident truths.

MT: *I have an example from Augustine, who gives an example, in one of his writings, of something that is logically absolutely certain. And he gives the example: The sun cannot be shining while it is [night].*

JD: But the sun is shining while it's night, it's just not shining on this part of the Earth.

MT: *And in some parts of the world, you have midnight sun. Of course that was not what he had in mind giving this example, but to me this is an illustration that often when we try to phrase these self-evident truths, we end up doing it in a way that is highly contextual, in a way that we didn't realize was contextual.*

JD: That's fine, but... it remains that they're independent of context. There isn't any context where an apple can be red and green all over. There isn't any context where you can have a square circle. And Sextus Empiricus, I'm sure, uses this to arrive at some kind of skeptical conclusion.

MT: *Unlike me.*

JD: And Sextus doesn't take into account this notion of self-evident truth. Not very many people do. But that's the basis of moral choice, that good is to be done. So, you get into a situation – what are you supposed to do? It can be very difficult to say what is a good thing to do, but that's what you have to try and aim for – you may or may not succeed, but that's the driving force. One who has thought about this a lot is Kalevi Kull. He tried to figure out: Why should good be done, and he couldn't come up with anything (*laughs*). I wish he was here, to ask him about this, because it's quite interesting. He comes up with many interesting things (*laughs*).

DOG WITH PUPPIES VS. MAFIA CHIEFTAIN

MT: *You point on one hand to self-evident truths... on the other hand, on the moral scenery, there's always disagreement – so how can we find a common grounding of ethics, or of semioethics?*

JD: I brought this up only in the context of you bringing up Sextus Empiricus. Because this is a way out of Sextus Empiricus' skepticism.

MT: *Aristotle would agree with you.*

JD: Yes... It's not bad, to have Aristotle on your side sometimes (*laughs*). I don't know if you would agree, but I think this gives a way of defining a moral agent, that gets to why only human beings are moral agents.

MT: *Do you think that no other animal relates to otherness? If you talk about social responsibility among animals...*

JD: The animal lives purely in a world of objects, and the world of objects is organized in +/-/Ø. That's as far as it goes.

MT: *But they clearly have social relations....*

JD: That has nothing to do with morality. Nothing.

MT: *Does that mean that language is somehow necessary for morality to emerge?*

JD: That depends... Language is a tricky term. The way Sebeok used it, yes. But if you use language the way it's usually used, as a synonym for linguistic communication, no... Sebeok had this idea of the modeling system, that is to say the *Innenwelt*, which all animals have. In the human case, there's a biologically underdetermined aspect to that modeling system, and that he considers to be in the realm of adaptation. But that adaptation within the *Innenwelt* can get exapted to communication, and that's what constitutes what is usually called language, namely, linguistic communication. And then people tend to confuse communication with language, so they say dogs have a language, birds have a language... Birds and dogs

communicate, yes, but they don't have a language in Sebeok's sense of language. Linguistic communication is species-specifically human. So it constitutes a kind of a glass ceiling, as it were... You put an animal by the train station in Helsinki, they see a big statue of [Carl Gustaf Emil] Mannerheim [1867-1951]. They have no way of understanding what that statue means in terms of the history of Finland.

MT: *If you consider a dog taking care of its pups...*

JD: But that's not moral.

MT: *Do you see any relation at all to human morality, even as a comparison? How do you compare a human mother, treating her children in a certain way, with a dog or a cat, treating their pups or kittens?*

JD: That's not a question of morality, that's something in zoösemiosis. What's the difference between a mafia chieftain who takes care of his family very well, and – yet, one usually considers the mafia as a criminal organization.

MT: *Then for sure he has family values. That's ethically relevant, isn't it? At least in a human context.*

JD: In the human context, the mafia is considered to be an evil. It's a criminal organization. The fact that they take care of their own, that isn't what makes morality.

