

*MEDITATIONES SEMIOTICAE:  
SIGNS GROW – BUT SHOULD  
THEY?*

*SEMIOETHICS AND THE  
DOMINANT SEMIOSIS OF  
HOMO SAPIENS SAPIENS<sup>1</sup>*

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1. THE BEGINNING

Invited to produce a blurb to Paul Cobley's *John Deely Reader* (Deely 1966-2009), I came up with the following:

The voluminous work of John Deely represents a synthesis of historical awareness and conceptual innovativity. To succeed as an author, I once wrote, means to succeed in establishing your name as a metaphor. "John Deely" has become such a metaphor.

In an email exchange those days (which are, by the time you, dear reader, read this, already past), John wrote the following:

The "habitual" is much better described as customary rather than conventional. Strictly, conventional refers only to species-specific stipulations that succeed, i.e., become customary. But many habitual behavior patterns even among humans do not arise from stipulation (and of course not all stipulations succeed to create conventions, either). So "customary" is a zoosemiotically generic term that applies to all animals, "conventional" is a species-specifically anthroposemiotic term that applies only to some customs prevailing among human animals.

Asking him what exactly this passage was a comment to, I further commented as follows:

One intriguing intersection of the customary and the conventional, at any rate, would in the context of my article "The global species" [Tønnessen 2009] be the

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way in which *human* conventions oftentimes regulate and determine *animal* customs (among livestock and the like) – sometimes consciously, sometimes not.

“It is just that this is a semiotically important distinction”, explained John, “which, in fact, I have never seen drawn in semiotics, though it surely ought to and eventually no doubt will be.” He went on:

Of course you are exactly right about human conventions often (and more and more!) shaping customs among other animals. That is precisely the point that it is in custom, not convention as originating in stipulation, but only in what becomes the “accustomed aspect” of stipulations, as also in the customs that arise through behavior without any direct involvement of stipulation, that we find the overlap or “generic” character of zoosemiosis in its contrast with anthroposemiosis as having its species-specific dimension as well as a generically zoosemiotic dimension.

Exactly. The aforementioned Paul Cobley is among some known for pointing out that the aforementioned John has a beard that looks uncomfortable to the less hirsute outsider. As signs grow, (and as texts find their shape, i.e., realize themselves *qua* textual beings), apparently so does beard.

## 2. A MAN AND THE MARKS LEFT BY HIS HAND

“Floyd Merrell” is said to be a professor of semiotics theory (and more) at Purdue University. I have never met this Floyd Merrell. Nor do I have a satisfactory understanding of his catchphrase *signs grow*. “Merrell, based on the thinking of Charles Sanders Peirce [who suggested that *symbols* grow],” says a webpage, “discusses the semiosis process, that the universe is a perfusion of signs incessantly becoming other signs.” The notion that signs grow partakes in the title *Signs grow: Semiosis and life processes* (Merrell 1996), and, prior to that, in the realm of linear time, in yet another title: “As signs grow, so life goes” (Merrell 1992).

“Merrell”, reports University of Toronto Press Inc. (cf. Merrell 1996), “begins by asking ‘What are signs that they may take on life-like processes, and what is life that it may know the sign processes that brought it – themselves – into existence?’” It was with similar awe (I imagine) – if not precision – that I in Tønnessen 2003 (p. 288) referred to “this intricate web – of life, of semiosis, of world”. What am I, a verb?

Yeah, I know. I flash no photo in front of you [says this Floyd Merrell on his so-called homepage]. Who needs it? Well, then, who is floyd merrell? He’s a guy who once garnered the illusion that he knew who he was, until he began

becoming aware that he's always becoming somebody who is other than who he was becoming. But that, of course, is no answer. There's no answer because there is no answer; there is no answer because there is no is.

What is the nature of semiosis? And what is the *culture* of semiosis?

### 3. THE END

Signs can be cultivated. Signs can be grown. How else would we be able to conquer this planet? How else would we be able to get to be “civilized” in the first place, and then, consequently, to *cultivate* nature, so as to transform it into a *human* landscape serving *human* needs (and desires, and worse)? How else, in short, would we be able to turn nature and all her offspring into cultural artefacts (wolves with radiocollars; “pristine nature” on display)? – And yet – and yet.

Who dares to claim that the *more* signs grow, the better? When is it a virtue to be productive (innovative), and when is it not? Wouldn't such an idea be a *de facto* reproduction of (cancer!) our culture's naive notion of eternal, unrestricted and unlimited growth? Growth, yes – *economic* growth (although, as the sometimes clever economist Herman Daly has pointed out, growth is oftentimes *uneconomic*). Signs can be cultivated. Signs can be grown. Isn't that *exactly* what is going on in the growth machinery of the global growth economy? Signs for sale – signs for money – signs exchanged for yet other signs; *Platonic prostitution*, and worse. Streams and currents of semiosis flowing freely in the landscape, ruled by its own innate rhythm (down-hill, <sup>upstream</sup>; down-hill, <sup>upstream</sup>), only to be sliced up, packed and sold at the market place.

What is the nature of semiosis? And what is the *culture* of semiosis? And what is *our* nature, in this world of cultivation? Are we doomed to be (forever and ever, now that we have become “civilized” in the *modern* [i.e. absolutist] sense of the word) creatures constantly and incessantly cultivating all that *has* a nature? Is that the human condition (or simply fashionable)?

“We cannot stop now.” Or can we? As signs grow over our heads (and behind our backs, and ...), can we still develop a semiotic *code*? A code of conduct for the semiotic animal? That, you see, would amount to a proper *semioethics*.

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