MT: *But if you ask anyone in the mafia, they would brag about their family values. They're good republican values.*

JD: Yes, but don't you see what I'm getting at? Taking care of one's own is not incompatible with criminal behaviour. And criminal behaviour is not moral behaviour.

MT (*pauses while breathing*): *But in the human context, you agree that family matters, and is relevant for morality?*

JD: Of course family matters and is relevant for morality. But it's not the same – and in the context of a dog taking care of its young, or a lion taking care of its young, that's zoösemiosis, that's not anthroposemiosis.

ILLEGITIMATE SEMIOSIS

MT: *And of course you would not use the term 'instinct' here, which you don't like.*

JD: No, I don't like the term instinct.

MT: *So they don't do it out of instinct, but somehow it's not a moral impulse anyway that drags them to do what they do?*

JD: That depends on how you define a moral impulse, but it's not a moral impulse in the way that I've defined it here, no, it's not.

MT: *Because animals have no concept of otherness, that is what you would claim.*

JD: No concept of otherness in the sense of being able to recognize a thing that exists independently of its relation with me. The animal knows what it likes, it knows what it doesn't like, and it knows what it hasn't made up its mind about or doesn't care about. And humans have all that too, but humans go one step further, the human says "regardless of how I feel about this thing – it has a being. It has a subjective constitution".

MT: *Do you think that dogs have no concept of their owners as existing in themselves somehow?*

JD: No, no.

MT: *They are pure objects.*

JD: 'Pure objects' is saying quite a bit. They're not pure objects, because pure objects *don't* exist. Hamlet is a pure object, Napoleon is not.

MT: *But they conceive of their owners in an objective way.*

JD: Absolutely, because they're aware of them. That's all that 'objective' means, to exist in awareness.

MT (pauses) *I would still like to get further in terms of distinctions we can make in an ethical context, about semiosis or communication. How can we distinguish, in ethical terms, good from bad communication? Or, legitimate semiosis from illegitimate semiosis? Would you draw up no such distinction? Or even hint at it?*

JD: Well, I don't know... Illegitimate semiosis... If you're in a courtroom and you're called upon to testify and swear an oath to tell the truth, and then you lie... That would be an illegitimate semiosis, I suppose.

MT: *But what decides whether semiosis is legitimate or not?*

JD: Well, in that case – your system of laws. But of course even laws have to be evaluated against the principle of "good is to be done".

MT: *But then it's just a matter of politics and majority...*

JD: No, it's not just a matter of politics and majority, it can be that, but – Thomas Aquinas would say, a law, even if it's enacted by the sovereign, if it is contrary to reason, which means contrary to good, it's not a legitimate law, it's not law... There are times when you are justified in standing up against the state. It may cost you your life, but you are justified in doing it, and even required to do it.

AN ANIMAL NEVERTHELESS (A BEING OF GAIA)

MT: *So maybe it's about each individual's morality and responsibility, and sense of morality.*

JD: That's right. Responsibility always comes down to the individual. And then the individual is always a member of society, so the individual has some obligation to be political, to influence society. Not everyone is required to be politicians, but everyone is obliged to some extent to engage in politics; you can't smugly decide to go off on your own.

MT: *So you would say that any individual has some obligation relevant to the society they live in, but not necessarily to adopt the norms of that society?*

JD: Any *human* individual. But getting back to how does semioethics differ from traditional ethics: It differs precisely because when we redefine human being as a semiotic animal, we gain everything that is involved in 'rational animal' – but it goes further.¹¹ Because in the notion of 'rational animal', we're still concentrating on what sets us apart from nature. In the definition of the semiotic animal, the very thing that sets us apart from nature is also the very thing that unites us with the rest of nature. Only the human animal can become aware of semiosis as a network of relations. But this network of relations doesn't separate the human being from the rest of nature, it ties the human being in with the rest of nature.

MT: *Here you occasionally refer to 'Gaia'.¹² How do you relate to the idea of Gaia?*

JD: Gaia is a very problematic term – I don't know the whole history of the term. There's a whole mythology about Gaia. The only thing that I know about the term Gaia is that [James] Lovelock introduced the term of the so-called Gaia hypothesis, and Sebeok picked up on it a little bit. That's where I got it, I got it from Sebeok.

MT: *Do you know the title of Lovelock's latest book?*

JD: No.

MT: *It's a terrible title, and a quite good book. The title is The Revenge of Gaia¹³.*

¹¹ The notion of the 'semiotic animal' is also generally contrasted by Deely with the modern concept of humans as '*res cogitans*' (thinking thing), which he finds to be inferior to the ancient notion of 'rational animal'.

¹² See e.g. Deely 2005: 124, where he refers to our time as "the age of Gaia (Lovelock 1979), where the recognition at last of delicate interdependencies within our own planetary ecology [...] have begun at long last to become themselves objectified".

JD: That sounds like a good title. Whenever I use the term Gaia, it's in the sense that there's a biosphere that involves the whole of the planet.

MT: *I actually met Lovelock – because I was at a one-week course at Schumacher College in England, about Gaia theory [in 1997] – it was taught by Stephan Harding, a colleague of Lovelock, and Lovelock was there for half a day to answer questions. I asked him: 'What would convince you that the Gaia theory was wrong?' And then he simply answered, as a good scientist: 'If the evidence was not there'. Boring answer, but strictly scientific. I'm not always fond of the political expressions of [Lovelock], because Lovelock has had very specific political stands related to renewable energy and nuclear energy, and he claims that global agriculture is the core of environmental problems, and he thinks that we should all soon live in towns and extract our nutrition from minerals to save the land, and have a kind of high-tech society based on nuclear power, at least in the short term. There are some things there that don't necessarily follow from his scientific outlook, which I think is much more interesting. And if you look at that, I think you could also arrive at assumptions of some global streams of semiosis that would be interesting also in any broad view on semioethics. Of course the main point of Gaia theory is to show in scientific terms how the Earth system is an integrated unit of which we are part.*

JD: And the extension of semiosis shows that. And that's where I think 'semioethics' was a brilliant term, exactly the right term for the problem. How human responsibility – involves the whole planet.

MT: *Hm.*

JD: And it's based on the recognition of otherness.

MT: In the case of Gaia, we don't talk about otherness as such – there you have a *synthesis* of all possible otherness in nature – with which we still have something in common, at least in the sense of partaking in a global ecological system.

BECOMING A SEMIOTIC ANIMAL

JD: Yes, the basis of all that is semiosis. And that's why I think this further notion of semiosis... You know, I never really got to talking with Sebeok about this. We were trying to arrange a meeting together, and then he died.

MT: *Do you know if he was familiar with any ideas about semioethics or something that was later phrased under that name?*

¹³ Lovelock 2006. Full title: *The revenge of Gaia. Why the earth is fighting back – and how we can still save humanity.*

JD: That was not a topic that was of central interest to Sebeok. He died in 2001, two years before the term was coined in a semiotic context.

(JD goes to his PC to look up the publication year of *Existential semiotics*, then returns.)

MT: *This [semioethics and existential semiotics] might be the most decisive development within semiotics after Sebeok, don't you think?*

JD: It is, absolutely. It's a natural extension. It's like an idea whose time has come. It's like Einstein's relativity theory. If Einstein had died before he formulated it, we would still have relativity theory. It was in the air. I mean, inevitable.

MT: *A logical next step for semiotics.*

(The two talk politics and about various other matters of no immediate relevance.)

MT: *When you talk about the semiotic animal, you make it clear, at some points, that it's not a timeless concept that would apply to any human being at any time, but rather it concerns the concrete understanding, or conception, of human beings.*

JD: In one sense yes, and in another sense no – because 'the semiotic animal' applies to anything that 'rational animal' applies to. The semiotic animal is an animal that is *capable* of becoming aware of semiosis.

MT: *But more than capable.*

JD: No, no. Not more than capable. That's the essential definition. Well, I think I know what you're getting at, and I think I agree with it. The fact of the matter is that a kind of general semiotic consciousness has come about in extremely recent times, and it's not even really general, because you see that – look at people, you say "semiotics" and their answer is "what?"

MT: *But still, wouldn't you be inclined to say that it's a matter of becoming a semiotic animal?¹⁴ To realize our full potential.*

¹⁴ Cf. Deely 2004: 13, where the 'Semiotist, voice 3' says that "we need to consider that consciousness, human consciousness in particular, is not an initial datum but one that needs to be regarded as something that emerged in time"; and p. 14 (Semiotist, yet again): "I want to suggest that semiosis is more basic than evolution, and perhaps explains *better* what has heretofore been termed evolution." Cf. also Deely 2009: 212, where humans are said to be semioethical 'by nature': "[T]he study of the action that follows upon the being proper to signs leads to the realization that the semiotic animal 'by nature' is a semioethical animal as well." Here, an intriguing distinction is (possibly) that between *being of* a semioethical nature (qua humans) and *our historical unearthing of* (discovery, or acknowledgement of) that same nature.

JD: To realize our full potential... To realize our full potential requires awareness of semiosis. And awareness of semiosis transforms our understanding of our own behaviour in relationship to the rest of the humans and nonhumans as well. And that's where semioethics comes in.¹⁵

SEMIOETHICS: A HOUSEHOLD WORD

MT: *Why can not the starting point of semioethics simply be the historical fact that there is an emerging consciousness about the global extent of human actions?*¹⁶

JD: That is the starting point of semioethics, but semioethics is still ethics, and ethics has to get back to the principle that good is to be done.

MT: *Yes, but it could start with the historical acknowledgment.*

JD: It does start with the historical acknowledgment, that's precisely why I think the term 'semioethics' was a stroke of genius. We seem to have reached a time about the last decade of the 20th century where we started to ask "hey, what are the implications of this for morality, for the understanding of ethics..." None of Susan and Augusto's earlier terms caught on... I think that semioethics is going to be the one that succeeds.

MT: *How far do you think it will get in intellectual culture?*

JD: It's going to go all the way. It's going to be a universal – a household word. But it's not going to happen tomorrow.

MT: *So you honestly think that a hundred years from now there will be only [semioethicists]?*

JD: Semioethics is the framework for rethinking the whole question of moral obligation.

MT: *But as such it's a movement, and isn't it realistic to think that other schools of ethics will remain?*

¹⁵ Cf. Deely 2005: 231, where he states that "it is the fate of human animals to be concerned with the truth, at least insofar as they are human. This concern, in turn, makes the semiotic animal necessarily semioethical in order to achieve and not betray its destiny. Other animals do not bear this burden, and semiotic animals do not often bear it well."

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Deely 2005: 229, where he reflects that "'Global warming' [Deely thinks a more accurate characterization is 'climate destabilization'] is a code-expression for this profound realization of the responsibility of semiotic animals to turn their awareness of being to a responsible stewardship of natural resources, both organic and inorganic, in dealings with the environment. For not only the human good but the good of Gaia as a whole depends upon the assumption of such stewardship before it is too late for all of us."

JD: It will all depend on how you define... But I think semioethics is destined to become the general framework within which these schools have to position [or reposition] and identify themselves.

MT: *The general framework.*

JD: Yes. That's my humble opinion (*laughs*).

MT: *When? Sometimes when you talk about the future of semiotics, I ask myself the question: When? Are we talking about one generation, a hundred years, three hundred years...*

JD: I don't think it's going to be a long time, things are moving pretty fast. If you could have been alive in the time of Descartes, you couldn't have seen [the watershed]. I mean, you could have seen it if you were in the right circles; but generally speaking – you couldn't see it from the universities of Spain, for example.

MT: *At the time when everybody knew about it, it was already long gone.*

JD: I like to compare it to the beginning of summer. There's an official day. Sometimes you get to the official beginning of spring, and it's snowing. "What kind of spring is this? This is like the dead of winter!" (*Laughs out loud*)... But I think that in the case of semiotics, it really introduces a postmodern intellectual culture... Did you see the look of that philosophy professor's face, when I said that semiotics *was* philosophy in the postmodern era?¹⁷ When that visitor, Martin Walter, gave his presentation? At one point in the discussion afterwards the philosophy professor present addressed me specifically, asking me what I thought was the connection of semiotics to philosophy today. And my answer was: Semiotics *is* philosophy today. You should have seen the look of his... (*laughs*) it's hard to put into words. He was horrified, for the same reason that [philosophers] are always horrified by semiotics, because they are all trying to defend their boundaries.

A REVOLUTIONARY OF SORTS

JD: I think that semioethics, like semiotics itself and as a part of it, as its "natural extension to the practical", is a revolution. There is an intellectual revolution that is going on – semiotics is it. And so, once the understanding of semiotics naturally extends itself... the understanding becomes practical by extension.

¹⁷ Cf. Deely 2005: 20: "I have seen audiences go into mild shock over the thought that one does not have to choose between [realism and idealism], but can instead simply move beyond them."

MT: *You have explained this from the point of view of semioethics. Now, from the point of view of ethics, how has modern ethics failed in any way that justifies this revolution?*

JD: Modern ethics... I don't pay much attention to ethics in modern philosophy. I don't find it very interesting. I find it to consist all too often of a bunch of people trying to tell other people what's wrong with them – ideology, less intended to deal with the process of thinking questions of right and wrong through actual circumstances than with specifying in advance and independence of difficult circumstances what the conclusion “must” be. First of all, ethics within analytical philosophy – it's just a word game. And then, medical ethics, at least in the universities where I've been ... they tend to come back to a bunch of people sounding off about what should or shouldn't be done, and they don't have any real knowledge of the problems or take seriously into account the “real-life consequences” of this or that choice. Ethics – real ethics, not ideology parading as ethics – deals with serious problems, and you get into life and death situations. How do you handle these situations? Appealing to religious authority, for example, as a substitute for thought is not ethics – something that Jacques Maritain [1882–1973] pointed out in the preface to his *Moral Philosophy* [Maritain 1964] as recently as the 1960s. Among the self-styled “followers of St Thomas”, he commented, a properly moral *philosophy* does not yet exist, just a borrowing from theology without ever really systematizing the foundations in terms of the difference between good and evil construed philosophically. In Thomas himself, for example, he remarks that the idea of “sin” as “an offense against God” begs the question of the good, because, as he put it, “God has so created the human being that it is impossible to offend against God except by acting contrary to the human good”, and that – the human good, not some imagination of “the will of God” or “the will of Allah” – is the philosophical meaning of so-called “sin”. Semioethics puts the whole question of behaviour and right and wrong in a context where the human good is precisely the focus of the problem, but the human good not as an isolated “thinking thing” or robotic “religious believer”, but as an animal uniquely confronted with *being responsible* for the very future of life not just selfishly but globally.

(JD talks about a tragic case, involving church authorities.)

MT: *I would probably agree that if you carried out a historical analysis, that in most societies, in most times, you find a lot of mistaken and misguided considerations carried out. And yet, how can we be optimistic on behalf of humankind's moral responsibility? Or maybe it's not a matter of being optimistic – it's a matter of fact: We have to relate to ethical matters.*

JD: I think that's right, we have to relate to them. And if you take a long enough view, I think there's actually moral progress. It's not some clear linear thing, but I think there is progress.

MT: *And now there's time for another step of progress in ethical consciousness?*

JD: Yes.

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